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Reflective essay: Beyond the snapshot: the elegant tracing of an emotional line in the writing of Anna: three fictions ; Anna: three fictions

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Anna: Three Fictions

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A trilogy of fictions submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts by Research (Creative Writing) Johannesburg, 2012

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Declaration

I declare that these fictions and my reflective essay are my own unaided work. They are submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. They have not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Arja Maria Salafranca Migdale

June 12 2012

Anna: Three Fictions

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Cul de Sacs

Four people are bumping along a dusty road to a farm.

The landscape is dry, trees cling to rocks, the sky swirls with clouds. It's boiling here, even though it's the start of autumn, near this farm in the north western part of the country. It is sometime toward the end of the century, a new millennium ahead. The farm belongs to the parents of the man driving the car. His name is Jake, and he has wispy strawberry blond hair that stands out in this landscape of bush and thorn. He has been here often, taking holidays here as a child, when his parents would bring his large brood of brothers and sisters and leave them with their grandparents over the long school breaks. He has come less frequently since leaving school. The army, university and a job have all prevented him from returning as often as he'd like.

Next to him sits Anna: small, dark-haired, petite, twisted into her seat, staring at the familiar landscape of this farm, although she has seen it only once before. She too has a job back in the city that prevents her from going away too often. Besides, there is often the question of money, lack of money, or more important things to spend it on – a car service, new tyres, clothes for her job in the city. The contrast between her black hair and Jake's high, near-orange colour is startling, seen from the back seat.

Danielle and Ian sit snug at the back. They have been lovers for two years, but that will change soon. Neither knows it for sure, but it is hard to erase doubts and to ignore a growing fear that something is about to become undone. They know this as they sit in the back, holding hands, smiling at each other as Jake steers along the dirt road.

The farmhouse is white and plain, sitting within an attempt at an English country garden. It is a sharp contrast to the dry, thorny landscape that surrounds it. An iron roof traps the heat; a rough concrete floor makes the house cool again.

***

They kick up brown earth as they walk along the rutted track to the river. It is the second day of their Easter holiday. They charge along the track with lunch in a picnic basket; rifles slung across Jake and Ian's shoulders.

'For snakes,' Jake had said as he got them out the safe. 'Also, they say there are leopards in the hills, although I've only seen them once.'

'What else can we expect?' asks Anna.

'Not much, it's just for in case,' says Jake. 'The animals will smell us and run off long before we even see them, but you never know. If we see any living thing today we'll be lucky.'

'Have you ever shot anything on the farm?' Ian asks, examining the shotgun.

'Ag, ja. Kudu mainly. For biltong and roasts. But we shoot so rarely that there's plenty buck left.'

So they stride. Ian and Jake in front, scanning the bush, heaving rifles across their chests.

'Armed white males,' laughs Danielle.

'Armed, but not so dangerous!' laughs Ian, as he slips Danielle into the crook of his arm. Anna and Jake look benignly on. Later, Anna and Danielle will stand holding the guns as Ian takes their picture. The photo will wither and yellow as Anna's slight frame droops from the weight of the rifle, and Danielle's rifle dangles close to her feet. They smile in the sunshine. As they sweat under the fierce sun, the flies brush past, tickling Anna's nose just as the shutter clicks, leaving her with a permanently disdainful expression as the photo withers.

They encounter little that is dangerous along the way. A puff adder suns itself in the path, but Ian and Jake scan the route and their training in the army comes to the fore before anyone can step on the snake. It slithers stealthily away, and they watch its sleek yellow and gold body as it slides off into the yellow grass.

* * *

They sit on a rock, idly flicking bits of bread and avocado into the river. The air is still. Occasionally a bird calls or fruit flies buzz past, attracted by sweat. There's a low insistent hum of flies, beetles and the wind as it ruffles the veld.

They eat the packed sandwiches and drink mineral water. Anna's black hair traps midnight as she sits in this harsh light that bleaches all colours white. She eats an apple and complains of being too full from breakfast for anything else. The light filters through Jake's fuzz, picking out glints and highlights.

They are talking about emigration and about the violence that is making them think twice about staying in this country they were born in. They are talking about the need to save enough money to make a new life somewhere else. And they are talking about how difficult that is, with the rand ailing fast against overseas currencies. This last week Anna waved goodbye to a best friend who was setting out for London after her recent graduation. Another friend has found a job in New York and is leaving soon. Anna wonders when it will be her turn. She also wonders whether there is a strange pull that Africa exerts, sucking you into its problems, its heat, its fierce divisions and extremes – something that can only be resisted when your life grows so bitter or unhappy that the only solution seems to be to get out. Wrench yourself away, find a new life.

Anna does not doubt that she too will leave one day. She cannot see herself getting old in this country of extremes, but hasn't yet found the courage (or the money) to leave. The ties are there: family, pets, friends, the fear of starting all over again; but this country binds you to it with its heavy sense of trying to make do. There's the fear of a car hijacking at the manual gate, a gun thrust up your mouth, the threat of being raped in a field, hearing cars whizz by – it is all too strong.

Ian looks out at this landscape of dry contours and thorn trees. Danielle lies across his lap, her dark hair spilling out over his legs which have been scratched by thorns and insects. When they break up, as they both know they must, he thinks he will leave this country. He can join his mother in New Zealand, the country to which she has returned now that she is divorced.

He will find a job, a life, a new girlfriend, a wife. South Africa will fade into a memory of his past.

Right now, he looks at Danielle, and tries to imagine a life for them together. She does not want to leave. Her entire family is here. Ian has tried to persuade her, but she refuses. She cannot let herself believe that this fledging new country will not come right. For her, there is no choice.

She works for a welfare organisation, one of the many that have mushroomed since the new government came to power. She is a social worker who helps broken families to mend. It is the reason she goes out dancing and drinking most weekends. It is a way of forgetting; it is a way of letting go of the weight of her job with its stench of poverty and hopelessness that carries the destitute into the office where she works. And this is part of the reason Ian loves her.

Jake remembers running through landscape like this when he was defending South Africa from terrorists in Angola. It made his skin crinkle into the tight lines around his eyes, and gave him a sense of fearlessness that sometimes makes him do incredibly stupid things now.

Born of an Afrikaans mother and an English-speaking father, Jake has always felt his life has been neatly split in two. He speaks English with a slightly hard edge to it, the more guttural tones of his mother's language spilling out into his English.

From as long as he could remember, his family has been partitioned off into these two sides of the family. One year Christmas was spent with the Afrikaans side of the family, the next it was spent with the English side of the family. Even the food differed: a hot roast, sweet vegetables and a steaming fruit pudding on the Afrikaans side; light salads and moulds with the English family.

It was actually a relief to be in the army, among mainly Afrikaans recruits. The English-speakers were separated from each other, isolated among huge groups of Afrikaners who forced them to adapt or suffer. Jake had begun to feel Afrikaans at last. When the sun beat down on training sessions and tough-looking corporals spoke of the need to defend the people

back home and the threat of terrorists up north, Jake began to feel as though he belonged in a way that had never seemed possible at home. He could forget the English side and revel in the low guttural sounds of Afrikaans that clipped his words neatly in two. He did not have to worry that somebody wouldn't understand: in a training camp outside Bloemfontein in the flat Free State field, everybody understood.

No one had told them, but somehow they knew they were going to Angola to fight in the war as their tanks moved further and further north, skirting the border.

Jake has told all this to Anna, has tried to explain why he didn't get out of the army, dodge the call-up papers, go overseas. But he has seen by her angry look that she does not understand, and still condemns him for his small part in propping up the government, the war, apartheid.

'If I'd been male, there's no way I would've gone to the army,' she has said to him. 'I would have left, gone overseas. Done something. No country could make me fight for them.'

Sitting on the massive rocks, with the heat making their words slow, the topic comes up again. Jake and Ian try to explain why they do not regret their time in the army.

Ian says, 'Young guys today, who don't have to go into the army, you can see they haven't been. They're immature, they've got no sense of responsibility. They haven't had toughening up. The army teaches you to rely on yourself. It teaches you a whole lot of crap, like that some of those guys are real arseholes, and wouldn't stand a chance in the outside world. But you've got to laugh at that, man. It doesn't matter. It teaches you not to give a damn about anything, that nothing really matters.'

'You know what I enjoyed about the army?' Jake asks. 'That feeling of togetherness. You're all in this together, and you've got to learn to rely on each other. Because when it's only you and those guys in miles of miles of bush, that's it. If you don't know how to look after each other, if you don't stick together, that's it.'

‘But how could you willingly go fight for the government?’ Anna persists, asking Ian and Jake together.

‘Well, to be honest, I didn’t fight,’ Ian admits. ‘After basic training I joined the police and spent my time opening and closing booms at the airport. Jake saw all the action.’

‘You forget I’m Afrikaans, Anna,’ says Jake.

‘Only partly.’

‘Enough so. We were told we were fighting for the people back home. They needed protection.’

‘It was brainwashing. Couldn’t you see through it?’

‘No. I couldn’t. I didn’t have to. They’d given us a purpose, a reason to go out and *moer* those Angolans. We wanted to. Then we got there, and it was just days and days of heat. Sitting underneath those *ratels*, the flies sucking off your sweat, trying not to be too bored. Trying not to make too much noise or we’d be discovered. But by then it was too late for idealism. You just had to go ahead, or you’d die. There was no choice.’

Jake looks at Anna, sitting self-absorbed and self-contained on her rock. It is easy for her to make judgements. She has never been tested to the limit, has never had to make a life and death decision. That might change when she gets older, and decisions and choices are thrown in front of her like land mines. It might not. That’s the beauty of being born female, Jake thinks, the choices that are taken away, and the choices that are never presented. Anna wouldn’t see it like that. Jake does not bring it up. He wonders if she will settle and marry, perhaps have children. Or perhaps she will move away, will find whatever excitement or peace she is looking for overseas. It is a nagging desire that makes her want to leave, something he cannot relate to. He’s never even been overseas. He’d like to go one day, but for now is content.

* * *

Bugs glide over Anna's feet dangling in the warm green water of the round dam built to catch the overflow of the reservoir. Brown scum clings to her calves flung over the dam wall, backside resting on the narrow curved shelf of the round enclosure. Leaves swirl among the debris, the heat creates a glaze over the faraway brown and green hills. You cannot see to the bottom of this shallow dam.

'It's probably cleaner and healthier than your average chlorinated swimming pool,' Jake remarks as he plunges in naked.

'Probably,' says Anna, looking away as he swims, embarrassed by the sight of the penis she once let inside her. She stares at the mountains, at the rough koppie behind, and the gnarled trees and plants in this dry landscape. When he is in and swimming and she can no longer see anything of vital importance, she looks again as Jake swims round and round, splashing her in T-shirt and rolled-up jeans. When he gets out, she again turns away, and he asks her why. It's not like she hasn't seen him like this before.

Anna finds it hard to explain that she doesn't want to see it this time, that it embarrasses her because their time of sleeping together is over. She doesn't want to be reminded of it, considers it a weakness that they even did it together. She turns away from this friend with the red hair and the grinning face turned toward her, his penis dangling stupidly like a toy wanting to be played with.

Anna ended the sex they had months ago. Something was clearly not working. She announced it portentously, quietly, with full explanations. Jake had shrugged his shoulders. It had been a business-like decision to sleep with Jake while they were both between lovers and passions.

She'd slipped once though, the night of a party, with too much ouzo swimming around in her. But that was it. She'd wondered for some time after that if she might be pregnant, despite the pill, despite the regular if scanty appearance of her period every month. She had heard cases of women being pregnant, yet continuing to have mild bleeds. She watched the bulge of her

stomach anxiously, but it grew no bigger, and her waist remained defined, not thickening as it would if she was pregnant. She didn't want children, but still it might be nice to know if she could get pregnant, if she was fertile. Maybe she couldn't even conceive.

She kicks her feet around in the water while Jake dresses behind her, and she wonders idly if sperm can penetrate the soles of your feet and travel up your legs right into you.

* * *

Ian's face is tense above Danielle's, as he pushes through her reluctance and the heat and the sheer impact of what both know is going to happen. He doesn't look her in the eye as he flops heavily over her on the single bed. Sweat runs off their bodies.

The farmhouse is silent. Jake and Anna have gone off to swim. The fly screens keep the flies out, and no animals move in the late afternoon heat. The crackle of hooves on the cinder-like veld will come later when the cattle are herded back into their kraal.

Danielle gets up and lies on the other bed. Ian looks across at her. He puts his clothes back on as he goes in search of bottled water from the fridge. Danielle joins him soon after, drinking loud, angry gulps as they wait for Jake and Anna to come back. They sit in the lounge, all odd wooden chairs and a long mattress that serves as an extra bed. They read old *National Geographics* laid on the coffee table. They flip through them, past ice-packed lands and green meadows, so different from this brown, scorched continent. The house seems silent without Anna and Jake, both intense people who seem to exude tremendous noise and talk when they are around.

Danielle and Ian have noticed the currents of irritation between their host and his friend, Anna. 'Don't you wonder what's going on between Jake and Anna?' Danielle asks.

'I suppose so. There's a lot of friction in the air.'

'Do you think they're sleeping together?'

‘Anna and Jake? No ways. Not those two.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, for a start, she’s not in love with him, and Anna would never sleep with somebody she doesn’t love. She wouldn’t sleep with Jake out of desperation. Trust me on this. I worked with her. I know her.’

‘You haven’t seen her in nearly a year.’

‘People don’t change.’

‘I think they do,’ Danielle says. ‘There has to be some reason they’re rubbing up against each other. Did you see when Jake flicked his banana skin into the river? Did you see that look of intense fear or disgust or loathing or something? It wasn’t a friendship look. It was almost hate.’

The screen door is flung open. Jake and Anna arrive wet, burnt a little by the sun, making loud noises about who is going to do what for supper.

* * *

The fire crackles down low, the smell of spices and meat hangs in the air. A half-finished bottle of red wine lies on the concrete outdoor table, it is joined by crushed empty beer cans. The moon shines brightly from the sky, a full moon which lights up the eerie evening. There is silence but for the static sounds of a battery-powered radio being played in the distance in one of the farm worker’s huts.

They have hung a few kerosene lamps to light the way to the steps of the farmhouse. They watch as a satellite, which looks like a star, makes a dazzling fast circle around the earth. Jackals yowl in the distance. Occasionally they hear a bakkie growling along the sand road.

Ian's breath comes out in beer flames, Jake's smells of sour grapes, Danielle clutches her cider. It is their last night on the farm. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday, and they will leave.

They wonder when and if they will return. They have thoughts they do not want to question or probe. Feelings that remain nameless. Anna thinks she will return here once more only. Something will happen, perhaps she will no longer see Jake, or life will catch up with them. Out loud, Ian asks Jake if he can return, and Jake says anytime. Danielle is half-asleep in her fold-up chair.

Jake remembers similar evenings on the farm, with his family and other friends. There's a warm glow as he remembers the people he has brought up here, the nights spent talking around the hissing fire. It is what farm life is all about. The nights spent braaing meat, eating it in the darkness. The smell of beer, burnt flesh and the aroma of smoke from the logs. It is a sweet, nostalgic fragrance that clings and comes back in the creases of clothes when returning to the city.

For now, it is night at the start of autumn. They will go into winter. Anna will grow to intensely dislike her new job, and will find another one. Ian and Danielle will break up. Jake will approach his thirtieth birthday and wonder why it is he can't find a passion in his life, something to fire him up, obsess him. Life is passing, seemingly meaninglessly.

Tonight they talk. They catch the occasional music from the kraals, and Ian taps into their collective anger and fear when he listens to music in an African language, drifting up the road to their farmhouse and he says, 'Tell me, what are the blacks good for anyway? It's only the primitive stuff. Dancing, athletics, having babies!' Anna and Jake murmur uneasily. It is not good to agree to racism, they know that. They grew up under apartheid and emergency laws, and the dying years of the Nationalist government. Now they live under a black government that both agree is necessary and just, but doubts are creeping in.

Anna attended a liberal university. She stood on the sidelines of the few protest marches still streaming across campuses on her first year. For a while Anna even took to calling South Africa Azania and sending letters overseas with Azania written on them instead of South Africa. What had changed? Why was she listening to Ian, and agreeing with what he said, in

spite of herself? When did that huge divide come about? At university she had not foreseen a time when she would have only white friends, as she does now.

Jake nods. Ian is expressing what they all feel now – the impotence at the increasing corruption that has swept the new government, the civil service, the postal system, everywhere you look. And somehow, because of all this, it is becoming acceptable to become racist. Despite the promises of a new country, freedom, a rainbow nation – all those buzz words – apartheid still lingers, the races don't mix. Even more so now, because resentment taints their views: resentment at the new crop of educated blacks who speak with an accent, come from the same universities and whose mistakes in the language or the job are overlooked because they've been oppressed, or haven't had the same opportunities. It's bullshit, thinks Anna, it's what's going to drive me out of here.

'It's not that they shouldn't be given opportunities,' she says to Ian and Jake and the almost-asleep Danielle, 'but why must I be denied opportunities because I'm white? They're going to chase me out of here. Maybe that's what they want. For us to get the hell out of here, and then they've got the country to themselves.'

'And what are they going to do without all the whites and their skills?' Ian asks.

'And where am I going to go?' asks Jake. 'My family is here, they've been here for hundreds of years.'

'What I object to is the fact that I don't have a national anthem in my own language,' adds Anna. 'I refused to sing *Die Stem* at school. How the hell am I supposed to feel South African when I don't even have an anthem in English?'

The question mark hangs in the air.

'I want to live in a country where I don't have to even know what or who the president is!' Anna continues indignantly. 'Like Sweden or somewhere else in Scandinavia. Where apparently the prime minister changes every year and travels on the bus along with everybody else.'

‘You’re not going to get that in Africa!’ laughs Jake. ‘Anywhere in Africa. It’s a continent of heat and blazing tempers and wars and revolutions.’

‘Then I’m going to Norway. Or Iceland. Where it’s cold, and nothing much matters.’ Anna mutters, her usual response. She has had this discussion before, with others.

They laugh.

‘It’s got to get better,’ says Jake hopefully. ‘Crime’s got to go down.’

‘I think,’ Ian announces, ‘that we’ve just got to accept that if we’re going to stay here, that we’re living in a third world country now. We hovered somewhere between the two extremes for years and now we must just accept it, and then we’ll be happy.’

‘Ja, with books being taxed till you can’t afford them, and ministers bribing each other and everybody else, and people killing you for your car, and standards and services going down ...’ Anna concludes.

They sit in the grim silence that follows her bitter remarks. The country has made racists of them all, as Ian points out now.

‘English white liberals, they’re not so liberal anymore,’ he says. ‘Listen to them. They’re as racist as any old Afrikaner, more so, because they have to pretend not to be.’

Anna recalls arguing with Indian friends a year after leaving university. She’d complained about the affirmative action she’d encountered while looking for a job. ‘You’ve got to pay for your privileges,’ they said unsympathetically.

‘No, I don’t!’ she’d argued back. ‘I wasn’t old enough to vote then. By the time I was old enough to vote, I was saying ‘yes’ in a referendum to give power to the blacks!’

You've got to pay, was all they kept repeating, and No, I don't! had reverberated round and round their argument till they'd given it up. She wonders now what had happened to those friends – casualties of the years after university, part of the friendships that had shrivelled.

'Are you staying, Ian?' Anna asks.

'I don't know. I want to go to New Zealand, visit my mom there, see if I like the place. My sister and her boyfriend are already there. I don't know, Anna, I don't see the country going anywhere fast, and I am not going to sink with it. Now if I can only get Danielle to come with ...' he says, running a hand along her cheek.

Danielle groans, grimaces, turns away, going back into her half sleep. 'Danielle thinks there's a future here, and all her family's here, but I've only got my father here now, and his girlfriend.'

There is no need to ask Jake, the Jake who had never gone overseas, and doesn't understand what all the fuss about a grand, mythical overseas is about. The Jake who fought for the country that his friends are considering leaving, the country he'd almost died for. Decisions are cut and dried for Jake on this score. Anna envies him the fact that he doesn't have to decide.

The night is around them, the dense shapes of trees stand stark against the moonlit sky. Plans stretch ahead, a year at a time, no further than that.

The debate dies down. They speak about Easter Sunday, and discuss religion. Jake's belief in Christianity against the disbelief of Anna and Ian who have refused religion, and Danielle who's been brought up Jewish, but no longer lives at home to watch her mother light the Friday night candles.

The laughter and discussion enter the air, the wind, the trees, the wild scrubby bush, the mud enclosures at the end of the long sandy road, the farm workers' homes.

The night goes on after they've gone to bed. Ian and Danielle wrap up together in her bed before it grows too small and Ian leaps back onto his twin bed. Anna goes to bed with a candle that blows in the breezes of the house. She refuses to blow it out, telling Jake she can't sleep when it's so dark. He sighs, compromises, and leaves a lit lamp hanging outside her door.

She sleeps, but when he gets up to turn it down later in the night, she wakes up, and he caresses her cheek for a long time before she sleeps again, and he creeps back to his own room. He blows out his freshly lit candle, falling asleep to the creaks and bends of the roof of the farmhouse that will one day be his.

Déjà vu

They are returning. It has been nearly ten years since Anna has seen the farmhouse, and not much has changed. Instead of relying just on gas to meet all their needs, Jake's father spent one summer installing solar panels, so that the lights in the home and the lamps by the bed now give off a glow that you can turn on and off at the wall. No more carrying gas lamps around the farm. But the fridge still runs off gas, as does the old stove that isn't much used, and the antique coal one that still stands in the corner by the window, still usable, but no-one has much energy for that anymore.

And this time, the sleeping arrangements are going to be slightly more complicated, Anna realises. She is alone, and being alone, will have to fit in with the rest, the couples, and the couple one with the still toddling toddler. Jake's in charge of that, he and his girlfriend, the woman he had started going out with shortly after that long Easter trip, when it seemed a door had finally firmly shut on them.

His new girlfriend, then, now, a fixture, a part of his life after more than a decade together. Jake is now forty-two, and his girlfriend, Riana, now 58. It is hard to comprehend – Anna hadn't seen them in years. She remembers the first time she had bumped into them as a couple – had seen Riana's hand resting lightly in Jake's, one night when they had met at the theatre and she had realised. Days later, asking him, 'Are you and Riana together?'

The answer was a pause, then a hesitant, 'Yes.'

Her own, firmer, 'I thought so.'

And so, Jake and Riana will be taking one of the main rooms, big enough for couples, but still with only two single beds, because that's the layout of the farmhouse.

As host Jake is giving over the main bedroom, the one separated by a concrete wall, and boasting a double bed, to Ian and his wife, Lisa. None of them have met her before this trip. Ian and Lisa have a baby boy, all 18 months of him, who will tear around and require

constant vigilance in this place where snakes can crawl in through windows and scorpions sometimes sleep in your shoes.

Ian and Lisa are following behind in their own large four-by-four. It's a white, largely aggressive-looking car, thinks Anna, with its thick grille, sitting high up on the road. They are travelling in a convoy – more or less – they have cellphones now, and Jake has given Ian directions should he get lost. Still, they manage to keep up in a desultory way, sometimes Jake's battered hi-ace is behind Ian's, when Ian pulls ahead for a few kilometres. So, they keep track of each other on the long tarred road to Lephalale and the farm hidden through rough, jolting tracks in the bush.

They make a quick last stop at the garage, where Jake fills up once more. There's that famous sign which Anna remembers from so long ago. 'Relax, you're in the bush now,' with a beer mug rakishly filled set against the lettering.

Anna remembers yet another jaunt to the farm, when it was just her, Jake and Ian, no girlfriends, no partners, no children, just a quick getaway to the bush on a weekend when they all needed it, Ian had broken up with Danielle by then, and Jake hadn't started seeing Riana yet. And she, Anna, it was some years away from beginning another new relationship too.

Jolting back onto the road. Jake pauses when the tar road stops, waits for Ian and Lisa and the baby boy, Ray. It's quiet here, and the road isn't busy, only the occasional car or farmer's pick-up thunders past. The air sings, as it does in the heat, there's the low hum of insects Anna can't always name, the more insistent buzz of flies, which Anna can name and that peculiar haze that comes from the heat. It's not quite yet the height of summer here though she's thankful for that, but the heat still packs itself tightly around her, as it always does.

Up front Riana finishes her small carton of peach and orange Liquifruit, places it in the plastic bag brought for rubbish. Jake and Anna, stretching their legs, stand by the side of the road, waiting. There's a strange sense to the trip, thinks Anna, as though they are reaching for something not found, that will never be found. She watches Jake and Riana together, sees, always sees and notices that yawning age gap, and yet, after all these years, there is a

resigned familiarity between them. She senses that too, only later can she put that into words. They don't talk much, as they stand and wait, only Anna, venturing a thought: 'I can't wait to see the farm again, it's been like a hunger, I've never forgotten the place,' and Jake, smiling into the sun, 'It's all as you remember it.'

Ian's 4x4 thunders in the distance. Jake and Anna get back in, waiting. Ian's head, grinning, 'I'll just follow you in, boet,' to Jake. Jake replying, 'We have to go slowly now, it'll take about a half an hour over the dirt road.'

What's another half an hour thinks Anna as they jerk and bump over the dry, cracking road, dongas and potholes gape and Jake swerves expertly. His hi-ace can handle it, of course, much better than the maroon-coloured sedan they used the first time she visited. Slow-slung, with its bonnet like a long nose searching out the way, its hard, angular body from a factory made in the mid 1980s. That old car of his was stolen sometime, when was it? Anna thinks to lean forward, to ask, but Jake is concentrating hard on the road, and does it matter anyway?

She waits, the seatbelt constrains her, they're all being tossed around in the cabin of the car, holding on to the arm rests. Riana's hand curls tightly around it, an old hand now, a hand through which the veins stand up thickly in the aged skin. A hand that belies the apparent youth of her face: Riana has always looked younger than she is, and still, she looks at least ten years younger, a woman in her late forties say, and a good-looking woman, rather than a woman looking at sixty. Anna wonders irritably how she does it, good creams, good genes, despite the hard life Riana's sometimes suffered.

The last gate is opened, shut, banged together with wire and then there it is. The farmhouse basks coyly under its metal roof. There's a pretty garden out front, the patch of lawn gleams shrilly green in this harsh brown landscape. It's Jake's mother's desire for a small patch of garden, and it's looked after tenderly, regularly. There's even a pagoda set in this fake sort of garden, and Anna can't help feeling its invitation. Around, of course, is the harsh, baked brown land, the trees gnarled, twisted, angular things, ready to hurt, as harsh as the landscape.

And the farmhouse hasn't changed at all: the same rough whitened paint on its exterior, the long veranda that links the home and its various components, the make-do kitchen with its

table, the two stoves, Jake fiddling with the gas fridge before leading them to the rooms they will all occupy.

Ian's beaming. He has his arm around Lisa, and holds Ray, his little boy, in the other arm. Is he too remembering these weekends, all those years ago? Is he remembering Danielle? Or is Ian easier with the past, able to let more of it go than she is?

It is as she had assumed. Ian and Lisa have the main room. Jake and Riana have the second of the larger rooms, a sunny bright room that overlooks the mountains in the distance. And she has that room facing the veranda, and made dark by that enclosure. Does he realise it's the very first room she ever had – that first time she came here with Jake and his parents, and one of his brothers, his aunt and uncle? That room where they lay one afternoon, in the deepening dark, together, but yet not quite together, and his brother came looking for them, calling and calling.

'Ssh,' he'd clamped a hand over her mouth, 'ssh, don't move.'

And so they had laid there, still, his hand over her mouth insistently and she had wondered if this was the way he had lain in the veld all those years ago, running through Angola illegally, learning not to be seen. Eventually his brother went away. She always wondered if his brother had guessed and that's why he had stopped calling for them, had gone back to the others around the campfire.

So this is her room then, with its darkness, its narrowness, the grey-blue walls adding to some sense of gloom about it. But she can hardly ask that she be given the brighter bigger room given to Jake and Riana. Jake brings her case in, the wheels dusted with that red brown dirt, the side streaked with it. He brushes off the dirt, tenderly, it seems, too tenderly, setting it on the other bed in her room, the bed that made it so narrow, and yet was necessary. Jake's family is large and they need lots of room. Jake's father is even going to start building a sort of cottage just to accommodate more members of the growing family.

Then he's gone, back to the car, bringing in the cooler boxes of food, then a tog bag with clothes. She watches through the windows as she opens her case. A luridly pink wonder bra

stares up at her. She'd hurriedly shoved it in – a present from a PR woman who had phoned to ask her bra size and then had had it delivered. Pink, and the cups foamed, not that she needs or wants extra cleavage, but there it is. Maybe she'll wear it – that daring pink coloured bra under the battered t-shirts and only she will know what she is wearing under the rough clothes she has brought along for the bush.

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Riana packs the food away in the old, almost wheezing fridge. She's an old hand now at these weekends, she and Jake have come up often through the years, sometimes even with his parents. It felt strange at first. She's ten years younger than Jake's mother, she is her contemporary, give or take. Jake's father is older, he married late in his thirties, which puts him on the cusps of his seventies now. Retired, but still as fit as ever, still fixing and fine-tuning the elements of this farmhouse.

But, Riana is used to this now, has long ago stopped letting it bother her. Even the stares of the world are kinder and less frequent. She looks so much younger than she is, she knows that, and Jake, with his papery typically red-haired skin, and his absolute disdain for face creams and sun block, has begun to age faster than she had thought he would. They almost look the same age – almost but not quite, of course. There's still almost a moment when strangers look, see, make assumptions, or not, and then move on. But, somehow, is it age? – it no longer bothers Riana.

Floro lite in the fridge, the kind that is meant to lower bad cholesterol, no-fat white yoghurt, skim milk and lean bacon. Pepsi lite and ricotta cheese. Over the years the menu has changed to accommodate Jake's shockingly high cholesterol, high in one so young and so thin. 'Genetics,' the doctor had shrugged. Riana's veins still run clear and unclogged, but eating low fat helps her maintain her slim body. Not as slim as before the kids, but still. And the slimmer you are, Riana knows, the healthier you are and the younger you look.

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It's lunch. It's simply set out at the long dining room table next to the kitchen. It's always been a bright sunny room, a place where you can read the guest books his parents have kept over the years, a kind of diary of the place which Anna always used to enjoy dipping into. She takes one from nine years ago – 2001 – the turn of the century, and reads Jake's aunt's handwriting: 'Love the new solar panels! Love the electricity they give out!' Ten years ago already? She was here then, the last time, just before she and Gareth left for overseas. The entry was written around Christmas, they'd been gone a few months then. She flips through, the years spinning past, one of Jake's brothers writes, they have all married now, the boys, all except Jake. One of the wives has curling, curlicue writing, she says she can't wait till the new cottage is finished. Anna asks Jake where the cottage is and he says he'll take her out back, show her the shell, after lunch. Meanwhile Ray is tearing around the room, a piece of sodden bread crust clutched in his fist, face beatific with the excitement of being in a new place. All eyes are on him, Lisa is trying to get him to eat some cheese.

'He needs a bit of protein with his carbs,' she says. Ray obviously disagrees. 'He's stubborn,' she shrugs as explanation. 'I can't make him do anything he doesn't want to do, or eat. I've learned that much!'

'Are you going to have more?' Anna asks, and as soon as the question is out, she recoils. Was she rude? Is this a rude question? What if she had some difficulty at the birth and now Lisa can't have any more children? What if they don't want?

But Lisa's not offended. Smiling at Ian, she says, 'Of course. We're going to start trying to give Ray a brother or sister.'

'Good,' breathes out Anna too quickly, so, she hasn't offended. It is so easy to ask the wrong questions, say the wrong things sometimes. 'Good, so he won't be an only child then.'

'You were an only child?' Lisa says, concentrating on Ray, who is sitting on her lap now, trying again to get protein into him.

‘Yes...’ begins Anna as Riana brings in a bowl of strawberries and berry-flavoured frozen yoghurt for dessert. It’s set down to oohs and ahs of appreciation with Riana explaining that it tastes as good as ice-cream but has half the fat.

‘Jake has high cholesterol,’ she explains, ‘so he has to watch what he eats now, despite being so thin.’

‘I have to watch what I eat too,’ laughs Ian, ‘but I don’t! This lad here,’ patting the stomach protruding more crudely than it did years ago, ‘is getting bigger. Lisa’s going on about it, aren’t you?’ Kissing Lisa, laughing.

‘I’m worried about your health, darling, you know that,’ as she pops a strawberry into Ray’s mouth.

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The cottage has been set some way further back from the house. It’s shaded by a row of trees, and is almost invisible from a certain angle. It’s still a shell of the home to come – with the walls just bare grey concrete, the struts of the roof in place, but the roof isn’t on yet and the sunshine streams. But, perhaps because of its strategically placed location it’s cool inside. Jake shows her where the small kitchenette will be, a little lounge dining room and two bedrooms leading off from that. Like the main house it’s simply designed, a necessity as much as anything else. The clan has expanded so much that the main house just isn’t up to fitting everyone in. In the past, in the hot summer months, the kids slept on mattresses on the enclosed veranda, but Jake’s father wants something better and even the veranda is becoming crowded now.

‘It’s going to look good,’ says Anna, ‘cosy enough for a couple and kids if you want to be private or to take the overspill from the main house. Nice.’

‘Ja ...,’ says Jake. Two of his four brothers are married now, the one brother declared he was gay and lives with a man, and the last unmarried one is marrying in the next month, he tells her. ‘With all the children coming, you know ...’

‘Your mom must be happy now that she has grandchildren,’ Anna says.

‘Ja, but we certainly made her wait!’ Jake kicks at the dirt floor.

‘Yes, yes you did,’ Anna says, testing her weight on a plastic chair that’s been left in the room that will be the kitchen. Jake leans his on an upturned, empty paint bucket. The silence stretches in this empty room. Anna contemplates her fingernails briefly, starts to say that this place will look really good once it’s done up, then realises she will be repeating herself. The past yawns behind, so many years of no contact, how to begin again, how to say what can be said, how do you know what can be said?

‘So, you and Riana, you seem very happy together?’ Anna ventures. ‘How long have you been together now?’

‘Just over ten years.’

‘Wow! Like a marriage, almost.’

Jake is non-committal.

Anna says, ‘Well, it’s good, I mean I am glad that you’re happy, that you found each other.’

‘It hasn’t been without its problems, believe me, but ja, it’s good. You know, it’s good to have someone. Nothing’s perfect. That much I’ve learned.’ He has a wry half-grin on his face. ‘There are some advantages to getting older hey, you learn to accept things.’

‘Yes, I suppose you do,’ replies Anna, wanting to ask, what do you mean? Isn’t Riana right for you, have you just settled? She has suspected it all along, from the first time she had met the two and through the next few years. They had found each other, but neither was really what the other was looking for. But she couldn’t say it then, and now, with the distance and years between them, there’s even less right to say it. But it floats in the air between them, this unspoken acceptance of life’s vicissitudes.

They sit, silent. The next question would be for her. She could try and ward it off, this early in the weekend while she was still feeling her way around, or she could confront it head on. The questions were going to come, and not just from her. They were all still feeling their way around each other after the absence. And yet, they had once known each other – their life stories would tumble out, it was expected. She sighed, aloud, she realised after the sigh had escaped her.

Jake gets up. 'It's nice that you're here, that you came.' She gets up too. The pause over, they return to the main house, questions and answers will wait. 'It'll be good to go for a walk later, when it's a bit cooler,' says Jake. 'I want to show you and Ian some of what we've done around the farm and the river.'

'Oh no, you haven't built anything too touristy have you? I mean you haven't spoiled the rough nature of the farm, have you?'

Jake smiles. 'Later.'

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Riana and Lisa stay behind with Ray, just up from a nap. It's time for the boy's bath and then early supper. Lisa wants to make sure that his routine is maintained, otherwise he just won't get to sleep and they will all hear him crying night-long, disturbed. So, Lisa says she must stay behind, besides there's time enough the next day to go walking. Riana offers to stay with her, and together they will start supper. So, it's like old times, just Jake, Ian and Anna, walking back along the paths to where the cars are parked and then looping up the hill to one of the rivers. It's a short walk, today, a taste. Tomorrow they will set out early, make a whole day of it again, bring a picnic basket perhaps.

But a short walk here means walking for close to a half an hour before they crest the hill and start descending to the river. It's a little scraggly at this time of year, before the rains have started, a blueish green bend of water snaking away into the distance. The bush hums again and the sweat flies suck greedily at their perspiring faces. It's quiet down here, deserted, no

sign of the neighbouring farms or any other people. Jake's pushing through a well-worn path, leading them through trees, over tree roots arching through the soil like veins. They don't talk – it's too difficult to walk and talk while going through this terrain, grabbing at trees to keep yourself upright. Jake has a walking stick, he offered her one, but Anna just looked at him as though he were mad. She sees now, how useful it would have been, more dignified than this grabbing at trees to stop herself falling, feet slipping.

Still, they make it. Anna almost sliding down the embankment, and there it is. Jake's beaming. They've built a bridge over the river – a small, wooden, rough-looking bridge, but a bridge nevertheless. They never could get to the other side before this, gazing at the rocks and banks of the river on the other side, like a no-man's land. She says the obvious, on glimpsing it, 'It's beautiful!' because it is. A graceful arching curve of wood over the waters.

'Come,' is his response, and they go over. As they reach the other side, they see what has been hidden from view, a stone and thatch pagoda of sorts, a shelter from the sun, complete with a rough table, a concrete round slab around which stand a bench and some chairs. Jake's grinning. 'I built this with my brother one summer.' It's private, rough, and yet like the bridge there's a strange beauty to it, this hidden shelter amongst the wildness of the bush. It's also a mark of Jake's and Anna can see how proud he is, of having put his stamp on the piece of land. Ian whistles long and loud, it pierces the stillness and he slaps Jake on the back. 'Not bad man, not bad at all...you got your uses after all, hey.'

They bring out the drinks which Ian and Jake carried in a cooler box. Set them up on the rough concrete table and sit staring into the distance, watching the other side of the river now. Ian wants to know how long it took to build this little shelter and how they got all the building materials to this side. When Jake finishes telling him, saying they built the bridge first and then the shelter, Ian wants to know why, what made him think of the idea. 'I wanted somewhere I could sleep outdoors,' says Jake, 'I don't know why. I just wanted to be near the river, alone, as though I'm only the person in the world. I have slept here a couple of times, bringing a sleeping bag, watching the sun go down, braaing some meat over the fire, watching the stars come out. Just me and that's it.'

Ian laughs, ‘Sounds like a typical man fantasy to me, Jake, just you and the veld around you, the stars and a couple of animals getting the hell out of the way in case, you know!’

Jake smiles ruefully. ‘You should try it sometime.’

‘Not this weekend though, Lisa would give me hell if I suggested it. That little man of ours keeps us wrapped around his little finger. Ah, but we love him to bits. He’s the most perfect thing you could ever find! Laughing then, adding, ‘Spoken like a true loving dad!’

Jake and Anna laugh with him. She holds onto the glass of her drink, the lemon and lime in her hand is a pale green, blending with the colours of the veld, wet in her hands. Jake and Ian are holding cans of beer.

‘So Anna,’ Ian is asking, ‘what’s your story? Have you got a man tucked away somewhere? Where’s Anna’s life going?’

‘If I knew where Anna’s life was going I’d be very happy and relieved! I haven’t a clue, Ian, but no, I don’t have a man tucked away somewhere!’

‘Weren’t you seeing someone that time I bumped into you? What was his name?’

‘Gareth. Yes I was seeing him, we lived together for a few years. But that wasn’t quite right. I’m not with anyone right now.’ Her answers are prim, proper, rehearsed. They invite little enquiry. And Ian doesn’t push it.

Instead, they stare out at the river, drinking, reminiscing about the time they all used to work together, years ago, on a community newspaper. It’s where they had met initially, bonding over the loose deadlines of a weekly paper and the small shoddy salaries they worked for. There were regular pub lunches with their editor on Tuesday afternoons, long lazy days that stretched into darkness and the sense of togetherness that came from being such a small team. It was then that a close friendship was forged, a friendship that included weekends away to Jake’s parents’ game farm and parties at Ian’s large sprawling house, loaned to him by his father. There was no way he could afford to live alone on such a paltry salary.

Ian and Anna still lived at home then, unable to afford places of their own. Of the three only Anna still works in the industry, having long ago moved onto a large national newspaper. Ian now runs his own business, consulting from home and Jake first became involved in selling advertising for the paper, then started studying to become a game ranger and now works in a second-hand bookshop. They haven't seen each other for years – the distance stretches out uncomfortably, they are still feeling their way around each other. There are questions that remain unasked, each has their own form of reticence.

'So, where did you meet Lisa?' asks Anna finally, and Ian tells her. She was part of the group of childhood friends he had been surrounded by for years. While he had gone to St Michael's she had attended St Anne's – they'd always known each other, and then one day they had just got it together. Anna silently absorbs this information. As easy as that ... the easy camaraderie of shared schools, lives running in tandem. She asks about some of the other friends she remembers from Ian's circle, and they too are married now, a few couples formed from that alliance too. Not for the first time she wonders if things might not have worked out differently for her if she had attended a private school, had a close group of friends that surrounded her from primary school to high school, instead of the shattered wide-sprung group she's part of.

Instead she just smiles at Ian's story, 'Nice.' Does she say it, or does she think she says it? She's not quite sure. Her soft voice doesn't carry anyway. It doesn't matter.

'So, here we are all again! Cheers Jake! Thanks for inviting us here, hey, I mean, we haven't even kept in contact. It's really generous of you.'

It has been years. A betrayal lies between her and Jake, the way she treated him. Silence, till she'd sent him an email, using the same address from all those years ago when email had first come to the country. The mail hadn't bounced back, surprisingly, but then she had also kept her first email address from all those years ago. She had apologised, understood how much it had hurt him. They had met for coffee, once, in a mall, trying to repair the threads. Then, that was is it, or so she had thought. Mending of the bridges, of a sort and that's all. But his email had come weeks later. He had bumped into Ian, who was now married. Met him too. They

were planning a weekend trip back to the farm. Did she want to come too? The invitation was like a thunderbolt, unexpected. She hadn't thought he was serious at first, questioned him, was he sure. But he was sure, he said. Too much time had gone past, his email read, too much water under the bridge. She and Ian had always loved the farm, she constantly spoke of returning there.

She shocked herself too, with her ready answer, her unusual eagerness to be off with people who were really strangers now, after all. And what if they didn't get along after all? What if she wanted to leave within the first few hours? She had considered taking her car, but it was a long drive, and Jake persuaded her not to. Three days. Surely she could handle three days? If she had to bite her tongue and shut-up, well she could do it surely. And so, she had said yes. She was curious after all, and she had often remembered the farm, wishing to go back to this rough farm in the bush, wanting to sit around a campfire again.

And the journey is backward as well as forward. And recently she has been reaching back, snatching parts of her childhood from oblivion, sometimes even re-creating them, re-moulding them, before trying to let go. She can't quite get why she was reaching back so often, trying to snatch at times, days, memories, trying to work out what it meant or why she is drawn to visiting these places from the past ... For months now she has been dreaming of returning to Utopia, a rather optimistically-named resort just outside of Magaliesberg. She had been there in 1980, she'd been eight or nearly nine years old, and for some reason needed to return to that place of A-framed homes, and a river with big boulder-like rocks that she remembered.

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Riana has wrapped the sweet potatoes in tinfoil, Lisa has made a salad. The meat is marinating. Ray is still running around, although freshly bathed and in pyjamas, ready to sleep just as soon as he's been fed. Jake has the fire going ready for the braai where they will roast the potatoes and cook the meat. Everything is exactly as it had always been, thinks Anna. Even the food is predictable, wholesome, but predictable, exactly what she has been expecting. Lisa bathes her son in the brown water that trickles out of the taps – a mineral-

enriched water that's safe to bath in, it just looks unpalatable and after a while it stains your skin.

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She cut open a sweet potato and spread generous dollops of floro lite into the steaming tuber. She sprinkled salt on it, another generous shake. To hell with health, I'm on holiday, she thinks. The juice squirts from the boerewors, trickling into the salad on her tray. It's silent as they eat, the fire crackles down, wood splitting, burning. From far away they hear a neighbour's tinny radio sounds and the lights of the next door neighbour, kilometres down the dirt track, were visible through the trees. The night is illuminated by stars not seen usually, hidden by city pollution and, as she leans back, she strains to make out the shapes, the Milky Way. It has always been a mystery to her, the night sky. She can never see where Scorpio ends or begins or where bright red Mars is in the sky. It's a mystery, and she wonders if she is ever going to finally be able to make head or tail of the Southern night sky.

'Can you tell what's what up there?' she asks Riana who has the seat next to her around the fire pit. Riana squints upward 'Well, a bit. There's Orion and if you look a bit further there's the tail of Scorpio. Can you see?'

Anna looks up again, the sky's shapes blur. 'Sort of.' A cop-out of an answer, she knows, but she also knows that when she confesses that she really can't make head or tail of the sky there is always someone enthusiastically trying to point out the end and beginning of things. Is this something that is going to elude her forever?

Instead, she stands up to gather the dishes, fetch dessert. Riana comes in after her with the rest of the plates. Anna scrapes food off, placing each plate in the sink, running water over the greasy white discs. At the kitchen table Riana's gathering spoons, fetching the whipped cream for the Woolworths trifle she had brought.

'I love trifle,' said Anna, 'I love any dessert actually. Doesn't matter, I have such a sweet tooth.'

‘Ah, me too... I tell you I’d be a few kilos lighter if I could just lay off ...’ Riana laughs.

‘You look great,’ says Anna. ‘You haven’t changed much since Caxton days you know...’

‘That’s sweet of you. Not a little hard work involved there though – takes time to be beautiful at my age. Tinting my hair every so often, there’s nothing more ageing than silvery roots, I see my hairdresser more often than I see my friends sometimes! How are you, Anna though? You haven’t said much. How is work, how is *your* life? Are you in love?’

Are you in love? It was a question a Spanish aunt had once asked of her too. She’d been twenty, visiting the country and her new-found family, and she’d walked along the narrow streets of the old town with her much taller aunt who had put her arms around her at one point, and said, ‘So, are you in love?’ A condition then, love, like sore legs, or blue eyes perhaps.

‘No, I’m not,’ the stock-phrase.

‘A pity, everyone needs someone to love,’ replies Riana. ‘Are you dating? I have a friend who tried internet dating. She was so sceptical at first, but would you believe it, she met someone and they’re getting married? It’s the modern way.’

‘What site did she use?’

‘I don’t know, I can ask her.’

They carry dessert outside, Jake is busy putting more wood on the fire as they approach, and it spits angrily. Ian has his head turned to the sky, ‘This is the life!’ he says as they set the pudding down and sparks fly from the fire. ‘This is why we’re never going to leave this country, isn’t it, Lisa?’

Lisa has her hand on his neck, standing next to him. She smiles, says nothing. ‘You know Anna, I heard you asking Riana about the night sky. Come stand next to me, I want to show you something.’

Anna obediently goes to stand next to Lisa, this much taller bigger woman. ‘Look there,’ turning her head, ‘look there’s Mars and you can trace the arch of Scorpio there. And that bright disc, that’s Venus.’

It’s happening again, but this time, from out of the blur Anna can just about see the Scorpion’s tail.

‘Easy when you know how!’ says Lisa. ‘When I was pregnant I went to the planetarium. Other pregnant women crave butter or charcoal or god alone knows what, but me, I had to sit in the darkened amphitheatre and see the stars. I had to know what I was bringing my child into. I thought being able to read the night sky was going to prepare me!’

‘How odd,’ says Anna moving, uncomfortable at standing so close to Lisa. She can smell Lisa’s perfume, a mix of something fruity and light and feels that if she can smell another woman’s perfume then she is surely standing too close to someone she barely knows. ‘But thanks, Lisa. It’s nice to be able to make something out of it.’

‘Anytime doll, tomorrow we’ll have another lesson!’ And with that she’s off to bed on this Friday evening. ‘I’m up at five with the little tyke,’ she says, ‘tomorrow will probably be no different. Jeez and to think I used to be a night owl before I had him.’

Anna watches her long figure stride off into the house. She’s big, blonde, slightly overweight, still carrying the baby weight from having Ray and yet, there’s such a sense of fun of happiness around her, like a charisma, a scent you smell in and want to be around. She sees the effect Lisa has on everyone around: her enthusiasm and her happiness radiate, rub off, draw people to her, moths to a flame. Is she even aware of it, Anna wonders, does she even know how lucky she is? This effortless thing that she has, that some people have, while others have to work at it, this popularity contest at life. And some are, of course, less successful than others.

She catches a glimpse of Ian’s face, half illuminated by the glow of the fire. There’s something beatific about him too, he was always fun to be around, happy. Optimistic,

laughing, but something's been added to this now. There's more, there's contentment something deeply content around him now. She suspects that there's not the same aura around her, and knows that there isn't around Jake, even after all these years.

Jake picks up on her sense, saying to Ian, 'You're a happy family man now, Ian!'

'How are your kids, Riana?' Anna turns to her. 'Oh, they're fine! You know Tania finally decided to get married at the ripe old age of thirty, and they're battling to have children though. My two sons are well. Johan's been manager of a graphic design shop for a number of years now, you know he was always into art and that. He has a steady girlfriend now, and I can see myself attending another wedding soon!'

'That's great, Riana, great. You must be very pleased.'

'I can't wait to be a grandmother. I loved my kids when they were little, and being a granny is much easier they say. You just hand them over to the parents when they get too much. And you get to spoil them rotten.'

Anna smiles.

Ian says, 'You ever think of having kids, Anna?'

'No. I've just got no desire, never have wanted them,' another stock phrase. 'It's a good thing too,' bringing some levity into the conversation, 'since I don't have a partner. I wouldn't want to be a single mother either. I have a friend who's going that route. She got pregnant through a sperm donor, is going to raise the kid alone. I could never do that.'

'It's unfair on the child,' says Riana, 'I think that's so selfish.'

'It's what I feel, but then again, I've never felt that intense tug to have a child. I don't know what that feels like. Maybe if I had. My friend has lots of family around her, the kid will have cousins, lots of male role models. It's going to be a boy...'

‘Ag, I don’t know, get a dog if you need companionship,’ interjects Jake, ‘that’s what I’ve always said.’

‘Boet,’ says Ian, ‘if you think a child is like a dog we’ll give you Ray for a weekend. You’ll be calling us before we’ve even left the driveway.’

‘Maybe,’ Jake concedes.

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But the next morning watching Ray and Lisa together, watching Lisa wipe a smudge of dirt off his tiny snub nose, she imagines for a second that Ray is a little girl. He’s wearing a red t-shirt with a giraffe on it and navy blue shorts, and he looks nothing less than angelic. She’s passed racks of children’s clothing often enough in department stores, on her way to the big clothes and there they are: little dresses hanging limply on hangers, red, purple, turquoise, the dresses tiny, for tiny people. How can she describe what she feels as she goes past?

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Jake has planned the day. Breakfast takes forever, with conversation carrying on around the long dining-room table, Ray smiling, running around, the centre of attention, always, the washing up, making her bed in that narrow room, it feels as if they’ll never leave that morning.

Jake is impatient to be off. As always he has a plan for the day ahead – a plan made without really consulting anyone, and this chaffs slightly. But he knows the land, the farm, they defer to him. He’s decided on a picnic lunch, and Riana has already started making the sandwiches. Potatoes boiled, and it’s Anna’s turn to add mayonnaise to them. Ian’s packing a cooler box. Lisa is keeping Ray amused and Jake is going from the vehicle outside and back indoors, loading whatever’s ready, impatient, not amused that things are taking so long.

‘Come on everyone,’ he keeps saying. ‘We want to get going before it gets too hot to walk, we’ll regret it if we don’t go now.’

And eventually they go. They pile into the four-by-four, it's a bit of a squeeze, but it's just for a half an hour of jolting through this nameless, unnamed bush. Jake steers it over the hard as rock ground, biscuit-coloured, bumpy, jolting them all into close proximity. Anna holds on to the hand rest, but she's tossed high up and then tossed almost smack bang into Riana and Lisa who share the back seat.

Ray is upfront with Ian and Jake, squealing with laughter at each new bump. When Anna hits her head on the ceiling, he's uncontrollable with glee watching her, and sets the rest of them off. Except Jake, steering tight-fisted through this landscape that's as strange to them as it is familiar to him. It's part of him now, and he seems to be able to identify a tree that once stood here, and has since been struck by lightning, or a hill that has a name in a language that the rest of them will never speak. It's hot in the car, and dusty, despite the aircon. A thin layer of red dust clings to the sweat on their skins. Riana's fair skin is shining in the heat, they're so close Anna can see the tiny pore marks in the corners of her nose. Lisa's fair hair is tied back, her neck flushed slightly in the heat. Anna, neat, small and dark, still feeling the heat, always, but somehow able to hide the discomfort, not showing in her olive-toned skin.

Jake stops abruptly, and they climb out into what looks like the middle of nowhere. The bakkie can't go any further it seems, and from here they will walk on. Anna looks around at the arid, thirsty land. The trees are twisted into skeleton-like shapes, gasping, some blackened, awaiting the spring rains that will bring them to life. The dust catches in your throat. It's a hard landscape, there's little greenness here, just shades of brown and grey and beige, and that high blue African sky that arches over them. The sun is a hot piercing disc this morning.

Ray is squealing again with excitement, and Ian catches him, loops him around his neck, telling him he's as a tall as a giraffe, which sets off another set of giggles in the boy. Anna watches, curiously, always watching, it seems. She slings her camera backpack around her body, and they all set off, child, cameras, food, cooler boxes, hats to ward off the heat. Riana has smothered cream on her arms, it smells of coco butter, of food, it reminds Anna of fudge she realises, thick squares of English toffee fudge.

They soon see why the bakkie couldn't go any further. The ground crumples up ahead and the rocks begin. They're walking on lumpy ancient slabs of rocks, only marginally smoothed down by centuries, millennia. It's not a hard walk, and Jake warned them to bring good walking boots. Anna has on her trusty brown hiking boots bought optimistically one year at Cape Union Mart. They're waterproof and snow-proof too – as she had found out the previous year walking high in the Bristlecone Forests of the US ten thousand feet above sea level and her feet crunching through snow, she hadn't felt any discomfort then, and now these same boots grip the rock firmly. She's glad she has them, even though wearing boots and socks seemed overkill. It's not quite spring, but already hot in this baking part of the country.

They walk silently – the heat saps energy. And everyone is carrying something, while also concentrating hard on the land. Walking seems to be its own form of meditation, a stillness descends.

Jake carries a rifle, as she remembers him doing so many years before. 'Just in case,' he'd said then, as he'd said this morning as he unloaded it from the boot of the car. It's slung around his body, and it makes him look sexy, this combination of man and weapon. She knows that any animals will smell them long before they come into sight and run off, that Jake probably won't have occasion to fire it, it's simply a possibility, an in case, that's all. But as she watches him striding ahead, the gun hugging his body like another skin, Anna feels something unnamed, unexpected, and unwelcome. She who eschews guns, and man things as she calls them, even big cars provoke her ire, showing off masculinity by buying big cars. And so she doesn't exactly welcome this side of her, tries to flick off her feelings as you would a persistent fly. It's hard though. Jake with his gun, and Ian striding with his child, they both have something she wants, but for now the thought is irritating, unwelcome, she adjusts her backpack.

It's the same river that's to be found just a half an hour's walk from the farmhouse. It loops around the land, and they've come out on the other end. It gleams blue this morning, not the dull grey-green of the night before. It looks almost icy today, alpine, almost like a snake winding its way through this land of rocks, whitely gleaming rocks in this bright sun. It's silent, and serpentine here, but Jake assures them there's a small waterfall further on, with a little space for a picnic, and all day long you can leap from the platform into the foaming

waters and then climb back again. As a child they spent whole days here – and sometimes the brothers even spent the night here in the sort of cave where the platform rests. It's idyllic, shaded and cool, yet the waterfall, which isn't very high is perfect to dive into, again and again, it's the kind of place you would want to spend the day.

Exclamations follow Jake as he shows them the place, only Riana has been here before. This was one spot Jake hadn't shown them in all the times previously, but he's brought Riana here occasionally. 'It's a special place,' he smiles. It is, and it's taken close to an hour of walking alone to bring them here. They lay blankets and some cushions on the rocky platform.

Ray wants a cool drink and Lisa finds him his juice while removing her dress to reveal the floral swimming costume beneath. Riana follows suit. It's only Anna still in short tights and a type of dress cum top. This is like a day at the beach, she thinks, and she's never liked days at the beach. Cheap ice-cream and then exposing inches of flesh kept white all year round, exposing yourself to others' scrutiny, their criticism... if she stays on the platform she will remain cool, moving away from the sun.

Jake splashes into the pool at the bottom of the platform, emerges from some rough-hewn steps in the side. His reddish-hair is flattened against his skull, and he's grinning as the cold water droplets spray from him. 'That's it,' I'm next!' says Ian and he's thrown off his t-shirt, his belly is flabby and white in the sun, it makes a considerable arc over his shorts, but, it seems, he doesn't care, he's off, flying over the side and they too hear him splash into the depths.

***

Lisa has moles patch-worked across her back. Anna sees them from where she watches, her back against one of the walls of this protected place. Out of nowhere, a memory of another woman with moles. She was eight, or nine or ten, playing at the swimming pool in the complex where she had grown up. They spent every Sunday there in summer. This woman, a friend of her mother's, asking her to put sun cream on her back.... Anna remembers how she shuddered, avoided the moles with their brown warty appearance. She had been revolted. Where did this memory come from, why? She couldn't even remember the woman's name

now, of course and couldn't have called up this memory if she hadn't seen Lisa's moles spread so lavishly, so unevenly across her back.

'Aren't you going to swim?' Riana asks,

And Anna shakes her head, 'Not right now. Maybe later. The water looks so inviting though, doesn't it?'

Lisa's off next, splashing into the water, after Ian and Jake and Ray, playing in the pool with his father.

'Did you ever meet Danielle?' asks Anna of Riana.

'Danielle? Oh you mean the woman Ian was seeing when he worked at the paper? Ja, a couple of times, don't really remember her much to be honest.'

'One time we came here, he brought her,' says Anna. 'I just keep remembering him and Danielle together here. They're happy though, aren't they, Ian and Lisa?'

Riana looks away. 'You know, it's not so good, this thinking of the past. Sometimes it stirs too much up, it's sometimes better to forget, move on, you know ...'

'What are you saying?' Anna's tone sharp now, 'that I'm living in the past?'

'Are you?' Riana asks.

There's silence. There's a sharp stab of pain inside Anna, Riana's cut to the quick somehow with her remark, and there's no answer.

Riana looks at her. Sometimes, she'd like to tell Anna, you live in the past because the present's not so good, because you prefer to be elsewhere, back when you were happier, or you think you were happier. But she can't say this to the sharp-looking Anna at the moment, she finds she can't say much to her. It's as though Anna has erected some kind of defence

around her. You don't see it at first: she laughs, talks easily, but something's there. Riana has felt it from the beginning, has also felt the need to cut through, tear something apart. But it's neither the time nor the place. Instead, she says, 'Ag, we all need our memories. I'm not surprised you're remembering Danielle and all the times before, this place brings it out in you. And it has been a long time, hasn't it?'

Her words like ointment, soothing the waters, Anna takes them in. 'Everything's all jumbled together I suppose. The past with the present, it's all around, what can I say. That's how I make sense of now.'

'I just forget,' laughs Riana, 'makes it simpler, I think. But then I'm not a writer, always looking around for inspiration and looking to the past, to what's been before.'

'I think sometime life's simpler if you forget, move on. But I've always felt the need to get it all down, remember, get it on pen and paper, mostly because you do forget so much. You know I've kept diaries since forever and sometimes I go back and read things and it's not like I remembered at all. I've changed things in my mind, I'm sometimes just so completely amazed at how that happens.'

'I tried to keep a diary once. I bored myself witless, writing the same old things, today I did this, went to work, came home made a cottage pie, got up, went to work went shopping. Maybe I'm just not a writer, that I couldn't make everyday seem exciting.'

'It's not for everyone, I agree,' says Anna, 'you need some sort of compulsion to carry on doing it. It is a bit nutty at time, though, and so time consuming! Busy writing about what's been and meanwhile there's life, ahead of you, you know.'

'Ja,' agrees Riana. It's the most Anna has said all weekend about herself, but now the silence stretches out. They hear the laughing and shrieking coming from the pool below the falls. 'I'm going in, you sure you not coming?'

But Anna shakes her head, and then she's alone on the platform, her, the picnic baskets, the cooler boxes the blankets, the cushions. She stretches out, lies back, looks at the sky through

her darkened glasses. It's clear except for some wispy excuses for clouds ... she could be all alone in the world here, no-one around. The feeling is strange, yet familiar, like a taste you can't place or name, yet you want more, it draws you in.

Jake glances up as Riana takes a flying leap down into the water. She lands with a splash near his face and he takes her hand underwater. Her eyes gleam, the water running down her face. He lets go of her hand and she dives underwater. He looks up at Anna on the platform. He'd like to tell her to come down but knows she won't. He wants to take Riana's hand again, but something's stopping him, looking up at Anna there, not watching him as she lies, alone, but still, something there. He shrugs it off, dives underwater himself, the water is sharp, cold, but welcoming after the walk, the heat, the long day stretching before them.

***

Lisa asks her to help her put sun cream on her back. It's strange that she should ask her, they're strangers to each other after all, but Ian's busy running after Ray and Riana is busy with the cooler box, and there's only Anna now, available, waiting, watching.

So, she reaches out a hand for the sunblock lotion, farts a big blob into her hand, and then raises her palm to smear it against the firm, warm back of Lisa's. She does not avoid the moles, her hand bumping over the raised bumps, the skin is tingly under her hand, goose pimpled, she rubs, smoothes it in, wants to rub in some more, but stops, says, 'There, you're all covered up now.'

'Thanks.'

Oblivious, lying back now, against the rock, her face to the sun.

***

The hours pass. It's lunch, again. And then she's holding a Pepsi lite in a plastic glass, a scratched worn plastic glass, it looks dirty when you hold it against the light. She does that, the black drink bubbles away as she tips. Ray's next to her, 'Mommy I want!' he points.

‘Can he?’ she asks Lisa.

‘Oh, he won’t like it, he hates anything with bubbles. Darling, it’s got bubbles, see...’

He makes a face, he’s going to cry, Anna leans the glass toward his open ready for crying mouth. He stops, looks surprised, but when he tastes the liquid he makes a face, as though he’s going to cry again, wipes his mouth with his wrist, and then plonks himself down next to Anna. Puts his head against her arm, his chubby cheek resting there, eyes slowly closing.

***

Déjà vu. It had felt that way to hear Lisa ask him the very same question Danielle had asked all those years ago. ‘Those two? No ways. Don’t be silly. They’ve never been together.’

‘You sure? There’s something, I don’t know, best way I can describe it, *intimate* about them. They’re closer than friends somehow, look how closely he stands next to her. And there’s something in her manner towards him ...’

Ian had shrugged. ‘I don’t know – maybe you’re right, stranger things have happened. But I just don’t see it.’

‘Do you think of her, here?’ she’d lain beside him on the bed, running a hand over his unshaven cheeks.

The unspoken her. He’d put her away. ‘Now and again ...’

Now he looks up at the platform where Jake and Anna sit, he’s eating an orange. They’re talking to one another but they’re not really looking at each other. They’re looking into the distance. Could it be, could it once have been? So long ago now, hard to remember what he thought then, what they all did then, like decades and decades ago, another lifetime, not only say, ten years ago now. Was this what memory and ageing did? You no longer remembered

what you had eaten for lunch the day before, never mind what you had thought or said or did in your bucolic late twenties.

***

The day rolls on as it must, the inevitability of it is almost tiring. And they troop back to the bakkie, tired by the sun, the swimming, except for Anna, of course, the time spent outside. They are subdued as Jake grinds the gears, lurches them back towards the farmhouse. Ray's asleep in Lisa's arms, the sun's arms long across the land.

Anna too can't keep her eyes open and says she is going to lie down. And when she enters that narrow dark room and flops down on the bed, she's gone almost immediately.

It's dark when she is finally woken up, Jake's come into the room to see what's up. She hasn't heard any of his calls.

'Hope I'm not disturbing,' he says, standing by her bed. 'We're going to have supper soon, thought I'd get you up.' In her half-asleep, just about drugged state, does she imagine him brushing his fingers against her cheek? She wonders, as she lies there, trying to surface, as though she has somehow been drugged.

The evening is like déjà vu – except they are all more familiar with each other this night, and they seem to work in a team. Lisa's done the sweet potatoes this time, and Anna gets busy making the dessert for later, a chocolate mousse that needs setting. As she swirls chocolate bits into the mixture, Riana tosses sweet corn in the salad. Once more it's just the two of them, alone in the kitchen while the men roast the meat over the braai and Lisa amuses Ray outside.

'You seemed very tired,' says Riana, 'I also had a lie down just now, but you slept for hours. Jake was quite worried about you. I told him it's just the fresh air and being outdoors. That'll do it to you sometimes, especially if you're not used to it.'

‘Yeah, you’re right, there is something about being outdoors. Still it was lovely, today, being out there. It’s obviously a place that Jake and his family love. It’s really quite special.’

‘It is. And did you see how Ray loved it! Such a sweet boy. He really took to you too.’

‘You think?’

‘So, you sure you don’t want any?’

‘It’s getting a bit late for that now, don’t you think?’

‘How old are you now, Anna?’

‘I’m thirty-seven...’

‘Not too late then.’

‘But it’s getting there – and I wouldn’t want a child as a single woman.’

‘Ja, there is that. Thirty-seven hey, I had my last child when I had just turned thirty-seven. That age, it’s just the right age for regrets, last chances.’

She waltzes out of the kitchen, taking the salad with her. Anna gives the dessert a final twist before putting it in the fridge to set. She had first met Riana when she was twenty-two. That first few days in the office, ‘How old are you?’ She looked eighteen, they were surprised she had four years of university under her belt.

‘Twenty-two!’ Riana had exclaimed. ‘That’s such a nice age to be!’

Was it, she had thought. She didn’t know any other age of course, or have much to compare it to. She’d been on a plane from London to Spain once, when she was twenty that trip she had re-met her Spanish family. She’d sat next to a middle-aged man who had asked her how old

she was, and when she had replied, ‘Twenty’ he’d stared at her thoughtfully: ‘What’s it like being twenty?’ he’d asked. She’d had no answer then, either. What was it like. It just was.

And now, thirty-seven, the age of regrets, according to Riana. She could have told Riana’s departing back that it was the age of regrets and longing and lost chances yes, the age of staring in the mirror and seeing the future reflected back at you, while your youth still shines from somewhere inside. It’s here, it’s somewhere else – you’re not young, but you you’re not old, or even middle-aged yet. A nowhere time – waiting, an interregnum between now, then, forever. A turning point perhaps, you would decide at some point.

She strides outside, takes her place beside the fire, accepts a Dry Lemon from Ian who holds out glass and can to her. She drinks thirstily, gulping it down. She’s parched.

***

After supper Lisa, as promised, pointed out more Southern sky constellations. It’s beginning to make sense to her now, the whirls and whorls assuming something beyond a vague blurring. ‘But, why,’ she asked, ‘Why the Milky Way? Where does that come from? Every time someone says it I think of a milky bar chocolate!’

Lisa smiles, “Oh all sorts of reasons. Different cultures believe different things. The Egyptians considered it a pool of cow’s milk. The Khoisan have a myth that the universe was dark, and then a young maiden threw embers into the sky and created it.’

They stare at the sky, the fire glows in the centre of the pit.

Later, ‘Is your mom still in New Zealand, Ian?’ she asks.

‘Oh yes, she’s from there originally, she went back when my sister and I left the house.’

‘And your dad?’

‘Oh he retired some years back, he’s got a house on the coast, but I think he’s lonely. I can never understand why people retire to the coast away from all the friends they have known forever. What’s the point of having to make new ones?’

‘Doesn’t he know anyone there?’

‘Some... but they’re all people he met there. He did remarry though, ja that girlfriend he had for years. They finally tied the knot. I was pleased for the old bugger, but it didn’t make much sense. They’d been together like ten years and then he goes and retires and he’s got to be respectable or something!’

They laugh. ‘Have you ever thought of joining your mom in New Zealand?’ she asks, gently. “I remember you were once planning that?’

‘Nah, we’re happy here. They don’t call it the land of the long white cloud for nothing, you know.’

‘I couldn’t think of starting up all over again,’ says Lisa. ‘I mean, a beauty salon is a beauty salon, I could open one up over there, but I wouldn’t know a soul or how things work. The thought alone is pretty tiring.’

‘Ja, it’s hard emigrating,’ Anna adds, ‘friends who’ve done say it takes years to adjust and then you know, you’re always a foreigner.’

‘I think,’ says Ian, ‘if you’re going to up and go you’ve got to do it when you’ve just left school or studying or whatever. You get to a certain age and you get too old. You’re too set. But hey, Anna, you and Gareth went overseas didn’t you? What happened? Why did you guys come back?’

‘Oh, long, long story,’ says Anna as all eyes turn on her. ‘We weren’t right for each other, for a start. I got there and thought, no I can’t spend my life with this man. And besides, I just suddenly realised I wasn’t English, you know. You speak the same language and then you get

there and realise all these people, they're not the same as you. You share the same words, but that's all.'

'You ever think of going back?' asks Jake.

'Not really, not anymore. I love the theatre, the bookshops, but you can get everything here now over the internet, and I get to go overseas fairly often with my job. It seems to be enough, for now. Besides, you have to put down roots, sometime, somewhere. My mom and I have been emigrating since I was eleven! She's not going to leave now, of course, and I don't know, I'm not English and I'm not Spanish, despite my surname. I'm somehow here.'

'Funny way of putting it,' says Ian thoughtfully. 'Same here. You know, it's the Afrikaners who've stayed it out. They're more South African than we can ever hope to be. But the whole 2010 World Cup thing, that changed us, don't you think?'

'I've never been more proud to be here,' says Lisa.

'Me too,' adds Riana. 'You know, talking of us Afrikaners,' and she smiles at Jake, 'since we're the only ones here, they say that of the whites, it's now seventy percent Afrikaners. The English have left ...'

'That's us,' smiles Ian, 'tail between our legs, soutpiels and all that stuff! But that makes sense, I have a lot more Afrikaans people I meet every day through work, that definitely makes sense.'

'People still keep leaving though,' says Anna, 'I went to a birthday party the other day, and there was a couple with their teenage children. They were leaving for New Zealand in a few days.'

Ian: 'You can't stop it.'

Riana: 'People are always emigrating, moving around, especially now...'

Lisa: ‘I love it here. I couldn’t think of living anyway else.’

Jake, silent till then, ‘Me neither. I just want to visit the French winelands one day, one day soon.’

Anna : ‘You haven’t done that yet, Jake?’

***

Awkward silence then, yes he’d agreed to take her.

She goes with him then. They bump along the same track they had taken early that morning to go to the day at the river. But at the fork, instead of turning left, he turns right. The branches scrape against the side of the bakkie, scratchy, thorny noises, running grooves into the paintwork of the vehicle. She shudders at the damage being done.

‘I love trees at night,’ she says into the silence. ‘I love the ghostly shapes they make, all grey, stripped of colour, they look so other-worldly. One day I want to write about trees at night, in the bush...’

‘Poems?’

‘I don’t know. Poems, or maybe take photographs of them, trees at night. You’d need a tripod though. And it might be a bit spooky, being out alone at night, you know ...’

‘Let me know,’ he says, ‘and I’ll take you.’

‘Next time. I can bring my tripod. There will be a next time?’ questioning, but he doesn’t answer.

They’ve arrived, he brakes hard at the entrance to the kraal. It’s dark, and Jerry comes out with one of the old-fashioned gas lamps she remembers from before. He’s mumbling something in Afrikaans to Jake.

‘You coming?’ he asks, and there’s that moment, between swinging out of the bakkie or staying in it, that she knows will change everything. She hesitates, then quickly opens the door, runs after Jake into the kraal. She smells and hears it all before she can see anything. She stands at the entrance, the cows mill about, distressed, Jerry has a lantern crouched over one. The smell is slightly nauseating, a faint whiff of dung on the air and the sweetness of his marijuana cigarette.

‘Ag,’ swinging back into the car, ‘that could have waited till morning.’ He’s irritated. ‘She’s got worms. I told him, I’d do it all tomorrow morning, his brain’s addled, man, addled with all that damn dagga he smokes. I’ll have to come back and I’ll do them all.’

They bump away from the kraal. ‘It’s OK, I wanted to come out at night, see all the trees...’

‘Thanks for the company.’

‘OK. ... look, almost full moon! Hey, what’s that?’

Silvery-green eyes gleam at them through the darkened bush. ‘Buck, looks like a kudu...’ He stops the car. They look, the kudu stares back, horns proudly curving over his head. It’s absolutely still in the bush with the engine off, just the quiet ticking of the cooling metal.

‘Beautiful ...’ she breathes out, ‘so glad we got to see that...’ Turning to him, but he’s not looking at the kudu anymore, but at her.

‘You too ...’

‘Me too?’

‘Still beautiful...’

The words feel like a cliché, she wants to catch them, say so, toss them back at him like a ball perhaps, but he means it. The words are trite, her answer even more so, 'Thanks for saying that. It's nice to hear that, still...'

There's something strange in his eyes, she shifts uncomfortably, stares back into the bush, but the kudu has taken off and now there's just silence, dust and the grey skeleton-like shapes of trees ahead of them.

There are things that can be said, words to avert danger, actions to prevent danger. She doesn't use any of them.

The smell of him, something other, different, it's not like the past, it's not like before, and it's not like anyone else. He's bulked up in the intervening years, he's stronger, and there's more. What he lacked then, he makes up for now, experience, technique. She gives in. There's something animal-like and hungry in the car, the kudu's eyes flash before her as she closes hers. He's fumbling with her top, then her pants. She's pliable, soft, adaptable. She'll go where she's led – it has, after all, been too long as a friend said recently. '*It'll be like breaking your virginity again, almost...'*

***

How many lies can you tell? How many lies do you tell until they all start to become the truth? It's the lies I can't take anymore. I'm starting to believe them myself. I can't distinguish between reality and fiction anymore. I don't have to watch myself that I won't be caught out because it's a habit now. It comes so easily. It's part of who I am. The lies, the layering. I seem to be what I am not. I am now what I'm not. And there's no one to guess at the difference.

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'You ...'

'Yes ...'

‘Now what?’

‘I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. Don’t tell Riana. She’ll be so hurt.’

‘She’ll know immediately. She’ll smell it on me.’

‘Have a bath the minute you get in.’

‘She’ll know anyway.’

‘I’m sorry, I think, I mean, you started it, you wanted it.’

‘I should have gone to the kraal alone. Why did you come with? Why didn’t you just go to sleep along with the others?’

‘I wasn’t tired, especially after my long sleep this afternoon. But that’s not the answer you want to hear is it?’

‘This has ruined everything, you know. I knew it, the minute you agreed to come with ... it was Riana’s idea, that day I bumped into you again and I was speaking to her and we were planning this weekend and I said how much I missed you all from the community newspaper days ... I knew it.’

‘It was *Riana’s* idea? I never knew that...’

‘You’ve changed everything...’ accusatory, blaming, yet resigned.

‘I didn’t plan this, you know. *How* have I changed everything, Jake? You start the car, you drive back, you clean yourself up, you get into bed with Riana and then tomorrow we drive away again. We never even have to see each other again.’

‘You hurt me badly the last time.’

‘I know and I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. And I thought we could be friends again, I’m sorry if this is all just too much.’

The silence again, the wind and the scraping of the trees. She winces again, thinking of the bodywork of the car.

‘You’re still so beautiful, Anna ...’

‘Are you happy with Riana, Jake?’

‘What’s happiness?’

‘Well, you mean generally or in a relationship? I don’t know, wanting to be with that person, looking forward to coming home from work and being with them, being able to go on holiday and spend say a week or two just in their company without being bored. Finding them interesting after all these years? Isn’t that happiness?’

‘That’s not happiness, Anna, that’s clinical. It’s like you’ve worked out a formula for happiness or something and you’re applying it like some scientific method. You can’t do that with another person.’

‘Well then,’ a pause, ‘I don’t know.... You know when I was fourteen I once thought that you could simply *choose* to be happy. You decided. So one day I got up and made the choice, I would be happy. And that day I was, it was a good day, but something happened, that day or another day, I don’t know, some teenage thing and I was plunged into unhappiness. I learned then that happiness isn’t something that you can choose. It’s illusory, it comes and goes and when it’s there you’ve got to be pleased with it, and when it isn’t, I don’t know, I suppose you must remember it, know you will get it back somehow?’

‘Are *you* happy, Anna ?’

She pauses. This is one of those moments. It could go either way. The answer is yes or no, she knows that and the pause stretches longer and longer, it tells its own story. But still she struggles to say it, pulling the blanket of lies closer, closer, twisting the answer away.

'What's happiness?' she asks, echoing him, 'see, I'm throwing the answer back at you!'

'Come, we must go.'

'Start the car.'

But he doesn't. He stays there, hand away from the ignition, his arm so close to hers, then reaching out to touch the curve of her breast.

***

She will hear that, throughout that night, that rough almost whisper of his, 'You've ruined everything.' It will punctuate her night, climb in and out of her dreams. She feels violated now. He's blaming her again, he's making her feel guilty all over again, just the way he did all those years ago. Does nothing ever change? Do you not grow wiser the older you get? Isn't that the way it's supposed to work?

The past is another country ... where had she read that?

Instead, she says now, 'You're right, Jake. I should never have come. I should have said no, stayed away, spared us all this. Now you've got to go back to Riana, you've got to lie to her and yet you've got to carry on, haven't you? Even if she's not the one for you. Am I right? Is that what happiness is? Settling?'

Now he does start the bakkie and it lurches angrily toward the farmhouse, its occupants mainly asleep, or waiting for sleep.

'When she takes a sleeping pill and gives me one too, then I know,' Jake had laughed, 'nothing tonight.'

Had she taken a sleeping pill? Or was she up, waiting, perhaps reading, or just lying in bed, quietly waiting?

Triangle

1

Could it be as simple as clicking on a few links, coming up with a few addresses, a few telephone numbers, and following the leads? The white pages, the yellow pages, scrolling through profiles on LinkedIn, clicking through Facebook profiles?

She has tried, over and over again, numerous times. Through the years, as the internet has got more advanced, faster, more detailed. She remembers dialling up, those first few years, her 486 machine spinning through Windows 3.11, the modem creaking through the ether, the pings bouncing, until eventually you connected, and then the interminable slow wait for the pages to come up, and then the delay as you clicked through the links. Back then they all knew it could be quicker: already there were faster better systems overseas, sometimes at work, on the ISDN line the links would scroll through quicker. But that was all there was back then, in your home, a cord snaking through the debris of your desk, rendering the telephone useless while you dialled up, and always after seven at night or over weekends.

The first time she had tried to look for him had been after that shocking announcement in the paper. She had, somehow, been looking through the classified section on a slow day at work, births, deaths, engagements ... something she never ordinarily looked through. She remembered feeling the slap of the shock and the way she suddenly became cold on that summer January morning.

The Star, January 21 1998

Engagements

Johnson-West

Announcing the engagement in Calgary, Canada, on Christmas Day of Jennifer, daughter of Margie and Bernard, and Paul, son of Barbara and Jack. Congratulations and love from your families and friends in South Africa.

It should have been the end, reading the simple announcement, but it hadn't been.

Up till then she had been thinking that Paul would find out her new email address over the internet, would write, return, miraculously there would be a reconciliation, and the path they should have taken would have continued. The announcement had sliced through all her fantasies and daydreams, numbed her and thrown her back on herself onto the cold hardness of reality.

For a time she had been shaken, but then the fantasies had built up again, as they always had, accretions through the years, like cholesterol deposits in the blood, narrowing the pathways, letting through only a thin sliver of truth, of blood, the rest channelled away, till the pathways slowly closed.

There seemed no way of stopping it, of closing the door, not through lovers who meant nothing much, nor through peering through the veil of marriage. And here, two months after the ceremony that was meant to close the door, she sits clicking through pages and pages of names. There are so many Paul Wests in the world it seems, and so many in Canada.

Would he still be living in Calgary, the city he had loved as a teenager, and the city he had returned to, as he had always threatened he would? Would they have married, and then moved to live in a city that was only a vague notion to her, Jennifer, the now wife?

Once, in a book, Anna had come across a character who had run away to Calgary, and the writer described the scenes, the bland downtown, the sprawling concrete blocks, the mountains ringing the city and she had devoured the descriptions with a hunger, and something that went beyond passion. It was like being given food after years of starvation: she sucked it all down greedily, but it didn't help... the writer did not include scenes of Paul West striding across a main street about to meet his wife, or a business partner, or ...

There are six Paul Wests in Calgary, addresses and telephone numbers neatly listed. She prints out the listings from the white pages. On LinkedIn there's one Paul West, a systems engineer for an IT company, it fits it neatly with what she knows Paul had been doing in South Africa. There's even an email address. She prints that out too.

There are, frustratingly, no photos accompanying the LinkedIn profile. On Facebook there are endless entries, many without photos. Those with images she can discard quickly, none match the familiar features she remembers so well. Finding him, or trying to, is like searching for gold or winning the lottery.

And there are so many people who bear the same name, the common name: a famous psychologist who had invented some new talking treatment; a minor rock star who lives in Tennessee, a writer of historical thrillers in Australia, a journalist who writes for a British daily newspaper, an engineer, a scientist, a professor, all carrying the same name, yet each so different, fat, thin, old, young, dumpy-looking and tall. She has only ever carried one image in her mind: that of a man with thinning sandy hair, a straight nose, small, owl-like glasses, the beard sprinkled with dark strands of brown, and the accent, the peculiar mix, the rounded Canadian vowels twisted by the flat South African expressions, flattened and dulled by having lived in Johannesburg all those years. Anna has no doubt that the Canadian accent must have come back though, rounded, full, and he would have willed it back in any case, so desperate had been his desire to leave South Africa then, to go back to the place where he had been happy.

The colour laser printer whirrs, prints, then calibrates, the noise filling the small room where she sits printing, searching, hunting, trying to find, always trying to find what she can never have.

'*What is it you still miss about Paul? Because it wasn't him that made you feel good about yourself. It was you. You made it.'*

'Maybe.'

'Were you in love with that guy you were going out with last year? What was his name again?'

'Paul.'

'Ja. Because so much of your conversation is centred around him.'

'I know. I don't know if I was in love with him. I just don't know.'

The friend who'd made these comments had long since faded off the scene. Fat, mid-forties, he'd been rotund, short and enormous. He had taken her to eat her first plates of sushi – vegetarian sushi, as he had been a vegetarian, and she had felt the contradiction in that. He couldn't stand his wife, stayed with her for the sake of his children, whom he loved. And yet, there had been nothing between them but friendship, a vague strange friendship. Once they went to a psychic fair. The sushi. Coffee. Moments stolen from his marriage. He was twenty years older than she was, fat, unattractive, yet trying so hard to make her see through the murk. So far, she never had. Through mutual friends she heard about him, toyed with the idea of phoning him, saying, I have a wedding band around my finger now, do you still have that? But it seemed cruel, unnecessary.

The printer is out of paper. She is out of paper. She rummages through the drawers, there is nothing left, the red and white Typek wrapping empty in her drawer. The printer's light blinks accusing, her laptop warns her threateningly, the moon glares at her through the open windows, scowling. Why did it always seem as though the moon is looking at her? Why does she feel like the moon is some kind of deity that can see through her, that looks threateningly, just waiting for the right moment to pluck her away?

She angrily pulls the curtains closed, the fabric tripping noisily along the curtain tracks.

Opening the door, calling out, 'Leo!' her voice loud in the quiet of the house, 'do you have any paper for the printer?'

Leo, the husband of just a few months, in his study in another part of the house, quietly, feverishly working on a project he has to finish before the end of the month. His voice, quiet, soft-spoken, quiet and calm, handing it to her, she is inexplicably angry, taking it almost ungraciously, 'I always forget to buy, I'm always running out, I'll buy more in the morning.'

‘It’s okay.’ Leo smiling back at her, but she is already gone, banging open the printer’s paper slot, closing the door, the printer whirring back at her.

Anna stares at the telephone number, the strange Canadian codes, the unfamiliar address....

‘I just want to know if he’s okay, you know. I mean, is he still married? Does he have children? What’s he doing? Is he still painting? He always wanted to be a painter, you know.’

‘And then, once you know that, then what? What will that solve? It won’t end. You’ll need to know more. It won’t be enough.’

‘It will. I don’t have to go and meet him or anything. I just want to know he’s all right.’

‘You know he’s all right. And if he’s not, then what, what can you do about it?’

‘Make it right?’

Her friend Megan had thrown a cushion at her, ducking, laughing, almost spilling her mug of coffee.

She stares at the paper again and the string of unfamiliar numbers. This Paul West hasn’t loaded a photo, so there is no way of knowing if it is him, or some other man with the same common name. She has the same problem looking at the reams of Paul West on Facebook, those who have loaded photos weren’t the one she had known. The others are faceless no photos and restricted access, Paul West only shares certain information, you have to be friends with Paul West...

At times she wonders how a private investigator would do it, would they even be able to find him? He seems so well hidden; as though he is, in fact, hiding from her, making sure she never finds him, and yet the thought is ridiculous. She has never stalked him, never phoned him again after that day they had walked out of the coffee shop, separately. The most she had done after she knew it was over was to phone his house, once, hoping to hear his voice ... and

he had picked up the call, 'Hi, Paul here ....Hi, hello, hello....' She had replaced the receiver quietly; this was before caller ID, he may have guessed it was her; it had only been a few months. And she knew the boundaries. You could never accuse her of not knowing the boundaries, of overstepping the mark. That was all, that and then after, the trawl through the internet, looking for scraps and remnants, once a year, that was all. It comes on her like a fever, suddenly she has to know, and of course, she never does find out ... The rest of the year always goes by, he is a dull presence, like a bone broken and never set properly so that in cold weather the knit throbs like a vague old friend come by ...

This time, though, a wedding band on her finger, not two months old, and she is again hunting through the internet. One day she will hit pay dirt; one day there will be a photograph, the right photo next to the name, and she'll know. But is Megan right, will it be enough?

And would Megan phone Canada for her? Anna laughs, thinking about it, and knowing that there is no one she can ask to pick up the phone, who will run through the list of possible Paul Wests in the city of Calgary and phone them all. Besides what can be said? How do you phone a stranger and ask if they're okay, if they're happy in their marriage, if they regret anything?

Anna slowly shuts each internet tab and watches as the laptop shuts down. The moon is peeping through a gap in the curtains again; she feels like she is being watched.

2

The past is fading, she thinks, after Leo has made love to her in that perfunctory, almost passive way he had. Childhood is no longer the fresh raw wound it has always been. Memories an ache, sometimes overwhelming her with intensity, and she'd cry as though the past would never be assuaged, assigned its rightful place in her life, or any others. And then the aftermath, creeping like ooze through the next few days, permeating everything in a dullish brown haze. But these times were rarer now. More often than not the past receded, memories were blunted, growing faded, brown and beige, like the newsreels you sometimes caught of the 1970s or even the 1980s, another world now: aeroplane seats covered in brown

cloth, and loud big sunglasses, yet all looking faintly quaint, another century, but more than that, another frame of mind. The past varnished now, fixed, preserved.

Sometime during that year she had known Paul, he had sold his new car to pay for helicopter lessons. He used the money to pay for the lessons, and bought an old baby-blue coloured Audi instead. The turning mechanism was worn, and you had to flick back the indicator manually, and there was a radio with speakers but no tape or CD deck. Paul, always a lover of music, had rigged up an elaborate system where his CD walkman played CDs back through the car's sound system. Anna's job was to hold the Walkman as he drove and to change the music. Neil Diamond played alongside heavy metal throughout the afternoon; she had even promised to go to an Iron Maiden concert with him later that month, although Anna hated that head-banging music that split through your skull. But such were the things you did when you like someone, when perhaps you were in love.

The faulty old air conditioner dribbled out faint bits of cool air; much as a year later, in yet another old car, with another man, the aircon would dribble out air. But it was never enough, never enough to blow away the uneasy, heated feeling.

It was four hours to Johannesburg, and neither spoke. Paul was taking a route back along the Drakensberg mountains, winding through in a leisurely way instead of racing back along the highway. They stopped for lunch, a rusk at breakfast had barely kept hunger at bay. She ordered a fish pie at franchised bar-cum-pub, poking through the crust and steam as they spoke perfunctorily about the week to come.

'I have a huge presentation on Friday,' Paul said, 'twenty of our guys and they're bringing in about a hundred from branches all around the country.'

'What's the presentation about?'

'About our customer service, the way we handle customer care, how we're trying to improve so that people don't think that they're just going to call in and listen to a recorded message forever. We're trying to get a human voice on to all calls within five minutes, even if it's just to say we'll call back. And we do, we do call back, always.'

Paul had recently been promoted to manager. After months of sitting at a desk answering computer support calls, complaining to her about how bored he was, he was now the manager, in charge of the whole division, and finally working away from the phone with its headset clamped to his ear. He had always been so pleased whenever she phoned in the day, 'Oh, you're not a client!' His warm, goldeny Canadian vowels creasing into a smile she heard over the phone.

'I'm sure you'll be fine, great in fact,' Anna said, 'you have a warm, confident manner when talking to people and presenting.'

'Yeah, here's hoping.'

They ate, he drank a Castle, she had a Coke. They carried on talking about the week ahead, work, deadlines, it was all so unimportant, and yet, they carried on. They did not talk about what had happened that weekend, about whether that signalled the start of an 'us' or not, or what, in fact, it did mean.

Paul was in a hurry after that. He paid the bill soon after and hurried her to the car. The few hours left sped by quickly, and the familiar industrial reaches of Edenvale loomed up. One of the few skyscrapers in the area caught the light, flashed a beam of gold as they drove by, windows glittering one by one, like dominoes falling. The Sunday streets of Kensington were quiet, the long reach of Langermann Drive curled up the hill, wide, empty, just a few cars around at the tail end of an afternoon. The silence filled the car now, Neil Diamond had come to an end, no longer singing about Sweet Caroline and she hadn't bothered to put another CD in the player.

He didn't want to come in, the goodbye was brief, almost nonexistent. It was still light outside as he drove away after carrying in her bag. She felt blinded, as though she had been hit across the face and hadn't realised it till hours later. He'd carried her bag upstairs to her room and it sat accusing on the polished Oregon floor. Fatly black and rounded, a sports tog bag with a zip beginning to go. For days it sat there; she refused to unpack it, pulling out her makeup bag only, as though, somehow, she could prolong that weekend by having a reminder

of it sitting there, a fat, fake leather bag spilling out a black bra, panties, jeans, a brightly patterned orange top.

3

Her handwriting has always reached into the past, she thinks idly, as she takes notes on a new elephant sanctuary that is opening up near the Kruger Park. Her tails of her h's loop into the past reaching out for something she can never quite name. It had always been like this.

The presentation on the sanctuary is finished, and they are now invited to help themselves to a late breakfast at the buffet table. It is almost summer, the table spread along the boundaries of the hotel swimming pool set in lush gardens. The hubbub of Sandton's CBD is muted here by the banks of trees, the long sloping lawns and the high walls that shut out the chatter of Rivonia Road. She shuts her bag, joins the group at the buffet table: there are croissants and hard rounds of butter, pink curls of ham, ice cold orange juice, a few bottles of champagne. With one hand she drinks the juice, the other holds a plate of food. A journalist she has known for years – they went to Indonesia together once – congratulates her on the marriage. He makes his living now writing funny columns rather than travel stories, as he had back when they had travelled together.

It was the usual crowd, the handful of journalists, PR people pushing a destination, a hotel, a brand, business cards handed out – but did they ever get filed anymore, she wonders?

'Two months ago,' she hears herself saying, 'Tuscany.'

Then, 'It was a small affair.' And, 'We met recently...' It had been just eight month ago, the brief time they had known each other is embarrassing to mention, she is always reluctant to say so, to admit it, but she hears herself repeating the same old tired words, 'Sometimes you just know, you know when it's right!' She'd heard a friend tell that to her once, years ago, after meeting the man who would become her husband after an equally short period of time. It seems a good enough, believable enough thing to say.

Something changes though, in others, when she says it, that much she has to admit, repeating the facts seems to admit her to a club, a rather large club, but a respectable club, a place that is respected. It is a rite of passage all right, getting married, more so than living with someone. It proves, somehow, that you are normal, that you are capable of doing this thing that everyone does. You've passed a test, you no longer have green horns growing out from a purple-spotted face, an induction. And now you are part of a larger world, now you know the code.

Still, it makes Anna uncomfortable at times, this ease of passage, this entry into a world of respectability, compromise, cosiness, as though doors have closed, instead of opening. At another woman's request she retrieves her phone and finds a photo of Leo on it, passes it. Leo stares up at her, the black hair curling around the open, boyish face, guileless almost. His image never fails to stir up the contradictions, she can never pin down her feelings when looking at his face.

She spends her days in an office – which is a contradiction for someone who works on a tourism website. Yet, most of her fact-gathering comes in the form of press releases and on flash drives, with occasional forays to a new museum that has opened, or a new lodge that offers something different beyond the inevitable five-star luxury alongside sightings of the Big Five. At times she feels stymied, writing up descriptions of lodges and B&Bs and new attractions that kept opening up around Johannesburg. Or responding to queries from readers of the website, who write from overseas and ask if crime is really that bad and want to know where to stay.

But, the job provides quiet, a wall between herself and the world. She spends hours selecting and going through the colour photos supplied by the handful of freelancers the website employs: African sunsets, the Atlantic crashing against the Cape shore, the Drakensberg mountains soaring, the clichés become fact. And there is always something new – tourism is booming, would always boom as long as the rand offered value for money to jaded European tourists and fussy Americans and the Asians, ever in search of new destinations. Exotic Africa, but also civilised Africa, there were no civil wars down south, and this was certainly an attraction. Her smiling face appears weekly on her blog: telling the website's readers about new places, giving advice, the tone warm and friendly, she steers clear of negatives. Yes

there is crime, but the overseas readers don't want to know about that. She writes weekly of the warmth and friendliness of the country, the heat, the beaches, opening and closing times of pharmacies and how much to tip waiters in restaurants.

She dumps the bag with brochures and press kit in the corner of her office and presses the power button on her work computer. She makes coffee as she waits for the machine to start and her email to download. As she stirs the milk and sugar into the polystyrene cup, one of the website designers, Tom, wanders in, iPod buds clamped to his ears, head moving to the music. Grinning at her, 'So, where you been?'

'Launch of a new South African tourism initiative, had to go, we're co-sponsors. Bit of a waste of time, but nice to get out of the office.'

'Always,' he says. 'But send me next time, I'll be on my best behaviour.'

'Maybe I will!' He winks at her and looks as if he is dancing away as his head moves to the music.

The day is as ordinary as mud, routine, mundane, forgettable she thinks, as she scans through her emails, hitting delete every now and again.

There are some emails you wish you had never opened.

Years later the saying will become like a mantra, she will repeat it, telling the story, prefacing it with that one remark: *There are some emails you wish you had never sent or opened.*

4

In the beginning – after the ending, of course – she had started playing a game. She thought of that time then as the beginning of the slow dance away from life.

The game had started in movies, that late October, as things were beginning to crumble. And then when it had all died away, the game became an obsession. She'd be silent after movies, rapt, intent, watching the credits roll up and away. She wouldn't talk or walk out of the cinema until after the last credits had finished, the music had ended and the cleaners were impatiently waiting to scoop up the plasticky cups and empty packets of chips and cartons of popcorn. Friends didn't understand it, and she told no-one, had told no-one in all these years.

She'd watch the credits waiting to catch glimpses of his name. The first time it had happened quite by chance. There it was: costume designer: Paul West. She'd been startled – the name was common enough, plenty of other people in the world were called Paul West, of course, sooner or later it would jump out at her. And then she started looking: she never again saw the name come up in the movie credits, but sometimes, bizarrely, it would almost be there, an oblique sign from somewhere?

Production Management

Paul Holmberg	executive in charge of production
Dana West	unit production manager

Put Paul and West together – and you had his name ... and it happened, again, and again. The American movies had the most number of occurrences, of course, but the British movies had a few. Seeing European films meant she could relax at the end, could even file out before the credits had finished, could relax her intent, hard stare at the screen, the black, the white letters rolling up so quickly, she always felt tense, threatened, having to watch stare, get it all in, just in case she missed the names, the signs... She told friends that she enjoyed staying till the end, that she liked sitting silently in a movie house, absorbing the atmosphere of the film, absorbing the message, that she didn't like to talk then, it spoiled the mood. It was amazing how many lies people accepted, and how easy it was to tell those lies. People wanted to believe, it seemed, no one wanted to be suspicious.

She did it for years and years, and now it has become a habit, silently watching the credits, looking, looking ... does she still believe that something slipped away that was meant to be? That the gods were, indeed, looking down on them, giving out signs and portents? What was it he had said in that final letter in response to hers, when she had been so anguished, her letter written fuelled on that whiskey-vomit night, that plea answered in cold hard dot matrix printer text, 'The gods must be looking down on us, and they must be laughing...' and only at the end, only two words in handwriting, that sprawling black ballpoint: *Love, Paul.*

Were they laughing? Were they trying to tell her something? She never found out.

5

'Do you believe in fate?' he asked that first date. They were standing in a dark field, the air slightly chilly, her heels sinking into the soil. The wedding party was going on in the distance and the music was faint. He held a beer glass, she'd finished her drink long ago, stood there, without a drink, her bag somewhere inside, her hands free, at long last free. What was it that poet Eva Royston had written, 'A woman's hands always hold something/ a handbag, a vase, a child, a ring, an idea.' She often thought of these words now, whenever she felt herself holding nothing, a bag somewhere, it was so much easier to hold something, easier to stand, to be.

'Do you think there's some grand design, that things are meant to be, that there's a path we follow from birth to death and there's not much we can do about it?'

She liked him. She liked his blue eyes protected by the round, rimmed glasses, and she liked that accent, that almost faux mix of Canadian mixed in with a few flattened South African vowels. You could almost call it fake, but she knew it wasn't: it was the result of living in two countries. He stood there, just past drunk, looking at the dark fields, the wedding had been held in the country. His words were beginning to mix and muddle, looking at her, the fields, the bright hard stars, the occasional streak of a car in the distance.

He said, 'The whole of last year I looked for a job, went for tons of interviews, and nothing. I needed something secure, something permanent, Bryony and I were going to get married this

April, you know. And then I resigned from that crap job I had, did a computer course, and then this new job just fell into my lap. I hate the idea of fate, but that's just what it felt like.'

She said, 'To me "fate" is a witch clothed in black, hooked nose, warts, wearing a hood. I can't believe in it.'

Then he looked at her, finally, his whole gaze on her: 'Then what do you believe in?'

'I believe in a Higher Self,' she explained, 'I believe in attracting to yourself what you need, good or bad, which for me, takes away the fate concept. You're controlling what you need, want, you attract it, then deal with it.'

He looked again at the occasional car going past on the distant highway. It was past midnight. 'It makes sense, in some way,' he said, 'but I have to think about it some more.'

The wedding was ending, and the friends they had come with, Karen and Roger, who had been dancing as Paul and Anna had taken a walk, had long gone. Driving back, Paul and Anna paused through Rockey Street; the street was lively with car guards pointing out empty spaces, tables jammed onto pavements, Rockefellas restaurant loud, noisy, the nucleus of the whole scene. In the end, they simply drove through without stopping for drinks, as they had considered. He came in for chamomile tea instead. They spoke about UFOs, 'That was always a problem with Bryony – I mean, if one came by, I'd have wanted to go! I would have gone.'

They spoke about the paintings he wanted to buy, the helicopter lessons he wanted to start taking and they spoke again about Bryony, and the purpose of the relationship. 'What for, if it was only going to end?' he asked.

Anna said that sometimes people come in and out of lives for various reasons, 'We learn things from each other, and then sometimes it's over.'

'There were problems,' he admitted, 'but I just hoped that they'd go away, or sort themselves out once we were married.'

She'd sipped her own tea, sitting on the couch where once Paul had sat with his fiancée Bryony. She'd had a dinner, invited them, and he'd sat, seemingly smiling throughout the night, an arm around Bryony, holding her to him. Bryony hadn't seemed to speak much, a woman with blonde hair and a soft look in her eyes. Anna suddenly thought of this as Paul spoke through the early hours of the morning, looking across at her from time to time. 'I'm twenty-seven, and I don't feel like I've achieved anything,' he said. He was pleading then, but Anna had nothing left to reply with.

He left, that first night, after two-thirty in the morning, and she thought then, how pleased she was to have him as a friend, how at ease she felt in his company.

6

They went out often after that. They saw Phil Collins in concert, with some friends, and his sister. They saw the movie *Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle* and wondered why writers were so prone to depressive episodes and suicide. They drove to Pretoria and saw ballet, *La Fille Mal Gardee*, and ate a late supper in Sunnyside. They went to the Rand Show with a friend of Paul's, John, a shy, brown-haired man who hankered after a girlfriend at age twenty-seven, and yet, had never had one. They watched the Electric Light Orchestra in a sort of field made into an amphitheatre.

And they spoke: Bryony entered Paul's conversation all the time. He missed her, and didn't miss her. He missed the closeness, the intimacy of a relationship. It had been his first real relationship, he confessed to her one night, he'd first had sex with an older married woman at the age of twenty-one, but until twenty-five, nothing, then he had met Bryony, and he thought that, at long last, he had met his soul mate. He believed in soul mates he said. He believed that there was one person who was meant for you, and you alone. That was your purpose in life, to find that soul mate, and then your life took shape and meaning. The idea was romantic, alluring, but frightening.

'Can't you have more than one soul mate?' she asked. 'I mean, what if your soul mate is also your sister, or a friend?'

He'd shaken his head, there was only one soul mate, one person meant for you ... 'But what, if say, you meet that person at the wrong time?' she'd asked, 'and it doesn't happen, does that mean you miss your chance forever?'

'If it's meant to be, if that person is really your soul mate then you won't miss your chance,' he'd said emphatically.

The idea was enthralling, yet dangerous. The idea that there was just one person meant for you in the whole world with its billions of people. But what if something missed? What if the bus failed to arrive, or you felt tired or sick that night, and something slipped and it didn't happen?

'I was meant to meet you a year ago,' she had told him then. He looked surprised. She mentioned the name of their mutual friends, 'I was going to go with them to that party where they met you. But I couldn't go for some reason, I can't remember why now.'

'I met Bryony a few weeks after that,' he answered.

'I know.'

What was it he had written in that final letter? The gods must be laughing letter? *'If it happens that you are my soul mate, if such a thing even exists, I will be ecstatic that I can waste no more of my time on my search and begin living. My stipulation, however, is that I must be absolutely certain. That's the one criteria I cannot forsake.'*

She'd kept the letters, the notes, and there were times when she'd go back, open that letter pasted in a notebook now. Nobody used dot matrix printers now; did they even sell them anymore? She always read that letter with a kind of bitter biliousness – and yet she had never again read that letter from start to finish, not after the first time. She read parts of it, so that it had become a kind of a jigsaw puzzle that had never been completed, only half begun. A face had started to emerge, the side of a neck, a bit of beard, a tie, but never the whole thing, never again after that night he had given it to her in an envelope.

There were so many absolutes, so many black and whites, so much cut and dried, yet ultimately undecided upon. It was so strange looking at her twenty-three-year-old self with its desperate yearning to believe, its naive hope and trust in soul mates and absolutes, its certainties that life would proceed in a straight line, that finally she would get it together, and nothing would ever smash apart. In some ways it was like finding a child of yours wandering a bit carelessly down a busy street, not looking left or right.

'The greatest chance for all of us lies in enjoying life. The gods have provided an endless supply and must be tearing their hair out that they created us too stupid to appreciate it.'

In the end that was all she had left of him – that and a few photographs. Why had they taken so few? There were the black and whites she had developed herself in the darkroom, never very expertly, the paper cheap, the enlarger creating scratches where there weren't any on the original negatives, and a few, rare colour ones. She'd mostly used black and white then, enjoying making big prints, superimposing images on one another, heads turned at odd angles. There was one, with their mutual friends sitting on the couch and she and Paul had stood behind while the time clicked on the camera. It was two months after the wedding where they had walked in the field, and already they stood so close together as they smiled for the camera.

7

'Come closer,' he said that Easter weekend. He was having a party, the house his for once with his family, mother, father, sister, gone away for the weekend. But he'd abandoned his guests to take to his bed, saying his head felt funny. His head was spinning. 'My head's going round and round! I can't get up, but I'm missing the party!'

She'd arrived late. She'd missed the braai held earlier. When she had arrived he was there, dancing drunkenly in the dark with one of the women from his office. She'd come in, seen him move awkwardly away from the woman, embarrassed, as though it had already begun and he shouldn't be seen dancing with another woman.

But it hadn't begun. They both knew that. After seeing the Electric Light Orchestra at the Rand Show the night before with him, and again, his friend, John, who so often tagged along, they'd raced off to the newly-built Randburg Waterfront. Screaming along the deserted highway, Paul bolshy, saying it was a free country, and so refusing to lock his door when she asked him to. A sense of disquiet and unease. Anna didn't know how to deal with that remark, nervously watched out the windows.

They'd found a bar at the Waterfront: the lights of the restaurants glinted on the surface of the man-made lake, periodically a fountain lit up with music and colours, but by then, the world was receding. Anna drank two whiskeys in quick succession, hardly tasting them. Paul and John ordered beers, and then more beers, it started to take hold of them. She'd prodded the conversation along, over the music and lights, a jagged night of revelations, awkward pairings that never made. They were talking about their first sexual experiences: John had lost his virginity at the age of twenty-two, sleeping with a much older, married woman. She'd been in her late thirties, unhappy, stuck, but unhappy enough to take the eager, inexperienced John. They'd had to be careful, John said, it was while he was doing his army service, and the woman was married to one of the corporals. Furtive nights and sweaty afternoons. It hadn't been love – but it had been an experience.

Paul had met someone at a club, also at age twenty-two: 'It was a dud. Which is why I was so surprised with Bryony...'

They moved on to another bar, and onto tequilas. 'Let's toast things!' Anna said, raising her glass. They toasted being single, they toasted seeking out opportunities, they toasted ditching jobs for creativity and then Anna ordered more tequila, 'Let's toast to finding out my sexuality!'

'Why do you think you might be gay?' Paul asked, looking hard at her.

She said: 'There's a wall that drops between me and men, and maybe I've transferred feelings because of that...'

He nodded.

They drove back to Paul's home, the three of them. They sat in the lounge drinking tea and coffee, listening to music. John said he had to be up at six for an early shift. That left Paul and Anna in the lounge, drinking tea, changing music on the stereo, silence between the talk: 'You're not mannish,' Paul said at one point. She nodded, let the music fill in for her answer. Near five in the morning they left to sleep in separate bedrooms. When she awoke Paul was in the kitchen singing, dancing from stovetop to dining room, making bacon and eggs. When she left he mentioned something briefly about a braai he might be holding that night. She nodded. Was it an invite? Why did she so often misconstrue invites as something else?

And so she had missed the braai, the lamb chops and boerewors had been consumed and only chips clinging to the bottom of packets still remained. There was music, again, and there were bottles of red wine and cans of beer. When Paul saw her he moved awkwardly away from the woman he had been dancing with and went to lie on his bed in his bedroom.

She felt strange, sitting there in the lounge. The end of the party, people dancing or talking to each other, and she sat there, like a spare part, spooning chips into her mouth in an effort at doing something. Out of desperation, Anna wandered into the kitchen. A man with long red hair and a beard was talking about God: 'The universe is so perfect it couldn't possibly be an accident!' he exclaimed to her.

'I disagree,' she answered. 'It's all random. Evolution is random. Nothing has been created with some kind of plan in mind. It all just happens.'

'Prove it!' the red-haired man said.

'I can't prove anything,' she replied. 'It just is. Either you believe it, or you don't...'

He leaned closer to her, he too had been slugging beer, 'But look at the perfection of an ant, feelers twitching or a shell, all iridescent and beautiful or a sunset. Yeah look at a sunset. How can you say there's no creator then, no plan.'

'Because there isn't, there isn't a plan, that's what I believe. It's all random.'

‘You’re saying there isn’t a God.’

‘Maybe. Maybe there are a whole series of gods, laughing, looking, playing. Maybe there’s nothing.’

They spoke about poetry next: ‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad,’ said the red-haired man, quoting Philip Larkin.

‘They fucking do,’ said a man who’d entered the kitchen, listening to them. ‘Anna, is it? Paul wants to talk to you.’

‘Me?’ Putting down the glass of Coke she’d poured herself. Feeling so uncomfortable still, wondering when she could leave, take her car, back it out of their long driveway and just get the hell out of there and home, finally, home.

Instead. ‘Come closer,’ as she entered his dark bedroom, no lights on. ‘My head’s going round and round! I can’t get up, but I’m missing the party!’

‘It’s okay,’ she said, ‘people are drunk, people are leaving. Anyway they’re fine with you here.’

‘I wanted to ask how you’re feeling after last night, how you’re doing,’ he said, taking her hand between his.

‘I’m fine,’ she answered. ‘What you said last night helped, that I’m not mannish, but feminine.’ He ran his hand through her long hair: ‘I wouldn’t worry about that.’ His hands were back in hers: ‘I should have done it last night.’

‘What? Why?’

He didn’t answer.

It was cold in the room and Anna's back was getting sore. She took her shoes off and leaned against the wall next to him. He moved closer. She kept remembering what he had said once, that people shouldn't share a bed as friends. 'Get in.' She did. She felt a bit tense, suffocated, some part of her wanted to run away as his hands encircled her waist.

'Why are you doing this?' he asked. She shrugged in the darkness.

'Who were you dancing with when I arrived?'

'Janis, from work. But she doesn't mean anything to me.'

She relaxed into him. They didn't speak. Eventually the last visitors to the party came to say goodbye and left the house in darkness and silence.

'I'm hungry,' she said. He got up, made tea, made her a roll. They went to sit in the lounge and he asked her if she had ever seen *Ghostbusters*. She shook her head. 'I've got it on tape. I watched it ages ago. Let's put it on.'

And so, he put it on, and they watched *Ghostbusters* early in the morning, Paul half sleeping, half leaning against her.

Again, they slept in separate bedrooms, and again she left the next morning.

'I feel so guilty,' he'd said the night before, and she hadn't questioned his comment, as she'd made her way to his sister's room where she was sleeping.

8

Click, click click and then it happens. It has been several months now since the wedding, and Leo is in Germany. An unexpected break for him, months studying and working in Berlin, furthering his architectural career. There was no way she could leave her job, though, go with him. They had decided. But there was skype, email, chats... the months would go by. The chance was too good, he had to go.

And so, one afternoon, idly waiting for copy to come through for a website that has to be updated that day, she comes across him. He's been awarded some kind of education bursary along with ten other students. Again, as so often, she has idly typed in his name, along with the unusual second name, Kenelm, handed down to all the boys born to the family... and suddenly, there he is.

He is smiling with the others who have been awarded grants and bursaries. The same smile, the slightly weak chin, still covered by beard, and the hair, the hair shaved so close to his head, disguising his on-going baldness. The mouth, the same, of course, how could mouths change? But he is fatter, more solid than she remembers him. He doesn't look that much older than all those years ago. She stares at the photo, deliberately downsized for the net, there is no way of enlarging it, looking at his features in more detail.

She's going to have to make do with this slightly fuzzy copy. She hits print, and walks to where the printer is spewing out its pages. Her heart is beating too quickly and she even feels slightly flushed as she hurries back to her desk, ripping through the pages, putting the one with him on top. The relief spreads through her and she is laughing as she looks at his image. *He's alive! He's all right after all!* As she runs her finger over the image, as though trying to trace his features, she thinks that that is all she has ever really wanted, to know that he is alive, okay, happy, handsome, doing fine, not unhappy or depressed or even, and the thought has occurred to her, dead. He isn't dead after all then, but being awarded a bursary, although the link and the award are a year old. How has she missed this in all her trawling of the internet?

She scrolls to the top of the page of the organisation which had given him the money, she clicks on the 'contact us' button. The numbers came up neatly, and that she too prints out and carefully adds to her list of papers.

She picks up the phonebook next. If he has been awarded a bursary in this country could that possibly mean that he no longer lives in Canada? Has he come back to this country then? And if so, could he be in the phonebook?

The office noises seem to recede as she quickly picks through to the 'W' section in the Johannesburg phonebook. There are endless rows of Wests and then, there it is West, PK for Paul Kenelm. It can't be the same person, could it? This PK West lives in a suburb tantalisingly close to her, she could drive there in ten, fifteen minutes ...

She sits back in her chair, shocked. She feels as though she has taken some kind of drug, her heart is tingling and she is actually breathless.

Carefully, very carefully, she copies down the telephone number, pasting the lurid green post-it on top of the print-outs she has just collected from the printer. If she calls from work, the number will come up as 'unknown' ... there'd be no tracing her. She picks up the receiver. The number rings and rings. She calls again, perhaps she has misdialled. It rings on and on, through a silent, empty house. There's no answering service on the phone. And it is the middle of the working day ... She can call again, that night... but if she calls from her home landline, the number will show up on the other end. Ditto with her cell number. She can't take that, won't take that risk. She can't let him know she has been looking for him all these years. She could, of course, get a pay as you go phone. Give the number to no-one; it would be just for this.

Or, she looks at the clock, she could take a drive past the street, it could almost be on her way home ... and then? Then what? Look at possibly a walled home, stalk it out, wait till someone arrives, wait till *he* arrives? What then? Hide, duck? God, the mortification if he were to see her, realise what she was doing! The shame and the humiliation!

She picks up the phone again. Megan's voice on the other end is cheery, if a bit distracted.

'I found him.'

'Huh? What? Who?'

She explains about the bursary, the address she's found next to the listed telephone number. Megan's voice skirts along the edge of irritation, anger: 'Just forget about him. I told you ... you just need to forget about him. What good is this going to do?'

‘Would you drive to the street, I’ll give you the address, just see, just look for me?’ Ignoring the hints, the cues...

‘No, no, Anna, you know I won’t. You know I’ve said this before, you really need to see someone about this. You know, talk about this and then just move on. You really need to move on. I thought, with you getting married, but it hasn’t happened. You’re still going on about him. It’s become an obsession and I can’t figure out why. Not for the life of me. It’s painful to see.’

‘I’ll ask someone else,’ Anna says tightly, about to put down the phone.

‘Just wait, wait ... look, are you doing anything tonight? I know with Leo away in Germany you’re probably just doing your nut, getting lonely. Will you come over for supper? Let’s talk, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Anna says, ‘okay. But you’re not going to talk me out of this...’

‘I don’t know what I’m not going to talk you out of, but just come over, okay?’

Okay, okay she felt like yelling down the phone, but instead muttered the words quietly, put down the phone.

She dials this PK West’s number again, and again it rings hollowly through an imagined house.

9

The cards she had picked from the Tarot pack were all, seemingly, negative, they started with ‘the fool’ and ended with ‘ruin’. Her friend Karen, who had introduced her to Paul, had been at that wedding that had been almost like a first date for her and Paul. Karen had recently learned to read Tarot and had invited her to see what the future held. Anna had to be up early the next morning: she was going camping, for the first time in her life, with Paul and some

people from her office. But the allure, the chance to see what the future might hold – was too strong.

The Fool danced against a yellow background. He held a mask on a stick, held away from his face. The mask grimaced sneering, life was not what it appeared to be. The Fool looked happy though, even as his feet skirted the edge of a crumbling cliff. A bright sun shone beaming long straight rays, and a white dog tried to paw at the Fool's feet, trying to warn him of impending disaster. Karen pursed her lips: 'Don't do anything you don't want to do,' she told the eagerly peering Alexia.

The spread ended in The Ten of Swords, Ruin. The card was chilling: a man lay face down on a cold-looking stony ground. Ten swords pierced his back and his face was turned away Long-handled swords, they looked like they all ended in crosses. The sky was yellow-tinged, leading to black, and in the black sky the numeral 'X'.

Karen said: 'This means that your involvement would lead to ruin, death, despair, sadness. But the cards also say, go for it, take the chance.'

Anna's eyes prickled red. 'That's like Catch-22,' she said to Karen. She shuffled the cards again and then neatly placed them back in the deck. Anna hadn't told her what question she was asking as Karen had laid out the cards before her, but she soon guessed. She'd introduced them, and Roger, who was friends with Paul, had even been responsible for getting him a job.

'Be careful,' Karen said as Anna left that night, 'be careful, but you know what? Take a chance!'

Take a chance! It rang through her head like a song as she went away with him and his family to Sabie where his father was running a race. His mother, his brother and sister-in-law, his sister, Paul and she with her nebulous unknown undefined state. Friend, they said, but what sort of friend? On the last afternoon they sat outside the rondawels the family had rented and ate lunch overlooking a dam and it was then that his sister and sister-in-law touched on how long Paul's brother had taken to even kiss her, this woman who was now his wife. 'Nine

months!' she said, 'before he even tried! And now look, we're married. Who would have thought?'

Was it code? Were they trying to tell her something? Should she be patient, wait, let him take the time he obviously needed?

They stopped at Pilgrim's Rest for cake, tea and coffee. She took photos of the family, cherished snaps of a smiling, close-knit family. Years later, she would cherish them, lovingly place them in albums, a reminder, all she would have left. That night they were all late getting back to Johannesburg. She'd sat in the backseat with Paul, his leg almost touching hers; she felt so close to him then as the night sped on, lights whirring past, the warmth and comfort of that togetherness heightening everything, making it all beautiful.

Take a chance! again echoed in her mind the very next weekend as she and Paul drove through the mountains to the Pilanesberg.

They had gone in Paul's beat-up old Audi, baby-blue, and the indicator gone. Camping in the Pilanesberg with the rest of her office. When her boss had heard that she had never been camping she'd decided then and there to organise a camping weekend for the office. Anna had never worked in such a close-knit environment – they were almost like family – and never would again. Her first job as an entertainment and crime reporter for a neighbourhood newspaper – the twin beats of crime and entertainment – so diametrically opposed. The one involved visiting the four police stations in the paper's catchment area, getting statistics on who had been murdered, hijacked, raped or robbed that week; the other involved seeing ballet and theatre productions, receiving free tapes of music and watching movies once a week, once they had come on circuit of course. Reporters from neighbourhood papers didn't get to go to previews held for more important media. The crime stats made her terrified, of course, she'd sit stoically taking down the figures, noting that in the street she lived in yet another woman had been raped ... And yet, the balance of *Swan Lake* at night, and then rushing in after an evening out, hurrying to shut and lock the manual gates, the wolf at the door, the newly-formed bands of hijackers waiting, waiting perhaps for her....

They followed the editor's minibus hired for the occasion. The rest of the office hung out of the windows, beers already cracked open this Friday afternoon. Anna had wanted to be independent, she'd said to Paul 'That way we leave when we want, arrive when we want...' But despite that, there they were, following the minibus to the Pilanesberg. They were silent, listening to the music.

Her first lesson was in how to put up a tent – or at least, in watching how others put up the tents. In this, as in choosing to go in a separate car, she and Paul had their own tent, away from a massive ten-man tent the others were going to be sleeping in. She watched them wrestle with the blue flap and folds of the tent, watched as Paul hammered in the tent pegs that anchored their own green tent in place, a small, round-shouldered affair, hugging the hard, sparse ground where tufts of grass grew in random patches. Paul, a veteran at camping, had laughingly instructed her on how to secure the tent, but photos taken of the two them showed her smiling, shaking her head, standing back, watching, an observer, albeit a smiling one. He'd lugged along blow-up mattresses and blankets to keep the early spring chill away, and the interior looked cosy, and inviting. He flopped down on it, inviting her to join in, and once more, cameras clicked when they weren't noticing. Weeks later her editor put up the photograph on their newsroom pin board, their faces, peeking out from the tent where they had flopped down, grinning at the shutter. Weeks later, she'd stab at the images up there, taking a ballpoint pen to the glossy surfaces, scratching through this laughing face, erasing him, or trying to.

There were sweet potatoes for supper, along with the sizzling cuts of chops and boerewors. You smeared butter in the soft, sweetish potato flesh and sprinkled salt over the vegetable. Another first: her colleagues couldn't believe it, her colleagues, that she had never eaten sweet potato. They plied her with more and she ate, hungrily, the taste as exotic as durian fruit would be to her years later on a trip to Indonesia. Here, a taste and an experience as ordinary as mud she thought, and yet it was all new: Paul, camping, sweet potatoes.

There was a bonfire. There were jokes told around the flickering flames. Van der Merwe did something comedic and stupid in most of them, and some were funny. But Anna found she could never remember jokes after, try as hard as she could. There was the tinny sound of a radio, and the dulcet sounds of Abba broadcast from Radio Jacaranda. And then, the tinny

sounds of *Sakkie-Sakkie*, and the area around the fire was soon filled with the dancing couples of the people from her office. Her female editor put her arms around her girlfriend, finally acknowledging what she and the other reporters in her office had suspected. Another woman danced with her husband, another with her ex-husband, who still lived with her in a complicated vein of a relationship. She and Paul watched, looked, listened, they didn't join in. Despite his Afrikaans mother, Paul didn't respond at all to this culture, it seemed comic instead, to them, watching couples dance to a kitsch tune, arms around each other. Anna, as distant from this culture as Paul and one of the other reporters on the trip, Ian, with his English parents, watched, fascinated, yet also hungry, as hungrily as she had eaten the sweet potatoes, for a glimpse into other worlds, cultures, customs. Always so hungry to travel, to see new things. Instead, here, in the lip of an ancient volcano, long since erupted and smoothed into this baking veld, she felt herself reaching out, watching ...

And then Paul was tired, yawning, saying he was going to bed. She watched him go, said she'd be there soon. It was early though, and she felt torn. She wanted to run after him, and yet felt this pull, this pull toward the fire, the dancing couples, the desultory talk around the flames, this intense sense of togetherness under a black primordial sky, the tinny sounds of radio and tape deck in the night, the glowing lights from the other camps in this camp ground, the pulsing lamps within the tents, the caravans pitched and emitting lights, smells, sounds, silhouettes of people.

But she went soon after, stopping in at the tent before going to the ablution block. 'Come soon,' he said. He was waiting for her, not asleep, as she had half feared, but awake, alert, talkative, lively. They lay together, listening to the sounds of the camp around them, the tinny sounds dying down, the camp rustling like an animal around them. His fingers moved around her, in her, but she stopped him just as he moved to get on top of her: 'I don't know what's happening between us,' she said.

'Neither do I,' was his answer.

Miraculously they slept after that, each falling deeply away from the other, in a sleep punctuated only by the hard stones that occasionally dug into each of them through the night, rather than the concern that washed through them each.

The next morning the game drive was spoiled by the fact that no-one could get up early enough after the night before. By the time they set out the sun was almost blazing, and again the beers were cracked open, and the kombi was packed. Her colleagues hung drunkenly merrily out of the window, they chased the animals away, and soon they were warned by the park officials to keep quiet and to keep the back of the kombi shut and to stop hanging out of the back. The officials followed them around for the rest of the game drive, dampening the mood. At the water hide they waited for the animals to come and drink, but it was all too late.

That afternoon, to make up for the disappointing morning, she, Paul and two other reporters, Ian and Jake, went off on their own game drive. They were luckier. They saw baboons, antelope and finally elephant, young bull elephants, delinquents of the park, or so they had been told. These elephants had seen their families culled, yet had escaped, and were brought to the Pilanesberg. Like unruly teenagers everywhere, these elephants mock-charged. Jake was driving, and refused to go on, the elephant stood looking down on them, the atmosphere in the car was tense, silent. Anna gripped Paul's thigh, clinging on to the hard muscle beneath, 'Go Jake, go...' but he wasn't listening.

'Relax,' said Paul.

She couldn't relax. Eventually the elephant turned, walked away, his long penis sweeping the ground.

'Why didn't you go, Jake?'

But there was no satisfactory answer. Jake shrugged, 'He wouldn't have charged...'

'How do you know?'

***

That evening, a fish braai instead of meat, but again, the sweet potatoes. Again, she gorged. She sat around the fire instead, toasting marshmallows. It had been the first thing she had said

when the camping trip had been planned, ‘Are we going to toast marshmallows?’ And here, they were, the sticky, burnt sugar smell filling the air, and then crunching the melted sweet between teeth. And again, Paul wanted to go to sleep early, taking her hand, saying again, ‘Come soon.’ And this time, she agreed, as they had an early morning game walk planned this time. And she made her way back to their now familiar green tent, the mattresses so close together. And again, that familiar closeness. But, ‘What’s going on between us?’ She, asking, he hedging, ‘I don’t know.’

‘I’m interested,’ she said, simply.

‘So am I. But I’m so confused about my life at the moment. Some days I’m going back to Canada forever, some days I’m ok about staying in this country forever.’

The words were like knives. Canada. She pictured ice and frozen streets, and people bundled up. She pictured cars that wouldn’t start in the mornings after being out in subzero temperatures all night. She remembered reading about the underground malls they had built there, how you could live your whole life underground, stepping from the trains into the malls, and then going to work in some tall tower and back in the trains. She wondered if she could live there, in an icy, cold wintry country. Instead she said to him, ‘It’s freezing there in winter.’ The words banal, meaningless.

‘You know,’ he said by way of an answer, ‘I’ve fantasised about us being together, but I’m not sure, you know, I’m not sure if I could take that deep intense relationship again. You open yourself up, and give away so much of yourself.’

‘You have to. That’s a relationship, that’s part of it.’

‘I know. I get jealous when I hear you’re out at night without me. When I’ve seen you talk to other guys I get twinges of jealousy. But I’m trying to control that, because that’s the way I was with Bryony. That’s why I never ask when you’re going out, who you’re seeing.’

And then he said he had thought about it: what he'd feel if he met someone else, or if Anna met someone else. 'I'd probably feel hurt. But I want to get used to the idea that I might not know you next September. People come and go.'

The words cut into her. She mentioned meeting a guy at a party her friend had given. 'But I'm just not interested in anyone else.'

'You can have any man you want, you know.'

Anna lay there in the dark, the camp quiet as the night wore on into morning. But I don't want any man, I want Paul. The thoughts, again, like knives.

He got up to go to the toilet. 'You know what I'm searching for, that one woman meant for me. I may still be looking for, or I may have found her.'

Later, that week, at the opening of a new hospital, at the cocktail function she had attended with one of the advertising reps, the woman said, 'You two make such a beautiful couple. Have you, you know?'

Anna's face must have been thunder, because the woman laughed, 'Oh ok, some things are private! I know that.'

A beautiful couple. The words echoed through that evening, and through the week. She saw him nearly every night, he came with her to the opening of a bookshop, to a dance show, a movie, dinner. He wanted to go away again, a long weekend was coming up. They couldn't figure out where to go at such short notice, the coast was too far away, they hadn't booked anywhere. Eventually he phoned that Friday morning. 'we're going to stay with my aunt and uncle in Tweespruit!' he said. It was a small village in the Free State, an hour away from Clarens and the Golden Gate park. 'I love that part of the world,' he said, 'I want to show it to you.' That night, at his family for another braai, he was in high spirits, loud, jocular. His brother asked her, 'Why do you get so quiet the louder Paul gets?'

'How can I compete?' she asked.

That Saturday morning, he picked up her, singing ‘On the Road again’ as he met her at the front door, boyish, happy. ‘I thought we’d eat breakfast along the way,’ he said, ‘I know how much you love bacon and eggs.’ She didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d eaten, touched by his thought.

They listened to music through the hours driving to the Free State. Breakfast as promised at a Wimpy. They were then a little silent and awkward with each other somehow, his jocularity vanished and she picking up on his uncomfortable behaviour. They fed, awkwardly, off each other’s moods, she would later remember.

10

Two breakfasts and then a specially prepared lunch at his aunt’s place in the little dorp. She’d rarely felt so full, but she couldn’t refuse this meal either. Paul was happy, bouncing around. They had briefly dropped their bags in the cottage they were to stay in, at the back of his aunt and uncle’s home. Oddly for such a small place there were two bathrooms: his and hers, one had a shower, one a bath. There was a single bed, which had a mattress which unfolded from beneath, she noticed. There were books, a rocking chair even. They were there so briefly. After lunch Paul bounced off again – he wanted to show her the famous Belgian priest who had set up his studio in the village. He’d stated painting and had now made a name for himself as a painter. In the last few years demand had driven up prices for his work, and Paul wanted to buy a piece before they got too expensive. He’d known the priest since he’d been a little boy visiting his family in the area. It seemed he wanted to show her everything. He wanted her to taste, see, visit, and absorb everything this area had meant to him, would mean to him. Anna hadn’t seen him so animated, so boyish. She didn’t know quite what to make of it, absorbed as she was here, trying to go along with his enthusiasms. Only later on, years later, looking back, would she look at this one weekend, remember it with something beyond the pity and sadness she would later feel, and recall that she had meant something to him after all. That she hadn’t been a passing phrase from one fiancée to another, that he had been trying to show her something, and she in turn hadn’t been able to show her appreciation.

The painter's studio was large and cluttered with finished paintings. They'd driven through a rutted, dried-mud driveway to a low-slung house where he stayed. 'This is Father Frank de Vries,' he'd introduced her to the portly Belgian priest, now somewhere in his late sixties or early seventies. His hair was white and powdery-looking, and his face creased into a caring smile when she murmured her greetings to him. He wore black pants and a black roller neck on this Saturday and was proud to lead them into his studio, waiting while Paul looked through the finished works. Paul lifted the cloths draped over some of the pictures. Anna didn't like the paintings, and knew she'd never tell Paul. She disliked the nebulous swirls of paint that suggested outlines of bodies and faces, but committed to neither. There was nothing definite about the figures, noses were blunt protuberances, eyes suggested and bodies swirled away into brown mists. Paul chose one where a woman stretched a hand toward the mountainous landscape, her body almost fading into the scenery. He loved the painting, saying, 'There's something about this one...' his words trailed as the painting did. 'I don't know ...' he began again, then, practical, to Father Frank, 'I can write you a cheque, can't I?'

As they drank tea in a small side room Anna watched as Paul drew out his chequebook and wrote, 'Three thousand rand only' in his own looping cursive. It was more than she earned per month, she thought, as he handed the slip of paper to Father Frank and they drank tea and crunched into the square shortbread biscuits. They spoke about the weather in Canada when Paul mentioned that he didn't know what to do now, and he was considering returning to that country. 'It's cold there,' remarked Father Frank.

Paul made some spluttering noise, what did some cold matter? Besides there was central heating everywhere, what was a bit of outdoor cold now and again.

'Think about when you're old,' Father Frank said, 'then you won't like it so much!'

Anna thought that was such an odd thing to say. Think about when you're old, but she couldn't, didn't, it was like asking her to climb Mount Everest or book an expedition to the moon, so totally beyond the bounds of where she would ever go.

'You can go to Thaba'Nchu Sun,' his aunt suggested after they had returned and were thinking about what to do that night, 'it's only an hour away.' But they weren't keen. His

aunt and uncle were going to a seventieth birthday celebration that night, but again, they weren't keen on that. 'We have lots of videos to watch,' his aunt said. 'You can have some leftovers from lunch and watch a video.'

Paul was silent again, odd again, his moods as mercurial as ocean tides. Again he retreated, they ate in silence and then watched a movie set in 1900s Ireland where a man fought for a woman and another looked on, and somewhere there was a maniacal father on the loose. After, sitting in the lounge, his mood turned again and she felt as if she was swimming upstream. 'I'm going to bed,' he said, getting up to go, even as she was still sipping tea in the lounge. He left. She replaced the cup in the saucer, looked around at the lounge with its TV, its stiff wooden furniture and the frilly, flowery-patterned curtains, the photos on the mantelpiece of the aunt and uncle's children, Paul's cousins, all in various stages of growing up. From a six-year-old grinning with missing milk teeth to getting degrees in solemn black academic dress, to a wedding, a christening. Anna felt nauseated, disappointed, alone. She replaced the tea cup, carried it through to the kitchen, rinsed her and Paul's cup. The night was silent in this small village, dogs barked occasionally, but there were no sounds of traffic. She wondered whether to turn off the lights, or leave them on for the aunt who was returning later. She wondered what to do, stay in the lounge, did Paul want to be alone? Or go through to the cottage? But she didn't know what to do in a stranger's house and so she tiptoed through the silent rooms, slid through the back door and opened the sliding doors of the cottage. Paul was in bed, he'd pulled out the mattress and was lying on it wide awake, waiting.

Later, in the dark, she spoke up, 'Don't you want me here, Paul?' she asked. 'It felt like that, you just going off to bed...like you didn't know what to do with me.'

He said he was sorry, he hadn't meant it. 'I get carried away sometimes.' He really wanted to show her Tweespruit, the place he loved. She let him then. A massage turned into more, he climbed into the single bed with her. At first it hurt and she kept saying 'Ow, ow...'

'Shall I stop?'

'No ...'

‘Nothing like a bit of sadomasochism,’ he joked.

Later, ‘I suppose I’m not a virgin anymore.’

‘That’s such a funny thing, some people say you’re a virgin again if you haven’t had sex for three weeks.’

She tried to sleep beside him that night, but the single bed grew uncomfortable. She climbed back into her bed, and then missed him, and lay, again, beside him. He slept.

***

Years later she would remember the food. She, who had trouble remembering what food she had eaten when she wrote travel reviews of various lodges, remembered the food eaten that morning –as though the memories were totems into the past. The morning, coffee and a rusk dunked into the beige liquid, a small rusk, it didn’t quite fill her. The roads leading away from that small Free State dorp, he seemed in such a hurry to leave that morning. They left at ten, there would be no exploring more of the country or the area he said he loved so much. She didn’t ask why, didn’t question it, and it was a habit she’d carry with her years later. Instead, they took a scenic route home. Again the tape deck, no longer working, the music on a portable player the speakers lending sound mysteriously through the hook-ups of cords he engineered. Again, he drove and she didn’t have to, again the road swung ahead long ribbons leading on, and on and on, she didn’t know where.

Years later too she would remember the lunch she had at a small pub-like place somewhere in the middle of nowhere. She’d remember the spinach pie she had ordered: the crust baked over the steaming vegetable inside, the way she had lifted it and eagerly taken bites from it and then had left half of it, delicious as it was, hungry as she had been. And she’d remember the silence, again, his silence as he ate his steak, his chips, and she trying to fill in the desultory talk, sentences here and there and then, so quickly it seemed, they were on the road again. He seemed in such a hurry to get home this public holiday, what was he rushing to, or away from? Was it her? The implied rejection made her silent too. When he dropped her it was

mid-afternoon. Did he want to come in for coffee, cake? But he had to go, he said, he needed to go to gym, then get ready for work the next day. He left; he tried to kiss her, but something hung awkwardly between them, in the way of kisses and affection, and the kiss was chaste, like that of a brother to a sister, or of close friends, as though they were both embarrassed.

She went to unpack her tog bag filled with the weekend's dirty clothes, then left it there. She felt empty, sad, puzzled, not quite sure where she had been or what had happened. She bathed, washed her hair. Silent in herself. Later that night he phoned: he sounded like his old self, jocular, laughing, fun, he seemed restored. She laughed with him, relieved.

'When are we going to see each other again?' he asked.

They made plans for that week. The world was alright again suddenly, but she didn't know why, or what had happened. Because something had happened, that much was certain, he'd run, come back, equilibrium restored, but the tension couldn't be forgotten that easily. Doubts couldn't be erased with a phone call – and yet somehow they had to be.

11

The month came to a close: they had gone to Sabie, the Pilanesberg and a small town in the Free State. Three weekends away! She felt restless that first weekend home, without plans to go anywhere. Her birthday month began: she started waking up at four, five in the morning, her old insomnia back, jolting her out of sleep. Her birthdays always revealed the holes and gaps in her life, brought out the failures. Birthdays were meant to be celebrations, celebration of life, living, and yet so often she felt ashen as they approached, as she endured then breathed a sigh as the day faded out.

Like a wobbly needle on an old record player, picking out music on a scratched record, the month proceeded uncertainly. They saw each other: the round of going out to plays, movies, music, supper at him proceeded. Through it that same old thread – she didn't know where this was going, she needed to know. It rang through all her dealings with him, that silent recrimination, the doubt that crept in, stayed, hung around like a bad smell, the doubt that could not be spoken about. She felt like she was going crazy.

His sister turned twenty-one – and they were all there, including Paul's best friend, John. Like a theme in Paul's life, there was John, silent, melancholy John, lapsing into sadness, talking of his lack of a girlfriend. Talking of the older woman he had first had sex with, an affair and then nothing. Nothing except prostitutes he had slept with, occasionally. Anna listened to his stories, John drank, Paul drank, only Anna remained sober. Paul became maudlin then jolly when he got drunk, John sunk deep into himself, unhappy grooves around his mouth, despite his youth. John, the theme tune to some of their evenings, Anna sometimes thought.

One night John even invited them to Pretoria to the home he shared with his sister and his parents. It was a brown depressing place. The house smelled of fried fish and cigarettes, a TV yelled in the corner and an air of heavy sadness hung over the place. They'd gone into Pretoria for that supper that night, away from the gloomy home and the parents watching TV in their faded weekend slops. Pretoria's streets were alive on that hot night, hot as day, sun the only absence. Anna then understood for the first time why John was always so sad, so depressed, why he lapsed into talking about himself as a failure so often. It was perhaps hard to rise above circumstances: the parents, in their rented home, the cheap poverty of it, immigrants, musing that they never would be rich enough to afford a home, but they still lived better here than they would have if they lived in England! That was for sure!

That month Paul brought John more and more to the informal evenings, those evenings when they didn't have a play on. They ate and drank in The Tankard, Paul's neighbourhood bar where the calamari was good enough, just, the music loud, but friendly almost countryish. It became almost a home away from home. John there as a soundtrack, backdrop. Other evenings they met Paul's family there, Friday nights after hard weeks working.

And then there was sex, yes there was sex. Anna tended to forget this small detail in the years ahead. It wasn't quite a backdrop, more like an awkward track, almost unnecessary, stuck there to jolly along the pace. Now that that taboo had been broken, it was there. He'd ask if he could sleep over, they were so polite with each other! She'd think about this and sigh, years later. Sometimes there was an excuse, like his parents entertaining out of town friends and needing his bedroom and he'd have to sleep on the lounge couch, so could he sleep over?

She counted the times they would have sex: six times in the all the months they were to be together. A handful of times, more or less, you could say...and it was never as painful as that first time, that first night, but there was always something missing. She realised it then, realised it after, again, in the years ahead when she would know other men. It was empty, meaningless almost, but not quite. Because this was the man she liked, adored, the man she now wanted to be with all the time, the man who made mundane things beautiful, even a drive, or a bad movie. Everything was good when they were together: a bad movie was shrugged off, even enjoyed, because she was sharing the experience with him. Crawling through traffic one night with him was bearable, fun even, as they switched from radio station to station.

She had no name for it then, but again, the years would provide some kind of answer. She'd begin to understand what falling in love meant: that cymbals didn't clash, no, but life became heightened, the ordinary glowed, the mundane took on hues it wouldn't normally have. Love made life glow made everything beautiful. She'd only realise this once it was gone, seemingly for good, remembering it through the haze of years and notes made at the time. Love took you, love made the world go around, but its opposite was equally appalling, was its very evil, almost made the experience not worth it at all. When you had it and lost it – the world lost lustre, became ashy, tasteless.

And so, sex, the word crawled between them, its meaning lost somehow in the nebulousness of what this was, or wasn't. She had nothing to compare it to, and somehow didn't know what to do with her body.

'You just lay there,' he'd say on a night when it was all too late and they were saying things that couldn't be unsaid, and she'd say, 'You used me.'

You were never very good, she'd add, the final salvo. This was in yet another restaurant, on yet another night. A place near her own home where the furniture was for sale, candlelight was the only light, candles dripped, the food was good, a fish pie this time, as they dissected their relationship and decided it had all ended. Such a romantic place, and yet so many awful words were said then, there, in a place meant for love and soft words. After that night she had

never gone back to that small bistro, called Quasimodo, at the top of her road, it become verboten, as so many places became somehow, forbidden.

She couldn't say what was wrong, only that it all seemed cold, he seemed cold, distant, as though she were a body being used, she could be any body, she thought, as they lay together. She couldn't define her feelings then, couldn't say, 'I feel like a prostitute.' Couldn't define it then, only years later would she realise that that was what she had felt, as they moved together, as he held her, entered her, then came, all like a formula.

The month screeched on, to its eventual conclusion.

12

'Could someone please explain what's going on?'

She stood, the traffic whooshing past the main road in Melville, her head buried in John's jacket. He held her tight as she cried softly.

Paul came out, looking for them: 'Could someone please tell me what is going on?'

The night jumped in her memory.

Earlier, she'd stormed out, saying she was going to draw money at the garage. She'd been gone too long. Paul had come looking for her, found her sitting on the curb, waiting, silently crying.

No, that part she was making up. Yes, she had gone looking for money, had even drawn the cash, but she hadn't been gone that long, only long enough for Paul to look concerned when she returned, saying, 'Where were you?'

She had wanted him to come looking for her, that was it, but no she had gone back.

Where had Paul been as she and John had spoken? Was Paul inside Roxy's, listening to music as John and she took a break from that loud music, and the smoke inside? Perhaps, those details were no longer clear.

No, it comes back. She was looking for a taxi. She was going to get a taxi and go home. John came with her, looking for a public phone. It was out of order.

'Should I give up?' she asked him. He nodded. They went back to their table.

In the distance Paul was dancing. Highway Jam was playing on stage.

'Are you interested, you know attracted to him?' John asked her. Anna nodded.

She was drunk, she who never drank, needed it now.

Anna nodded.

John said, 'Well, I know he doesn't feel the same way about you.'

Anna nodded again. She'd started to cry. 'Let's go outside,' she managed.

She asked him: 'Did he tell you we had sex?'

John mumbled no. Perhaps Anna's radar should have been out by now, but it was blunted, by hurt, by tequila, by the whoosh of cars racing by in the early hours of a Johannesburg morning.

John held her as Anna started to cry in earnest, clinging to his increasingly damp shoulder, the traffic roared past on Melville's main road, the sound blasted out of Roxy's like foul, cigarette-wreathed air.

John said, 'Paul says that you're very good friends, but he can't feel the same intensity of passion he felt with Bryony.'

The words were meant to sting. Anna cried harder, clinging to John. ‘What did she have that I don’t?’

‘I don’t know. Life’s shitty isn’t it?’

Anna wanted to know more. John said, ‘Paul just says that he’s not attracted to you the way he was with Bryony. But don’t tell Paul that I told you this, hey.’ Anna gasps.

‘I think you’re attractive,’ said John. Anna cried.

It was at that point that Paul stormed out, asking what was going on, hoping that someone would tell him.

It was past two in the morning when Paul, Anna and John went home, back to her place, but that was no place to talk with her mother upstairs, sleeping. So they went to Bob’s Bar, a trendy place with a balcony, overlooking another main street, near her house. John went to get coffee.

Anna said perhaps Paul should go home and then John in turn could take her home. It was a ridiculous suggestion.

‘What’s going on, Anna?’ Paul had his head in his hands, looked beseechingly at her.

‘I don’t know. I feel used, every time we have sex, I feel used.’

‘I feel the same way.’

John left them alone. She repeated what John had said.

‘Of course I’m attracted to you,’ said Paul, ‘I wouldn’t have slept with you if I hadn’t been.’

Paul wanted her to go home with him, sleep at him. It was past three in the morning.

‘No, I’ll be okay,’ Anna answered.

The next night, they go to a play. ‘Be careful what you say to John. He’s very confused and takes things the wrong way,’ says Paul. ‘He thought last night, that you were asking him home with you.’

‘Just for the record,’ said Anna, ‘I wasn’t asking him home with me.’

‘I know.’

The friendship, they agreed, was intact.

They were still calling it a friendship then.

It is the beginning of the end.

13

But the month ground on, as months do. There was her birthday celebration. It was a disaster for her.

He took her to Sun City for the night. His present was an envelope of money she could use it to gamble, he said the card is meant to be funny, but comes out stupid-sounding. She wasn’t hungry, but ate the ordered calamari dutifully. She gambled some of the money, lost it, decided to keep the rest for something special, maybe a book. They drove back the two hours to Johannesburg, after midnight. She was exhausted. Said goodnight to him in the early morning and went to bed. For once she slept immediately, sleeping right through.

And so it ground on, inevitably.

There was another weekend away. They didn’t plan it. This one was organised to celebrate the sister’s birthday, another celebration for her and this one in the Kruger Park, organised far

in advance, and in any case, Paul and Anna, secretive, confused, the relationship muddled, unplanned, undefined. They went along with the plans. Paul slept at Anna's home, the whole weekend was a surprise, it was somehow essential that the sister didn't know anything. So, once more Paul and Anna were in the same bed. The first time since that awful night at Roxy's when John held her and she cried and later they decided that they would stop the sex. 'It's all getting too emotional,' said Paul.

Nothing happened. They spent the night together. Paul dropped off to sleep before Anna. There was a chasm in the bed; Anna so conscious of it, so determined not to touch Paul, even accidently. She kept waking up. She accidently rolled into him. He absent-mindedly put an arm around her; they were briefly together.

In the morning they rose early, met the uncle driving them to the Kruger, all business-like, brisk with each other.

The weekend turned into one of those ashy weekends Anna would remember well. The colour was leeched out of everything: the landscape dry, the words empty, the hours stretched on, she couldn't wait to go home. The family rented two bungalows, there was no privacy. She and Paul had two single beds; sharing the room with the sister.

In the day Anna suffered with the heat, with longing with something sad and unnamed. They went for game drives, they saw elephants, rhinos, even lions. It all meant nothing. At night, Anna endured the November Kruger heat: the air as stifling, as malevolent as a vicious animal. She wore jeans in the heat, hot, sweaty clinging jeans. She felt like she was going to die.

On the final night the full moon beamed down, bathing them in a shocking glare. The bush crackled with the noise of insects, and the snorts of wild animals around the camp. The parents and his uncle and aunt spoke about the best times of their lives.

His aunt said age twenty-eight to thirty-four was the best, 'I looked the best, I was confident.' His mother agreed. His uncle said age thirty-five was good.

‘Can’t wait to get there then,’ said Paul.

‘It’ll come, soon enough, it’ll come!’ laughed his mother.

That night, the others went to sleep early. Anna got ready for bed, looked out of the window at Paul, sitting in the glare of the moon. He looked so lonely. She went to sit next to him. He stared at the stars. He asked her, ‘Why did humans ever leave nature?’

There was no answer.

She went back to the room, again, watched him, there, out in the night air, alone, before falling asleep.

14

It continued. Nights out. Conversations. Books bought, borrowed, discussed. Paul read *A Bridge Across Forever* by Richard Bach, about soul mates, a book Anna had brought with her on that final Kruger weekend. He bought one on astral travel. They sat drinking coffee and eating cake one night at a restaurant in a mall and Paul said he was obsessed with astral travelling, ‘I want to go, fly away, see if my soul mate exists.’

What did Anna say to that? Somehow the mind doesn’t record; but can imagine. As they said goodnight in the parking lot, Paul said, ‘You know instantly. You just know the feeling when it’s right.’

‘How?’ Anna asked, surely, always curious, always now, her heart sinking.

‘It’s hard to describe,’ said Paul. ‘It’s like a happy ending at the end of a movie. When everything is right and wrapped up, complete.’

Anna nodded.

‘That’s why I’m not prepared to settle for anything less, if it’s not right, it’s not right.’

Anna said goodbye, that wasn't it, but it seemed like it. Again, Paul looked like a lonely figure, standing there, watching her drive away. It all seemed so sad, so senseless, so painful.

There were a few more final messy nights. The evening at Quasimodo, the bistro with the candlelight. Or yet another evening, out, dancing, a group. The details don't matter. And there was Paul, dancing with another woman he couldn't take his eyes off her. Anna drank again, danced with another man, but it wasn't the man she wanted. That night she vomited up the whiskey she had drunk into her straw dustbin and had to throw it away, even made a ceremony of it. But not all ceremonies stand the test of time.

15

So, she has this number now, which may or may not be his. She knows now where he has studied and so can, presumably, try to get information from that university. It isn't entirely out of bounds – at least she knows that he is probably living in this city.

But how? How to stage an accidental meeting? How to make it casual, so that he doesn't think she is, god forbid, stalking him? If she had a dog she could take the dog for a walk in his area – it was near a park ... she could say the dog had been running but wasn't tired yet and she had seen a for sale sign and she and her husband were looking to buy a home in the area – aha that was it! That could be her excuse for walking a dog in an area she wouldn't normally be in. A friend has a dog, she can borrow the dog ... but how long should she walk, she can't walk all day, waiting for him to come out of the house, what if he is staying indoors that day? What if he goes away that weekend, say? No, that plan isn't full-proof either.

She could, she suppose, hire a private investigator, but that's expensive, too expensive at the moment. But an investigator would know how to find out these things, like whether someone actually lives in a particular house and what time they go to work, or come home and when it's best to stage an accidental meeting ...

She sighs. She has tried the number a few more times and it rang and rang and rang hollowly through the home she was calling. She had even picked up a pay-as-you-go card for an old cellphone she no longer uses, a bother as she'd had to register it. So if anyone were trying to trace the number they'd find out it was her – but it was just a chance she's going to have to take, this time. And whatever she does, she is not to actually answer that pay-as-you-go number, as the only person she will phone will be him, and if were to see the number flashing on the screen and then he, curious, calls the number ... No.

She sits at her desk at home, and puts her head in her hands – it is all endlessly complicated. She sort of has the tools now – and she can't work out how to do this. She clicks again, looks again, he still seemingly isn't on Facebook, or if he is, there are still so many Paul Wests out there ...

She has a small brainwave, types his sister's name into Google, putting South Africa around the name. There are three entries. His sister, and she's sure that's who it is, a manager at a small aviation company. It fits. His sister had been taking flying lessons when she'd last known her, had settled on some kind of flying career. It has to be her. But so what? She could camp outside the small airport where she works but then? Perhaps Paul never goes to see his sister there? Or she could follow the sister home, see where she lives, and perhaps, sometimes, Paul visits her?

She sits back, a small tight smile on her face. That presupposes that she somehow has the time to go around walking dogs and following him, or his family members. She has a job, for one thing, a supposed life, for another. Any sane person would tell her to forget this. She also has a marriage, doesn't she? Even if the man she is married to is overseas for six months, very unexpectedly, and here she is, alone in a big house, idly trying to find some way of getting back to the man she knew fourteen years ago. It's enough to send you scurrying for therapy, at the very least, or dinner and sensible conversation with an old friend.

Megan simply shakes her head when Anna brings it up one night at supper, and then says simply, 'Why?'

It isn't enough to say that she wants to know if he's okay, alive ...

‘You know that now,’ says Megan. ‘So, what more? You want him to apologise? Say he’s sorry or that he was wrong, and maybe you too can make amends, go back to the way things were? You know that isn’t going to happen. It can’t happen.’

‘Maybe,’ says Anna, ignoring the remarks, ‘if I borrow a dog, and go walking?’

‘Don’t do it my friend,’ says Megan through a chagrined stare, shaking her head. ‘And what about Leo? You have a husband now. You know, if you were still single, sure, I could sort of understand this. A hankering to be with someone maybe, regrets, time passing, all that stuff. But you are, supposedly, happily married now. Aren’t you?’

‘The one doesn’t preclude the other, not necessarily.’

‘I’ve got news for you, doll. The one does preclude the other! At least now, today, the way we’re living now, or you’ve chosen to live now. You choose, this cake or that cake, you can’t have both.’

‘The polyamorists do ...’

‘That shit! Look at your cousin, practising polyamory or whatever the hell, it broke up her marriage! I don’t think there’s a single relationship that could stand that.’

‘That’s not true! I’ve read a lot about it – there are some really strong relationships that can stand the couple having other relationships and they all know about it and it doesn’t break up the relationships but actually strengthens them! My cousin’s example is just one example, that’s all.’

Megan snorts. ‘Well, that’s certainly not for me and to be honest, Anna, I don’t think you’re the type either. If Leo were having some kind of woman on the side, and you knew about it, there’s no way you’d sit idly by and say, oh that’s ok, that’s what polyamory is about, let me just have my own Tuesday relationships. You’re not made that way, I know you. You’d be jealous as hell.’

‘Yeah, I probably would be ... but it’s such a lovely ideal, don’t you think? The idea of exclusivity, of not being able to know anyone else intimately, it does frighten me.’

‘So you’re scared of commitment, aren’t we all to some degree? But if you run from commitment I think you run from happiness too.’

‘The polyamorists don’t see it that way...’

‘Fuck the polyamorists, you’re not one. You can’t have Leo and Paul. You think Leo would stand for this? And besides you don’t *have* Paul! I mean, even if you bump him into him accidently but on purpose and you what, what you hoping for? You go for coffee you discover that actually you love each other and have sex and want to live together and I don’t know ... does that mean it’s tickets Leo and have a lovely life but I think I made a mistake? Are you actually saying you don’t want to be with Leo?’

‘No,’ Anna looks thoughtful, puzzled confused, ‘no I’m not saying that at all. But I just want a proper ending that’s all. I want to know the way it would’ve turned out if I had let it. I actually ended it, you know, by being so mad and tempestuous and impatient. He didn’t know what he wanted, and maybe if I had given him more time, you know, perhaps it would have continued? Maybe we would have broken up in the end, maybe we weren’t right for each other, but I didn’t give us a chance, I didn’t give it a chance. I just want to know. And what if we *were* meant for each other? What if that silly game I play at the movies when I watch the credits and make up his name among them, is just the universe trying to tell me that hey, actually, he is the right one for me, and I let him go?’

Megan gets up, starts stacking the plates, a small frown on her face. She’s silent; Anna drains a glass of wine. The clock ticks on.

Megan takes the plates through to the kitchen, brings out dessert, a big decadent-looking chocolate cake. ‘They said it’s a Fudge Picasso at the bakery!’ she says triumphantly placing it on the table, a big chocolatey iced cake arranged on a pristine white plate. ‘But there’s no

way I'm eating all of this on my own, you're taking it home with you.' She cuts two slices, the silence hangs around them like an accusation.

Finally, 'You know Anna, you have the ending of your story. There is no other ending. You can't pretend that there was another ending. I don't know – maybe yes you would have made a go of it, maybe it would have ended after a year or two or I don't know. But the story you've got, *that's* the story. You can't go choose another story, or ending. That's *it*.'

Of course Anna doesn't believe her – if she did she wouldn't be, once more, clicking through websites, looking for clues, ways in, thinking up schemes that involve other people's dogs ...

And Leo – Leo stuck in Germany ... would she be feeling any differently about this if he were back here? She knows she wouldn't ... it just makes it easier that he is away. She feels marginally less guilt about this. Marginally less – because what Megan had said hasn't struck home.

Megan's wrong: Anna doesn't have the ending she's looking for or, more importantly, needing. She just wants to know – and there is no way she is going to get it together it with Paul again, she isn't going to have a relationship or have sex ... no she just wants to see him, to look him in the eye, to say, so, did you make a mistake? Or are you happy with the way things turned out? That's all she wants, to know, finally, and yes, there is Leo, and she is married to him. And no, she hasn't answered Megan's question on that: 'And Leo? What about Leo? Don't you love *him*?'

16

So, Leo then. She is reluctant to go there. The curly black hair, the wildness of it makes him look like a boy when he doesn't have it cut regularly. The tallness of him, the rangy length of him, taller than Paul, she thought. As serious looking, in his own way, although he doesn't share Paul's passion for painting. Instead he designs buildings and houses and, at night, draws pictures of things without names, such abstract images that you never know which is the right way to look at them. It's the commercial work that brings in the money, which

allows them to live here, in this place full of light, high triangular windows and open spaces that impart a sense of breath and breadth into the home.

His home. After all, she had moved in with him. It feels lonely here, without him, the rooms big, echoey, the upper floor is arranged around a balcony that runs the length of the inner house. Only Anna here now, at night.

She'd loved the home the night she had first seen it – the night Leo had first cooked supper for her, after weeks of times and dinners out, noisy and not so noisy more luxurious restaurants. A supper at her more modest home. And then, not wanting to be presumptuous, yet, how else to do these things, he had invited her to his home.

She'd walked in, it had been summer, and the sun's rays flooded through the place goldenly, the lounge lit up, the whole house built to take advantage of the sun's passing and spinning. The windows flashed with the peachy golden light for a few minutes, a few minutes before dusk set in and darkness crowded around the high triangle windows. But she'd arrived at just the right moment, and she gasped and was awestruck, as Leo had known she'd be, telling her to come just before seven that night. What an odd time to arrive, she'd thought as she'd got ready that evening. The light in her own home had been blue as she bathed, washed her hair, dressed ... a deep blue light before night. But here the house caught the flashes of dying colour: that had been Leo's intention, after all.

And then, as though following a plot in a movie, it progressed, seemingly naturally, as if in some way it was meant to be.

She had met him through friends – she who had eschewed dating, but desired a relationship and yet said she couldn't go through with all that again. It hadn't been a set up, far from it, he had been just another single man there among the spread of happily and not so happily marrieds, and children playing, splashing in a pool. And she, talking to a woman who, Anna had thought had said she loved Pedro Almodovar's movies and instead the woman had been talking about how she loved Rafael Nadal's tennis playing – and Anna had wondered all afternoon how she was going to back peddle out of that mishearing. She, who never watched tennis, pretending now that yes she did so love the way Nadal handled a racquet or whatever

it was she was meant to love about the man. It seemed such a long way to correcting the mistake that she'd gone along with it and had stood in the kitchen, fetching a bowl of olives and another of hummus when Leo had walked in, empty glass in hand, looking for another bottle of wine.

'So, you like Nadal's playing?' he had asked as they stood there, she helping him looking for the wine.

'Um no,' she had explained, telling him about the whole situation. 'So, I'm stuck there, pretending to like a tennis player and I don't know the first thing about sport...'

They'd laughed, the conspiracy sealed when he said, 'Tell you what, I'll feed you titbits, you feel lost, you just look in my direction and say Leo, did you watch that game, or whatever ...' As natural as that – she thought months later that that was probably when she had first started falling in love with him. This boyish-looking, fun and funny man who had helped her out when she'd been too embarrassed to say she hadn't heard right...and then talking through the late December afternoon, a hot scorcher of a day, and talking all night at the long bench-like outdoor table where friends entertained during the summer months. It hadn't been a set-up at all and in fact these people were acquaintances, they didn't know her well, not well enough to match her up with anyone. They were more his friends if truth be told, and yet they had hit it off, enough to sit there fascinated by each other as night fell, and contact details were exchanged.

It had been a relief, if she were honest about it. In some ways, too many ways, she had been dreading this. Her life was ordered, routine, yes even slightly dull and boring at times, but the safety of routine was sometimes the only way she could make it through the chaos of the days, the mad blurred rush. She hadn't welcomed the chaos and tumult of a new relationship: the emotional ups and downs, the wondering if he'd phone, if this thing was heading anywhere, or was this a dead end? And yet, it had come naturally, yes her life was twisted upside down, as she had known it would be. She waited to hear from him, she sent her missives to him and if seconds passed into minutes she wondered if she had said the wrong thing. She waited to see if he was online at the same time she was, she fell, madly, bitterly, deeply. As she had known, in some way, she would, if the occasion ever arose. And he

reciprocated, the weekends soon became full of him, time clearing itself, friends stepping back, tactfully, full of understanding. It was, after all, the modern way. And so many of her friends busy now at weekends in any case, with fetching and carrying their children to various extramural classes and sports matches: she had long learned to live with this, understood it. Only the single friends were now available over weekends, the mothers and fathers collapsed with exhaustion on Saturday nights, nights of pizza and TV for them.

And then, after weeks of edging towards the precipice, as she thought of it. The invitation to dinner on a Saturday night, the light beaming in, it seemed. His arm on the small of her back as he led her around the home he had designed, had built, a house full of soaring aim and ambition, a home for a family. She learned too, that night, of the darkness, of the woman he had built the house with, a thin brunette woman who smiled at her out of a photograph she asked to see. They had been together five years Anna knew the numbers, in the last year they had seen the home go up, a dream coming to life. The woman, her name had been Sandy, had wanted children, lots of children, and then soon after they had moved in, Sandy had turned around one night, said so sorrowfully that she was no longer in love. She was sorry – there was a man at work, they had been seeing each other. She had, overnight, it felt to Leo, fallen out of love.

'How do you fall out of love?' Anna had asked. She'd asked the same question of a gay friend of hers who had moved to Cape Town to be with her partner who had been relocated a few months earlier. When the friend arrived she realised something was not quite right, like voices not synched with lips on a badly-edited movie, but her friend hadn't been able to put her finger on it. And then Anna 's friend had also heard the words, her friend's girlfriend said she was no longer in love, she was sorry ... So, hearing Leo repeat almost a similar story Anna was not surprised, only puzzled, and then afraid. How did it work, that you lived together, loved together and then one day, you were out of love? Like being out of sugar?

It had been a hellish year for Leo. Sandy moved out and he was left with the home, a home built for a couple. He'd considered selling it, but he loved the place, the light, the angle of sun, the wide airy openness of it. Instead he had set about removing Sandy's traces from the home: he gave away the shabby furniture they had moved in with, bought other couches, the

place assumed its own feeling and it no longer felt so strange, so awful to be living there without her.

‘But I stopped eating,’ he told her that night, that first night as she sometimes thought of it after. ‘I couldn’t bear to cook, I lost interest.’ He became a skeleton of his former self, the weight dropping off an already lean frame, hollow, gaunt, his best friend stepped in. A woman with her own family, blonde hair and three loud children and a chaotic noisy home, they had been friends since primary school, the two of them. Oh it had all been strictly platonic, always, they had always been friends, this man and this woman. Anna felt slightly jealous hearing about this. But she’d stepped in, saved him, made him come over every night for supper and conversation and company.

‘I snapped out of it, or whatever you want to say,’ he’d said. ‘I got my appetite back, in all senses of the word.’

Months later she saw a photo of the gaunt, hollowed Leo. They’d been for supper with Leo’s best friend. And there, among the photos on the fridge was Leo, hollow-eyed, skinny, something haunted about him. A sigh, a pause as the friend noticed Anna looking. ‘He was broken after Sandy left him. For the first time ever, I was really worried, you know?’

Anna had nodded. ‘I hope I never see him go through that again.’

They mapped out the parameters of each others’ lives – the old, disused relationships, what had been, the schools attended, childhood hurts and scars, young adulthood, the narratives assumed shape and dimension around a dinner table, then later, sprawled on couches, lying in bed in the early hours of the morning after sex at midnight. Where did all the energy come from, Alexi often wondered ... how was it that they could sail through the days on so little sleep, just hope and a burgeoning love, it had to be ... Secrets spilled, lives rounded out, experiences commented on, observed, filed away, it was always like this. Anna thought – and how the other received observed the past was such an indicator of the future of the relationship. Tests were passed or failed at this point, Leo mostly passed. He accepted, mostly understood, although there were still times when Anna would lie back, hopelessly twisting under the weight of it of it all, wishing for more, something more. But no one could take it

away, the past, wipe the slate clean, make it brand new, blameless, and this, this was sometimes frustrating.

He was a good lover – and like all good lovers, he had learned patience. She sometimes wondered where men got that from, it all took so long and men were naturally inclined to go at it further, reach orgasm faster, they learned it from being with women, they had to. She had once said, idly, half-asleep, defences down, that she wondered how men could stand it, the waiting for a woman to climax, and he'd replied that when you loved someone ... a small shock that, of course. Could she have done the same? Did that mean...? it was good, satisfactory, sometimes they even blew off the ceilings, the desire there at last, palpable, untouched and seemingly endless. She wondered how it had lain dormant all these years, how she had been able ... but like anything, if unavailable, you learn to do without, to forget it. You have to, she had always been pragmatic in that sense, would always be, she suspected. He had a strong, hard, lean body. She loved leaning into him when they were out, the outlines just discernable under clothes and shirts, jackets. That smell, almost a non smell – she had read somewhere that you couldn't be attracted to someone if you weren't also attracted to their smell. It was all just beneath the surface of desire, something you sometimes hardly took note of it, but then she remembered the ex-lover who had smelled, peculiarly, of boiled carrots. What on earth ... she had thought once as she leaned into him, how? But she learned to not smell then, there, with that man, as she had learned to not do so much while with him. Not faceless, he'd never be faceless, but it had taught her so much, so much shutting down, how had it been possible?

But this was different, and things moved quickly. Time moved on, decisions were made, time went faster and faster these days, it was working, wasn't it? She'd moved in, months happened, another decision made. They married, somehow they married. She found herself doing something she'd never really dreamed of. Of course she had always wanted to be with someone, but unlike other women she had never planned a wedding with a white dress, or an after party with expensive canapés. It had something to do with commitment she heard, somewhere, like a faint booming, and it felt, suddenly, right. This then was the future, this man, this house, these years ... it felt like she was being led somewhere, but it hadn't felt wrong. She felt disconnected from her feelings at times. She couldn't have explained it – she didn't try. Instead, she found herself walking toward the man with the long lean body and the

boyish hair, a stupid smile on his face, and she was wearing a pinkly-peach/turquoise dress, something quite different from the white expected of her. A small intimate wedding where the sun cast a glow through the late autumn afternoon and the reception was small, equally intimate. It had all been so quick, almost too quick, almost but not quite. 'You'll know when it's right,' a friend of hers had said years before. And it didn't feel wrong.

They went to Tuscany after that, a week at a villa, a pool – it was summer in Europe nearly, the days hot, the madness of the past few months falling away, just the two of them. If asked then, and no one did ask, she would have said her love had started on an afternoon, been cemented by hearing of the way he had reacted to the breakup of a relationship, the fading away ... she had always wanted sensitive men, men who felt so acutely, too acutely – and as always, here she was. She would also have said that she was afraid of growing old alone although old age was sometime in the future, and that she feared loneliness more than death. She would have answered correctly, precisely, she had mostly always had a handle on her feelings. She would have fumbled through questions about love though; love was something intangible, other, and sometimes she thought she no longer believed in it, that there was love and there was love, and time took the edges off some things, and perhaps a certain amount of race-like passion was reserved for the very young, those with smooth faces, unmarked pasts or futures. She may have said it; but she may not have been able to tap into that, in the end.

17

There were occasions when she had mistaken someone she had met for Paul through the years. Her heart had always skipped then, a rush of adrenaline flooding through, time for a moment truly stopped. The cliché was true. But, as always, it wasn't, had never been him. She had never had to decide how she would deal with this, what to say, how to behave, or even, whether to turn around and run away. There was always that option, of course. The element of surprise, who knew how she would react. Who knew how *he* would react? There was always that to consider.

In the end she does not have to wonder, she does not have to concoct excuses to walk a dog in an unfamiliar neighbourhood and hope that by some chance she will bump into him, a stalker, but no, not a stalker.

In the end it is as simple as clicking through a few more sites, a few more hours of surfing. He belongs to a post-graduate club, the Eagle Warriors, she sees at the end of the website on which she had found his graduation photo. There's a little button to join, the ubiquitous F for Facebook. It's as easy as that. She becomes part of the group – helplessly she clicks through the members, but clearly Paul isn't on Facebook. Instead she receives monthly invites to the various talks and meetings they hold. One month a graduate speaks of his recent experience spending three months as a scientist in Antarctica. She doesn't go – not that she isn't interested – she's long read avidly of that great icy continent to the south, fascinated, repelled, longing for that kind of excoriating experience and knowing too that that was something she would never survive if she were to go.

But, what if he's there, what if she runs into him? She needs something more, she needs to be prepared somehow. Going, hoping, wondering, that's somehow too arbitrary.

The months pass. Leo has been away in Germany for nearly four months when the invite lands in her inbox. The Eagle Warriors are proud to host Paul West, recent graduate of the business school, talking on the challenges of changing leadership in South Africa in the twenty-first century. She sits there, frozen. She's at work when she reads the invite, going through the mounting list of mails in her Gmail account.

'My god,' she exclaims aloud, to herself, to no-one in particular. 'My god...' she gets up, goes to the tearoom, turns on the kettle, returns to her desk, forgets about the kettle.

'Your kettle's boiled,' the secretary sticks her head around the door.

She looks at her, 'My kettle?' The word is foreign, unknown, as though she's never heard it before.

The secretary looks at her strangely, 'The kettle? You know that thing that boils water? Anyway, it's boiled.' She smiles: You can make your tea now.'

Tea. Another foreign word ... she makes her way back to the tearoom: it is as though she were doing everything for the first time in her life, as though she has never dropped a teabag into a polystyrene cup and poured hot water all over it. She stands, staring at the cups, the teabags, regular and rooibos, which one is which, which does she take? Instead she takes her cup back to the desk, an empty cup, but for the spoonful of sugar she's managed to pour into it. Empty. It sits there. She scrolls through her emails again: the event is taking place in a week, in fact this is a reminder mail. She missed the original. She reads through it all again, repeating the words, Paul West, talking on leadership, challenges, the twenty-first century. She gets out her diary, the page is blank for the evening the event is taking place, and it's in Pretoria. She's going to have to brave Friday night traffic and the road works that still make the journey hazardous. The invite says she can bring a partner. She scrolls through her phone, highlights Megan's name, is about to press call, Megan can come with her. And then, she takes her finger off the button: Megan isn't coming with her. Megan isn't going to hear about this at all.

She makes a hair appointment; schedules a manicure appointment for a few days before the event. She goes shopping, settling on a turquoise dress that offsets her auburn hair perfectly and shows off her curves in a subtly decorous fashion, she thinks. Enough, yet not enough. Thank god she has kept her figure, her looks, people often mistake her for being at least five years younger than she is with her unlined skin and slim figure. She goes to war that week, or so it feels: hair, nails, dress. Chess pieces in place. There is nothing she can do about his reaction or even whether he'll even be prepared to say hello to her; but she can damn well make sure she looks her best, on that score there's no room for error, not this time.

Which is not to say that she sleeps well, or even fitfully that week. Or that she doesn't lie awake wondering whether to cancel, not go, she's emailed her acceptance, she could just as easily email her apologies. There are times she is on the verge of telling Megan, telling her what she has found out, and that she's going, she's going to finally have an ending.

'You have your ending,' Megan had said, 'You know what happens.'

But no, Anna doesn't know: the ending is far off; this is a beginning. A way of finding out. 'I just need to see him once,' she'd said to Megan, years before. 'I just want to know.'

A friend, a psychologist, had asked her why she thought about him constantly: ‘Maybe it’s the way you felt then, around him, maybe you’re trying to get back to that feeling.’ The idea had slipped into the conversation, and then, silenced by her shocked look, they hadn’t spoken about it again, but the idea had remained.

Is that what it was – a desire to go back to that feeling of desire, something she has never felt since, with no other man? None have come close, none have glittered as brightly. Even Leo, she thinks guiltily of him, in Germany, it isn’t the same. It’s love, but ... thoughts trail away in the early hours of the mornings leading up to the talk. Her brain races and fizzes, she either can’t get to sleep or wakes in the early hours, two, three, four a.m. ... is she doing the right thing? And yet, how can she pass this up?

She takes a sleeping pill the Thursday before the talk, she rarely does this. She sleeps, finally, a sleep full of the dreams denied by her sleeplessness. She daydreams through meetings that morning, and leaves work early.

Her nails glitter with varnish, and her hair, washed, curled, styled, falls around her pale face in long dark waves, a perfect frame. The turquoise dress drapes over her thighs, and the still high breasts, fitting closely, yet its folds leaving enough to the imagination. Her toenails wink electric blue nail polish in her heeled sandals. She looks like she is out for a hunt, kill, a capture ... and in a way she is.

18

She finds the venue easily enough – always a worry. She still relies on old fashioned maps after her faltering GPS had led her almost into a river one day. So she is early, conspicuous. She turns around and goes to wait in the parking lot of a nearby petrol station, waiting, sitting with the radio on, but she hears nothing. Music and news roll on and she wouldn’t have been able to repeat the headlines of the day if her life had depended on it on at some future point.

And then it is time. In fact she is nearly late, she delays so long at the garage, drinking from a bottle of mineral water. The woman at reception takes her money, pins a name tag to the folds of the turquoise dress, ushers her in.

Talk, then supper, then an opportunity to meet the speaker, that is the order of things. She's seated at a table of ten, the last to arrive. Professionals in sparkling smiles, couples, a few single people, this is clearly also a networking thing then. But the speaker, the speaker, where is he seated? She hears the names of the people being introduced, repeats her own name, but all the time her eyes are darting, where is the speaker seated? She asks the woman sitting next to her. The answer is heard through the mist in her head. Somewhere near the front the woman thinks. Anna cranes, a pillar partly hides her view, she's ice now. What if, what if he hasn't come and instead someone else is talking? Panic rises, like nausea.

And then, it *is* him. There's applause, then silence, clearing of throats, chairs being scraped slightly, a man is standing at the podium. A grey-haired slightly paunchy man, mouthing words of introduction. It feels as though she can't hear a thing, then words start filtering through, 'returned from Canada' 'studied in Pretoria' 'proud to have him back', 'please welcome...' The applause seems thunderous now, she wants to cover her ears, she feels light-headed, forces herself to breathe deeply. Relax.

He tests the mike, smiles at the audience, slightly nervously she thinks, a slight hesitation and then he begins, half reading, half talking. He's good: he holds them, his slight nervousness gives way to a steadied, measured calmness. He knows his subject obviously. He's confident in it. What he says, Anna can't repeat, if asked. The words fly over her, it is impossible to take them in, to understand. And it doesn't matter anyway. She isn't there to listen, she's there to look, to see, to understand. He's made it, he's alright. Perhaps after all she will leave before dessert, head home on that awful highway which half blinds with its yellow cones and chevrons. She'll go home, to bed, take off the dress, the make-up, settle in, accept. She has seen, been witness. Perhaps after all this is enough and Megan's right. She knows the ending, this, this is the ending. Bearing witness, knowing that he is alright ...

Speech over, it's well received and he takes questions politely, firmly, again, he holds the audience like a baby. He really is a good public speaker. He exudes confidence, always a

prerequisite when addressing people. His hair has receded, and he wears his sandy-coloured hair cropped close; he has a beard still, and still wears glasses, had always eschewed contact lenses. He has put on a bit of weight though. Anna, frowning, notices this, he had always looked after himself, gone to gym, been concerned about that. But, he still looks good – she feels something press deep inside herself. This isn't the end, then, that's all she knows as she stands up, makes her way to the bathroom to check her make-up, apply lipstick.

It isn't quite accidental, the meeting at the dessert buffet. Piles of red strawberries, melting font of vanilla ice cream, small bowls of sad-looking fruit salad, but then fruit salad always looked sad she thought, and the ubiquitous bowls of chocolate mousse. She takes bits of it all, standing there, they bump into each other. He turns, his own bowl empty, not yet filled, she sees.

'Hello Paul.' As simple as that. Something flashes across his face, afterwards she will wonder at it. Recognition, or had he pretended that? A face-saving glance at her name tag as though he hadn't recognised her. Was that a flash of fear then?

'Anna! What are you doing here?' Then, exclamations replaced with dignity, 'My goodness, how are you? I can't believe it's you! How many years has it been?'

Standing there, others elbowing through to the dessert table they stand away from the table. She smarts, how many years has it been? Doesn't he know? Hasn't he counted? Of course not...

'A while,' she smiles. Her diamond wedding ring flashes too, as she transfers bowl from hand to hand, reaching for a spoon. He can't believe it, he's even smiling. Of course it is no surprise to her, she has the upper hand here.

'How long have you been a member of the Warrior Eagles?' he was asking. 'Not long,' she says, the platitudes flew back and forth, small talk... then the moment she's feared.

There's a woman at his side, but she doesn't fit the bill, she's older, she is saying Paul just has to meet someone ... can he, does he mind? Anna relaxes ... it can't be ... she's too old to be his wife.

'I'm sitting at table nine,' she says. 'Come chat when you can.'

The ball in his court now. She spoons melting ice cream and bits of strawberries into her mouth and listens to the talk around the table. Something about private schools and yoga. Music plays in the background, people speak, eat dessert, hop between tables, networking it's called. She eats, suddenly ravenous. She's barely been able to touch her main meal of sole on a bed of mash, a bed, she'd thought looking at the menu, more like a pillow of mash. The pretensions of society. She was part of them, well, only partly.

But he comes. Extricates himself from that meeting with someone, to see her at table nine. She sits now drinking a bulbous glass of brandy, and he too holds a glass of something.

Curiosity? She has pictured him running away, not wanting to talk to her, fearing that she'd outrun him, overtake him perhaps, never let him go. Perhaps enough time has passed then.

'I can't believe it ...'

19

... To hold something in your hands, something you have wanted forever, and yet you haven't really wanted it, have you, or you would have held it sooner, would have pursued it, there are ways, aren't there? Where, how to go on? Should she excuse herself, drive home, the long drive home back to Johannesburg, turn around, forget this? There is a moment when time stands still, when you can so clearly see the fork in the road, the path leading this way, the path that leads elsewhere.

Time stops.

She leans forward, elbows on the table. If she were a smoker she would take out a cigarette, hold it between her lips ... if people still smoked indoors, that is. Not in this new century. So, no, she does not hold out a cigarette, and he does not hold out a lighter to light it.

He too doesn't smoke. What to make of him, what do with his hands, now, after all these years? He doesn't have a clue that she engineered this, chose this, chose to place herself back in his path, his life. And if he did ... well a few months ago, he would have turned around, perhaps cut her short, perhaps been suspicious of this. But things have happened in his life too. He is more pliable, now, because of what has happened between him and his wife and that, that changes everything.

Her name is Jennifer – the wife from whom he is separated ... Anna has never forgotten the name learned long ago from that classified notice in the paper ... but for now, action is poised, still, slow motion. Time is seared, stopped temporarily, it could go either way. Anna remembers a dinner party conversation she overheard recently: a man was talking about walking along a cliff, a freak wave came along, flung him down till the man was clinging to a wet rock face, he knew he was going to die, there was no way he could reach high enough to dry land to force a grip, propel himself back to earth. And his life literally flashed before his eyes – all the years leading up to that moment. He relaxed, accepted the impending death and then time stilled. It couldn't have been more than a few moments, and he didn't remember the superhuman strength he must have displayed, that heave as he pushed from near death back to life.

And so it is ... here, as the past stands animated, the present icy, cold, the moments stretching, vast, Anna holding fate in her hands, as she has never been able to do. The moment is powerful, too powerful to let go.

20

'What a surprise!' he says, as he sits on a low wall outside the main dining room. 'You're looking very well. You gave me such a shock there... a lovely surprise though!'

They have gone outside after all – not to smoke the cigarettes that they would have had to smoke outside, if they had been smokers – but because it is too crowded, too noisy, too hot. Anna had suggested it as they had leaned across the table, struggling to hear each other. So, that's the excuse, failing hearing, loud music, the need to explore something that they can't over the sounds coming over the loudspeakers. He'd been more than amenable. Frankly, she was surprised too.

Diamonds in her wedding ring catch the light, he's seen that, perhaps that puts him at ease. Yes, he has one child – his wife hadn't, in the end been able to have more, he says. Although they wanted more. It's been painful, that. And, yes, he is separated, no details, 'We're trying to work on things. We've been apart three, nearly four months.'

Details spill out, details she can hardly believe she is hearing. She turns away in the darkness hearing this – why is she so pleased? The pleasure she takes from the revelation is like a painful knife cut, she can't believe she'd take such pleasure from hearing of another person's pain, misfortune. She isn't like that. And yet, as she sits there, she realises that she wants him to hurt too – hurt, even while she has wanted to see that he was alright, after all these years she's wanted to know that he's been happy, didn't suffer, that perhaps life has been good to him. And yet, at the same time, she sits in the darkness, pleased to hear that he is living on his own, has separated, is hurting. She remembers how he always hated being alone, knows how vulnerable this could make him.

She reveals details about her life too, the happy, but late marriage. Leo working in Germany, the months away from him, how hard it is, where her own life has led. 'I'm glad you also found some happiness,' he says.

He is called away, again, the guest speaker, the star of the show wanted once more. 'There you are!' the buxom woman comes out of the dining hall room, 'I'm so sorry to interrupt but would you mind we have some donors so wanting to meet you ...' She looks inquisitively at Anna, who stares back at her. Anna extracts a business card from a silver card holder, 'My email address is on the back.' She says as she gives it to Paul, 'maybe we can have coffee, chat again?'

The woman is waiting. ‘Sure,’ he smiles, that old smile, that wide big smile that lights up his face, ‘That’d be great! I’ll be in touch. But you got a pen let me just give you my address ...’

The ride home effortless, she barely remembers the drive back along the highway, now more deserted than when making the onward journey. She feels as though she’s driven back on air, effortlessly, thoughts going back and forth. How he had looked – the same smile, the almost bald head, now that though, that had been a shock, but what had she expected, he’d been balding in his late twenties. But it had the effect of making him look vulnerable somehow, not weak, but more vulnerable. The eyes still behind glasses, now smaller, more stylish, and the body, meatier. What was that about?

It’s early into the morning before she is able to fall asleep. Excited, tensely excited, the way she recalls from before, as though she’s gone on a date, met someone she wanted to know. She runs back through the evening – had he admired her, liked what she was wearing? She remembers a compliment there, he’d said something, ‘You look good’ was that it? She’d barely been able to take what he was saying in, she’d floated, nervous. As though a schoolgirl, on a date, a teenager.

The hours tick on. What happens now? What can possibly happen now? They could meet for coffee, but what good will that do? She imagines telling Megan, Megan throwing her a look of disapproval, saying, ‘Well, you’ve got your answer now! You know what happened!’

But no, she still doesn’t know ... she hears Megan, ‘You’re a married woman! Forget this now,’ and finally, shutting the voice away. Another meeting, a drink, what harm can it do, meeting again in more convivial circumstances, just another quick meeting, fill in more of the details without him being rushed away. A final, proper ending. They are older, and yes she is married now, as is he, separation or not. And why had they separated, after all? And Leo returning in two months – can she forget this as Megan had said she hoped she would when Leo returns? Leo, who smiles at her from a frame next to her bed. It’s dark but the rock lamp she used glows next to the frame, silently illuminating him. She sighs, turns away, turns into sleep.

21

It has been ten days. Ten days in which time has gone by agonisingly slowly. She's been silent – in all senses of the word. She hasn't mentioned the event to Megan, or anyone else; she certainly hasn't mentioned it to Leo in any of her emails, chats and Skype calls and she hasn't once contacted Paul. He has her details – she has his. Once she had started composing an email, typed in his details, saved them, looked at the sharp curve of the letters in her contact book, smiled to herself that now he is tantalisingly near, then she'd quickly deleted the email she had begun ... all it had were his details in the address line, nothing in the subject ... she dare not save it to drafts, what if it inadvertently got sent, blank as it was.

So it has gone on ... the days of silence. She can't somehow bring herself to contact him. She feels as though a bucket of cold water has been thrown on her, and she now finds herself obsessively thinking of Leo, just two months until he's back, back for good. He was missing her, he told her, again and again, he was learning so much and he wouldn't have traded this time for anything, but he was missing her and looking forward to coming home, seeing her, being with her.

She's repeated the words back – she means them, she truly means them, and can't explain how it is that she can love one man, one man whose ring encloses her finger, and yet, how she still feels the need to reach away, into the past, why it is that a man whose love she'd never had still grabs her. Long ago, in a therapy sessions, she had discussed the idea that she needed him to love her, that until he did, she couldn't let go. It wasn't enough that one man loved her now, or that others had said they did, she needed him, Paul, to fall under her influence. 'It may not happen, it probably won't happen and you have to accept that,' the therapist had said. Not long after Anna had stopped seeing the therapist, a man with a slight, slim build and a delicate, almost nervous, manner to match.

And now, she can't work out the silence – her own, and his. Bitterness mounts as the days build on top of each other – and for the first time she thinks that perhaps Megan is right, the therapist was right too, she isn't going to get what she wants from him, and she has to accept that. She will never stop missing him, he will always continue in some part of her, and his name said aloud, glimpsed, written down, will always trigger something in her. She'll never

be able to say what, or why, and because of that she might never be able to finally, fully erase him, but perhaps she can move on, leave it. Leave him behind. Sanity lies in that path, and maybe that is what she has to do. Life, after all, is about moving on, maturing, accepting what wasn't and what can never be, isn't it? Life as a series of compromises, choices, a way towards happiness through what can't be.

And then, one late Wednesday afternoon, she's about to pack up her things and start for home, the email arrives. She wonders if she hadn't received it, what if between logging off one day and logging on another, the email had mysteriously disappeared? It had been known to happen, some emails mysteriously were never delivered and IT nerds could never quite satisfactory explain it. Or discover the reasons why.

But that hasn't happened after all, instead the email arrives – a short breezy note saying how wonderful it was to see her, and she looks so well and is she up for that coffee after all? How is this Friday?

This Friday, it turns out, is fine. As she quickly mails back a response, keeping her own tone light and breezy, hitting reply, she feels suddenly hot, then cold. She's clammy all over. She feels a distinct sense of foreboding. She wipes away the sweat on her forehead, re-reads what she has said, looks at the tone, feels queasy. She waits, he doesn't reply. She finally logs off, late now, hitting the depths of peak-hour traffic, cursing.

She spends an uneasy night, she's hot, restless. She can cancel the coffee, say she's busy after all – it isn't worth it. And yet, and yet, I just want to know, she repeats to herself, that's all. One coffee, fill in the gaps and that's it. I close the door finally, on that chapter.

And so, when he replies the next day, it's confirmed. In her diary she draws the letter P, and next to it, a dot.

22

They meet in the late afternoon. She's gone straight from work, suggesting Nelson Mandela Square in Sandton, it's close to her offices. It has been a roasting hot day and the heat lingers.

Children play in the fountains, and the outdoor areas of the restaurants are full. They find a table, squeezing in among others taking advantage of summer, sun, the weekend stretching ahead. She orders an iced coffee, grateful to have something to have something to do with her hands as they reconnect. She is afraid of awkwardness – but surprisingly there isn't. It is as though the years haven't been, as though they hadn't ended as they had, awkward in itself and with no real goodbye. As at the Eagle Warriors event she is surprised at the ease with which they connect. It feels good to sit there, looking at him, watching him talk, the news of his life a welcome cascade of news. All the earlier unease and foreboding leave her. It's just coffee, she'd repeated to herself as she had left the office, just coffee. That's all.

She watches him as he speaks – his mannerisms haven't changed. Does anyone's? She smiles as she watches – he has the same endearing habit of frowning at particular points in the conversation, or half smiling as he makes a point. She watches the crinkles around his eyes, they have deepened, as have the two furrows from nose to corner of mouth – but she still finds him as devastatingly attractive as all those years ago. Still finds herself lost in watching him, hearing him. There is still something there – the late afternoon sun bathes him in a kind of golden light for a few minutes, and she sighs. She has no way now, of knowing how this will end. She feels she is being strung along by something she doesn't understand, will never understand.

The conversation, light at first, dips towards melancholy as he describes the years in between. He'd vacillated between Canada and South Africa, had finally moved back to Canada in the late 1990s, the time Anna had seen the notice about his upcoming marriage.

'I loved Canada,' he tells her. 'It was home in a way that this country wasn't – even though I was born here. But you know, I went to school there, I grew up there.'

'But you did your university degree here, you seem to have spent half of your life in each place?' she prompts.

'Yeah, but you know how I always hungered to go back. I couldn't explain it, it was like some sort of obsession. I love the place, still do. I love snow, I like being able to walk the streets, all those things, you know?'

‘I know, I know only too well. That’s what I’ve always loved about visiting Europe. The sense of freedom. But it isn’t everything, living there. Why did you come back though?’

‘Jennifer. She couldn’t stand it there in the end. We had our child there, I thought she was finally settling down. But she missed home. She missed her family. In the end it was down to coming home, back to South Africa, or losing her. She was so unhappy there in the end. Crying, depressed. I was lucky, I transferred got a job, it was all so easy, got a bursary to study further, it seemed like it was all falling into place.’ He paused, looked into the distance. ‘So we came back. That was three years ago.’

‘And then?’ Anna asks, her hand tightening around the half-empty glass of iced coffee, sweet condensation clinging to her fingers. Paul handles his long tall glass of beer – it glints gold in the peachy light.

‘And then it all started to come apart at the seams it seemed like!’ Paul laughs ruefully. ‘The problem wasn’t where we lived, Canada or here. It was something deeper something else. We fought all the time. There was something wrong. We agreed to separate. I still love her, Anna, that will never go away, but for now, it’s wrong. That’s all we know, that’s all any of us will ever know.’

She wants to say, Are you going to get divorced then? But the words, the thought, is too harsh for this confession uttered so casually in the midst of kids screaming and having fun, other adults laughing, drinking. There is so much levity around them. It’s almost claustrophobic. For a brief, sickening moment she thought of the future, Paul, divorced, available, she sharing a home with him, perhaps a beachside home, a holiday. Thoughts are quick, so quick, she pushes it aside. Instead, finds herself, says calmingly, ‘I’m so, so sorry to hear that, Paul. Perhaps you can somehow find a way back to each other, perhaps you just need this separation and who knows what the future holds?’

He smiles at her then, looks distant, ‘Perhaps. Thanks for saying it.’

She takes another sip of the iced coffee, the taste now watery and diluted, looks at him. She doesn't really want to hear his answer to her next question, but she has to ask it: 'Do you think you will go back to Canada now, Paul?'

He doesn't know. His child is now here, of course, and Jennifer is definitely staying. But he misses it, he doesn't know what to do. It's bad enough being a separated father who sees his child only on weekends. He doesn't want to be one who sees his child only once a year on holidays, if that. 'I don't know ...' he shakes his head.

'What?'

'I shouldn't be saying this. You always had a knack of making me talk about things Anna . I don't know. It's a different love to that which you feel for another adult, even someone you love fiercely and have married, it's another kind of love for a child.'

'Deeper?'

'Yes. In a way. Deeper. Fiercer. I'd do anything for her. I don't know if I'd do anything and everything for Jennifer. Hate saying that though.'

The thoughts hang between them. Anna has no answers in reply. The waitress is there, asking if they want anything else. They order more drinks, this time Anna chooses filter coffee, longing for the hot, jolting bitterness on this hot afternoon. Paul has another beer, drifting further into the mellowness of the waiting night. Anna wants to be wide awake.

He asks next about the trajectory her life has taken, and she takes him through the arc of years. It almost tires her to think of it and she slices it up, cut out important bits, makes light of some of the darkness herself. She who continually twisted and loops back through her own life with an obsession that borders on the pathological. And here she is, rushed, unable to complete sentences. She forces herself to calm down, but still the words don't quite follow what she wants to say.

She cuts the years into segments then: bite-sized portions. It feels as though she were lying, she wants to spill it all out, but yet, the words won't come. She makes light of it of it all. She doesn't say, after you and I were finished, and I was just twenty-four, I felt as if my life had come to an end. I knew it hadn't – and I didn't return to the suicidal despair I'd felt at nineteen at university – but I felt as if you and I had meant to be, and I'd ruined it, so there was nothing left. There was no joy; there was no joy for years and years after that. I lived, I had to, but I felt dead inside, so dead, I didn't even know it, couldn't even really articulate the feeling. Then I met a man, a man who said he was in love with me. This was just a year after you – you even knew him – remember Jake? I worked with him on that community newspaper where I had my first job, we all went away camping that weekend, and I asked you to come with? So, after a while Jake said he loved me. I didn't love him, never did, never could, I knew that. But it happened – he was clever, manipulative, I was still so young, inexperienced. I didn't want to hurt him – I kept telling him – as you had hurt me – but in the end I hurt him.

Of course there was no way around it – I couldn't love him, and he, he imagined a future together. I made up all sorts of excuses – his religion was one, can you believe it? He'd been raised a Christian, and you know I've never followed any religion, so I said it couldn't work because of that. Then he somehow discarded that – and I've met him since and he's no longer a practising Christian. Believes in karma and reincarnation, reads about Sufism. Who would have thought. But that doesn't, didn't, wouldn't have made a difference. I couldn't love him. But I didn't know how to tell him that, and then it all happened. And I had to somehow make it unhappen. I did. We even remained friends after that – would you believe it? We were friends for years and years – increasingly distant, we saw each other seldom. He was involved with Riana, also from the community newspaper. She was older than him, us, by fifteen, sixteen years. They were together a long time.

And then after him, another man, another man I couldn't fall in love with ... I was with him for five years. And yet, again, you were there throughout it all. I kept imagining you – what you were doing, where you were, wondering if you were happy. I so wanted news of you – even just a snatch, anything, to know you were alright, happy, but of course there was nothing. I tried to forget you – I reasoned and argued with myself and no amount of logic could remove you from my mind. You were lodged there stubbornly, like a pebble in a shoe,

stuck there like glue. I could only try and forget you, walk differently so as not to feel the pebble. But that didn't really work either. And then Leo. You know the rest. Or do you? Do I? I'm sitting here drinking coffee on a Friday night and my husband, who I say I love, is away in a foreign country. And I've engineered this meeting haven't I?

Instead, she speaks about the trips she has taken overseas as part of her job as a travel writer and then editor, she talks briefly, lightly, about buying her first home, about meeting Leo, knowing, about the time, the years ... she makes it sound good, as though she hasn't missed, hasn't waited a long, long time to sit across from him, watching his face, watching how it has grown into its lines and angles, how the sun catches on the blonde glints in his hair, or the deep fan of creases running from his eyes. She knows what it would sound like – to say all that she'd really like to. She'd sound deranged, mad, she'd chase him away, and that isn't what she wants, not now, that she's come so close. She doesn't know where this could possibly lead.

She took out her cellphone instead, showed him a picture of Leo. He brings out his own phone, shows her a pictures of his daughter, in turn. He doesn't show her a photo of Jennifer, although she longs to see one of this woman, longs to see who had come after, why, what had captured him, and still does.

And then the moment comes: it was either order more drinks, extend the night into supper, or call for the bill, call it a night. They watch the water of fountains arc through air, then stop, the waitress returns, do they want more drinks...? Now or never, Anna thinks. She's never seen a fork so cruelly revealed, pointed out, so crudely, too.

'No,' she hears herself saying. 'No, can we have the bill please.' To Paul, 'Sorry, it's getting late. I must get going, my best friend's invited me to dinner.'

He's disappointed, she can see. It's nothing more than loneliness, she tells herself. I'm a convenient fill-in, I could be anyone. He's lonely, separated, he just wants companionship. Don't fool yourself.

‘It was so good seeing you, catching up,’ she says. The words hang there, the waitress is back, and punching in the details of Paul’s bank card, they waited for the transaction to go through, that awkward moment, all three of them, poised in this unsteady momentary triangle.

And then the transaction goes through, Paul signs the receipt. They get up. Anna feels a momentary panic. Am I going to see you again? She felt like blurting out, and knows she mustn’t. They separate at the doors leading to the mall and the escalators to the parking lot on the left.

‘It was so good seeing you again, Anna,’ he says. ‘Everything’s turned out so well for you. I’m so pleased.’

No talk of their shared past. Of course not.

‘Be in touch!’ she calls out to him.

23

She somehow manages to find change, slot it into the parking machine at the entrance, pay for her parking. The world a blur. She picks out her phone from her bag, dials Megan’s number, it rings as she clip-clops her way on high heels to her car, finally a hello as muffled as she feels. ‘Anna, what’s wrong?’

There are tears streaming down her face, she can’t talk, takes great gulps as tries to speak, gasping out, ‘I’ll text you now.’

She types: *I just met Paul for a drink. Can I come see you? I’m at Mandela Square*.

Megan phones back immediately. ‘I’m out with some friends. I’m just paying my bill and I’m coming home, half an hour max. Ok, just go to my place, wait for me. I’m coming, ok?’

There's a moment when Anna thinks she could pull back then, regain some control, instead she nods numbly at the receiver, gasps out a yes. Gets into her car, manoeuvres her car out of the parking space, through to the exit and into the early evening streets, smeared as she looks through her smarting eyes, rubbing away wet, mascara, thinking I'm going to look like a panda when I get there.

Once outside Megan's flat she sits, listening to a radio programme on cars on 702. She barely hears the words, they float beyond her, and not for the first time in her life she wishes that she smoked. It always looks so glamorous. And a way to while away the time, a taste of something when you need it.

The time ticks on, half an hour. Anna sits in the darkness, the voices on the radio far away. She's dried her eyes with an old bundled up tissue, smudged away the worst of the mascara marks, she looked simply tired now, tired and a little bit old, she thinks. The years are finally beginning to tell.

Megan's bright lights in the driveway, the sweep, the shadows, then Megan rushing out of her own car, Anna gathering up her things, finally the radio shut to mute. Megan there, smelling faintly of wine and some kind of scent as she takes one look, puts her arms around in her a hug. 'I've been so worried about you!'

Inside, a glass of wine in her hands, Megan sitting opposite her on the couch, she has no choice. The story spills out. Megan's face darkening, looking away, a soft lamp lighting a corner of the room, a woman's face looking out from beyond its picture frame. Anna thinks she is going to remember this scene for the rest of her life. Megan's mad dash home, the warmth of the fact of it, the wine, the crackers and humus and cheese Megan had quickly assembled, saying she was famished and had almost no food in the house, 'I'm going shopping tomorrow, I've had no time lately.' The humus thick in her throat, trying to swallow it down, it all tastes dry, like chalk dust. Megan listening, eating drinking, smoking an occasional cigarette. Anna talking about the trip to Pretoria, having found Paul online. She speaks, Megan listens. Occasionally she shook her head, but still listening. Finally, done, Anna drained her glass, sat back. Megan was silent. The house was silent, breathing, listening too.

‘And now?’ finally Megan asks. Her voice soft. ‘Do you feel like you have an answer? Do you think you can lay it to rest?’

‘I feel like I’ve been kicked in the gut, to be honest. I never want to see him again and yet, in some way, I have to. I have to see what happens. After all these years, finally meeting him, I have to know ...’

‘But you do know, don’t you?’ Megan voice gently again. ‘You know he’s here, and separated, but he’s not divorced, you know that, Anna. He may go back to her. What do you want from him?’

‘That’s the trouble! I just don’t know.’

‘Would you want to go to bed with him?’

The question blunt, direct. Tears pricking Anna’s eyes again. ‘I don’t know. He’s still so beautiful.’

‘You know how much you’d hurt Leo if you did though, don’t you? If you did and he found out – even if he didn’t find out. There’d be something different in you, changed, and he’d know that. You don’t miss these things.’

‘I don’t know what I want, Megan. That’s the trouble. If I did ...’

‘You’re playing with fire, you do know that, don’t you? Even just by seeing him, all that he means to you, has meant to you. It’s best to just not go there go...’ a pause in the dark evening, ‘but you’ve already gone there.’

‘What should I do?’ Anna’s face, teary, splotched red.

Megan: ‘I can’t tell you what to do. I can only say what I think you should do. But I’m not you, Anna, I can’t feel what you’re feeling. I haven’t carried one man around me forever; I

don't know what that's like. I can only say that you're going to hurt Leo if you do this. You might do worse than hurt him. I don't know. He might understand, he knows all about Paul. But you're asking a lot. If it was me, I'd delete Paul's details I wouldn't see him again, I'd walk away. I'd finally accept what I have, all the good that you do have. I'd try and shut a door, finally. You wanted answers and you've got them.' She sighed heavily. 'I just wish to fuck that you hadn't met him while he was separated from his wife. I wish he was back with her – that gives you some kind of escape route. Like he's going to divorce her and marry you or whatever. I don't think that would ever happen. To be honest. He didn't fall in love with you all those years ago – he fell in love with, what's her name?''

'Jennifer.' Anna's voice a whisper.

'Jennifer. He fell in love with her. And he's probably still in love with her. Who knows what goes in a couple's relationship. It's nearly impossible to see in, as it were. He didn't love you then, and the harsh truth is, I don't think he's going to fall in love with you now.'

'Why not?' Anna's tone sharp.

'I don't know. If he didn't love you then – for all the reasons you've spoken about – that you thought you were too temperamental, too unstable for him, not thin enough, then. I don't know. We all change – but do we change fundamentally? My feeling is, this isn't going to lead anywhere. He's either going to divorce his wife and then I'd say he'd go back to Canada. That place has a hook in him, as he has a hook in you. Or, he's going to stay and be with Jennifer, and that will be that. That will be the end of the story. Those are your answers.'

Anna sits there. 'It's so incredibly cruel of you to say these things, Meg.'

'It's honest, Anna. I'm sorry, but you need to hear this. It's what going to happen. You are not ever going to have him. I don't think I'm wrong in this. God, in some ways, I wish I were. I wish you'd have some sort of ending. But I also know, well, if you carry on, it's goodbye to Leo. In some way. I think you know that. And I think you also don't want that.'

‘Maybe,’ Anna laughs bitterly, ‘I can’t stand happiness. Maybe I just don’t know what to do with it. And I’m deliberately doing this, oh fuck, I don’t know. I wish there was some anti-Paul pill I could take!’

‘You and me both my friend,’ Megan touched her lightly on the elbow. ‘Coffee?’

24

And that’s that. She declines the offer to spend the night in Megan’s spare bed and by the time she has drunk her coffee, and it’s growing late, she’s dry-eyed, calm, controlled. The storm has passed again. She goes home, exhausted, falling into bed, thinking that surely sleep will come easy.

But once her head hits the pillow she tosses and turns. Every time she seems to have fallen asleep she’s jolted back to a groggy wakefulness, time and again. She turns again and again, the clock glows on through the night, Leo’s face glows from its frame. She puts the pillow over her head. At one point, addressing the smiling visage, hissing, ‘You did this, by going away ...’ but that’s childish, it had been a decision they had both taken, his long time away from her, furthering his career. And she knows it has nothing to do with his absence. She’d been like this over Paul for years. And she hasn’t actually *done* anything – a harebrained plan to meet him, which had actually worked and a coffee date. It didn’t constitute anything really. They haven’t even kissed – there hadn’t even been a hint of that. But why then, this looming sense of foreboding, this fraying edge of guilt? She has nothing to be guilty about. And she isn’t planning on anything. She is going to do exactly as Megan has suggested – while she isn’t going to go quite as far as deleting his contact details, she has decided that is it. There will be no more contact. She has an answer of sorts and she is, if not quite content, then at least, almost resigned. Before she jerks to sleep, again, she runs a finger over the pearly frame containing Leo’s picture, Why can’t you be enough for me? she asks. The clock radio hums on.

And life carries on. She works, she goes out to dinners with friends, she sees a comedy puppet show, she attends the opening of a sculpture exhibition, she goes to hear a woman sing at the Radium in Orange Grove, a place she hasn’t been in years. She makes sure she is

so busy that by the Saturday morning of any given weekend she is so hammered she barely makes it through the round of grocery shopping she does then. He doesn't go away, of course. Memories come through at odd times – now the past intersperses with the present. His eyes crinkling in the sun that late afternoon on the Square, juxtaposed against the weekend they had gone camping and she remembered him putting up the tent while making a goofy smile. Thinking about him makes her happy – she wishes to hell it didn't. And yet there are days where when she thinks about him, and knows she has to stop somehow. It's not going to happen, the running commentary in her mind. You know that, he knows that, we all know that. It's an impossible situation ... She keeps it going, some days it takes hold, some days she wanders through the days, guilt-stricken. She's done nothing wrong and yet ...

And yet ...

And Leo, in the centre of this, yet far away. They keep up, as always with conversations on Skype, text messages, and emails through the day as well. He's there – he isn't there. And there is no way she can let him know what was happening. He senses something, she knows – and yet all she can say is that she misses him. And she does. She misses him with an ache that approximates the longing she feels for Paul. She can no more understand it than explain it. She wants two men, as she said to Megan that one night. She does love Leo – but there is a part that is drawn, hooked into Paul.

'Why can't I have them both?' she had joked, and smiled ruefully. Because you can't ... Megan's voice had said. Because you're not the sort of person who could tolerate that kind of jealousy. After all if you can have a Paul, then what's to stop Leo from having someone else as well? I'd kill him. Exactly. Case closed. One night she weeps over Skype, and Leo's face is stricken, unable to do more than reach through the glass of the laptop screen, a hopeless gesture, in the end.

She goes walking with a friend and the friend's brother in the Roodepoort Botanical Gardens. She goes away for a weekend, and still the ache and longing continue. She thinks of going back into therapy, but she has come to dislike the circuitous route of therapeutic sessions. The obviousness of them – of going over the same old problems without conclusion, I know my problems, I just don't know how to get out of them, she tells Megan.

‘It’s an addiction,’ is her friend’s advice. ‘Stay away from him.’

So she goes away with Megan and a group of friends to an old place she’d been to before, fisherman’s cottages converted into holiday homes, rented out by the day. The place is isolated, set on a deserted beach, there are long walks on the beach, meals on the stoep. The whole place is whitewashed roughly, she spends the nights talking to Megan and the friends and the long hours leading into the early hours dreaming. Imagining Paul walking through these rooms with her, lying in the old wooden bed with her ...

‘An addiction,’ Megan is firm. ‘And the only thing to do with an addiction is to ignore it, put it out of your mind, don’t touch it. If you were an alcoholic you wouldn’t have it in your home, or order it out. You’d ignore it. That’s what you have to do with Paul.’

They’ve gone for a long walk away from the others, collecting shells, stopping to sit at the water’s edge, both starved for sea, the sound of waves on a beach, the sheer hypnotic harmony of it, living landlocked away from water most of the year. ‘You’re right, Megs, you’re always right. And that’s what I’m doing, but you know?’

‘I do, I don’t ...’

‘What if I did, would you still talk to me?’

‘Of course, I’ll always be around for you. You know that. Whatever you decide to do or not to. But you won’t.’

That night, sitting around a bonfire built on the beach, the flames catch them in a soft, gentle light and one of the children insists on roasting marshmallows. She helps the little girl hold her wooden skewer over the fire, and looks and the child’s bright smiling face as the child raises the sticky mess into her mouth. That’s what you can have, Anna thinks, if only...

Another night, with the kids asleep and men drinking around the fire outside, the women clustered on the stoep.

‘You can buy this thing from sex shops now,’ says one, ‘where you clip it on and you massage both your clitoris and your G-spot!’ She feels too inexperienced to ask exactly how or where you clip it onto. Does the mythical G-spot even exist? Conversation ebbs on, another woman is planning her birthday party.

‘I’ll bring my vagina cookies!’ Vagina cookies! Has she really missed out on so much, is she that inexperienced? What the hell are vagina cookies? Cupcakes with vaginas painted on them! Ohmigod. She retreats again. Haven’t you seen my Facebook pictures? Ooh right, yes ... conversation in and out, she’s there, then she isn’t. Why are you so quiet tonight? I’m getting over a love affair she wants to say. It happened a long time ago, I’m recovering from unrequited love, the second time around. I have a right to be a bit mis...

But of course, she says nothing. And you’re married to Leo? I’ve heard so much about him! He’s away? God, he’s gorgeous, Megan was chiming in. Tell Jane about Leo. And so, she finds herself describing Leo, his soft curly hair, the sensitive gentle mouth and way he had about him, him quietness.

‘I fell in love one morning, before we even knew each other. We’d gone away with mutual friends who had a chalet, we sort of had to share a room separated by a half wall. In the morning when he woke up, he just proceeded to read a book, that was it. No talking, no need to goad me into talk. I can barely string a sentence together in the morning, that’s me. But he was so quiet, so sensitive, I thought, if there’s a man I ever want to be with, he’s got to be like that in the morning. And then, well it happened.’ Sounds like a dream, Jane murmured.

‘Except for the fact that he’s not here, but there.’

‘But he’s coming back.’

‘So he says.’

Jane looks at her strangely then.

She carries on with the holiday, she becomes quite friendly with the little girl, the only girl among all the boys on holiday. There was another little girl who was meant to come along, but the child's single mother couldn't make it. And so Anna finds herself taking care of and playing with the little girl who is so often left out of the boys' games. She imagines different things then, a household, a child, perhaps two, more holidays at the beach, more roasted marshmallows over bonfires ... but in some ways it all seems so remote, like snatching at something you really wanted, almost getting it and then waking up, you've been dreaming all along. The frustration, the remembered frustration of dreams like that!

And then, the week over, and back home in Johannesburg, looking at the calendar. It was six weeks till Leo was due home. Six weeks! That's nothing, said Megan. Keep busy! Phone me. I will. You're a good friend. The best, remember that.

25

And then, life careening along, and Anna keeps her silence and it happens. She bumps into him – after all these years of never meeting him anywhere, ever, of even having to engineer a meeting, on an ordinary harried Saturday morning, doing grocery shopping, hardly wearing any makeup, looking tired, wan, there he is, holding an out of season melon to his straight nose, frowning at the barely discernible detectable aroma. Winter now, and melons and things are being flown in.

Go.

But as she is about to turn away, he looks. His face lights up. Smiles. He too is in his Saturday best, wearing a tracksuit. And Anna once again thinks how beautiful he is, what an absolutely beautiful man he is. And then he is at her side – and she can't get over the irony of it, of scheming to meet him and one morning, shopping at a supermarket she'd never been to before, but had decided to try because it had been hyped all over the media as some kind of South African answer to Harrods, and there he is.

She's stopped talking about it to Megan, her friend of numberless years. The silence complete, almost. Instead, the night before, was out with a new friend, a woman much

younger than herself. She'd asked her if she wanted to come with her to an Indian embassy do at a smart five-star hotel she had been invited to. The woman came; they ate the curries provided, poked and looked among the gift bag they had been given: a round, crystal-like paper weight and a calendar featuring India. And, as they had sat, eaten, listen to speeches and watched Indian dancing, they had spoken. The woman, Susan, had broken up with her boyfriend of three years. He couldn't commit, he couldn't love her as she loved him. It had been three years of hesitation and hurt and Susan had opened up, talking about trying to move beyond the relationship, trying to trust that it had been the right thing to do. 'I went past his house today,' she'd confessed. 'I shouldn't have – it always fucks me up.' Her face sad, but closed. 'But I know it's the right thing to do.'

'It is,' Anna had agreed. 'If he isn't going to love you as you do him, then you have to let go. You deserve better. There is something better waiting out there.'

And then telling her about Paul, about the long years since knowing and loving Paul, about the fact that she had found him again, searched through online sites, and there he was, and she even had an address. She hadn't yet concocted a plan to see him, not yet. But instead, Susan had asked her if she ever thought what she'd say if she were to bump into him.

'I want another chance,' said Anna. 'Some part of me knows we were meant to be together, and I fucked up. I still don't know quite what went wrong. I was too passionate, too tempestuous. Maybe I'd behave myself better now, hopefully I would. Now I think we'd make it work. I know I would. We met at the wrong time, that's what it was about.' Susan looked at her, almost disbelieving. Anna could hear her arguments, her self-pity, she'd heard it before.

'I went to a psychic the year I knew Paul,' she told Susan, and she said I was going out with the man I was going to marry. I was only twenty-three at the time! I thought I was too young to have met that man – that there'd be lots of men after him, that he was just the beginning. I didn't believe her, much as I had fallen for Paul, I just didn't believe her.

'But, after we had broken up, I believed her. Oh. Not the physical marrying thing, after all psychics can get that wrong, it's the meaning you've got to take in, remember. I felt dead

after we were finished. Not suicidal, don't get me wrong. I was never suicidal. And I've been suicidal before, and after, of course, but I was dead. I knew I just had to go on, and I did, months, years, decades. I carried on. But something had died, was dead, and that's when I believed the psychic, that's when I knew she'd been right. Paul was the man I was meant to be with. I know it. Don't get me wrong, there would have been problems, frustrations, there were things I didn't like about him, there were things he didn't like about me. But I was meant to give it time. I was meant to wait. But I was too young to wait. I know that now. Now, I'm older, I can wait. I could've. Except I met Leo, the waiting was over. But as the years went on I finally understood destiny. Destiny is you, who you are, who you meet and what you do and don't do. It's something so light and fluid and we don't always recognise it.'

'But you're still waiting, still looking?'

Anna shrugged. 'Go figure.'

'But don't you worry, that if you know, if you open this, what will happen to you and Leo?'

'The fact that I'm trying to 'open' this as you say, don't you think that means something? Besides who says you're only meant to love one person one way? It's not finished.'

'What are you going to do about it? This time?'

'Nothing. This time the universe can decide.'

***

She's not looking her best. She has only put on a touch of eyeliner and foundation, uncharacteristically for her, but she hadn't meant to bump into anyone on this Saturday morning. And she's wearing old leggings and a faded jersey. Her hair, although newly washed, is tied up, but unstyled. This isn't the way she would have chosen to see him again, and yet, there he is, there she was. She smiles at him, his eyes crinkle into hers, asks if she is done shopping. She has never got over that mix of accents in his voice – the Canadian lilt

blending into the flatter South African vowels. Done shopping, like an American in a movie would say. She smiles back at him, 'I'm done shopping, Paul. You free for a coffee?'

Taking the upper hand. He is free for coffee, which they drink in the coffee shop attached to the outdoor centre where this new supermarket is located. And, drinking coffee she asks him if he is free for dinner and would he like to come to supper at her home?

He is free. If he is surprised at her sudden audacity, her openness, the invite to eat at her home, the home she shares with another man, he doesn't say. They part before lunch, she writes down her address for him, watching as he taps it into his phone, saying he'll plug the address into his GPS and he'll find the place. She smiles, he doesn't want directions. She remembers the last time she had seen him all those years ago: he'd just bought himself a new digital diary then, in an age before the ubiquitous use of cell phones, and he was busy putting appointments into that diary, tapping them in with an earnest seriousness that tugged at her. Made her realise, in part, what she was losing.

And here he is, telling her he has just upgraded his GPS, downloaded new software. She smiles again, they kiss lightly on each cheek. She makes her way back to the car, already mentally preparing what she is going to cook, she's bought salmon steaks. What can she wear? Something casual, nothing too dressy or showy. She has to play it cool, as always, she has to play it cool. She's made her decision, she's finally made her decision, and she feels so much lighter and freer for it. She plays music as she makes up her face, mouthing the words of the song to her reflection: *Destiny came dancing in, it did, destiny came dancing in. Destiny come dancing in.*

26

He comes at eight, as she has asked him, a late supper, which suits her perfectly. It gives her time to shower, dress, cook, lay the table so artfully that he won't think she's gone to that much trouble. The baby potatoes are in the oven, the cauliflower had been lightly steamed and will soon tossed in oil with the potatoes. The salmon steaks will be seared and cooked in a skillet. She has made avocado ritz for starters, a delightfully retro dish that is now making a come-back.

The place looks immaculate, the skylights forming triangular arches, making the already spacious place look even more so. He is going to be impressed, she knows that. She and Leo had decorated together, blending their tastes seamlessly, there were few arguments about which sofas to buy or what colour to paint the walls. The house is a perfect amalgamation of both of them, and she knows it. There's a sense of space, of airiness, and yet the couches are comfortable, the photos and prints on the wall plentiful, yet spaced apart so as to retain the airiness. They both hate clutter.

The days are still warmish, despite winter, but the nights are chilly. She puts the gas fire on in the lounge, the blue flames dancing and sputtering hopefully. She puts gentle music on the stereo, Loreena McKennitt's Celtic-like tones from the album *The Book of Secrets* filling the lounge. McKennitt had once been a favourite singer – Paul had introduced the Canadian with Celtic tones to her, and she wondered if he still listened to her.

He comes bearing a bunch of yellow flowers. She was surprised – he, who had always said how romantic he was, he'd never brought her flowers in all the time they had been together. But she leads him to the open-plan kitchen, part of the living area, and she sees him taking in the vaulted ceilings of glass, the night sky looming high above them, the pool glittering blackly outside.

'It's beautiful, Anna,' he smiles, 'absolutely beautiful.' Staring her in the face. She feels herself blushing, turns to find a vase to put the flowers in, set it in the middle of the table. Suddenly the place is transformed, there's a sense of festivity, amazing what flowers can do, she thought. 'Wine?' she asks, holding out a bottle, 'will you do the honours?'

Wine, carefully selected wine, a good bottle from the small cellar they have started, she and Leo. Leo, educating her away from cheap reds and sparkling rose wines. 'Nearly ready,' she says. 'I made avocado ritz as an appetiser. You do eat that?'

'Oh yeah,' he said.

'It's so very 70s,' she laughs, 'so 70s it's come right back into fashion.'

They scoop out prawns and mayonnaise and ripe rinds of avocado, sipping the wine as they eat. Loreena McKennitt sings about secrets in the background. ‘Loreena McKennitt,’ he says. ‘You still like her?’

‘Yes, of course! You introduced me to her! Do you remember? Do you still listen?’

‘Yeah, now and again.’

He is examining their music collection – she moves to take the plates to the kitchen, lights the gas stove to prepare the salmon steaks.

‘You know, if you like Loreena McKennitt you might also like Sarah McLachlan,’ he says. ‘Ever heard of her?’

‘I don’t know. I must write down the name. I’ll go look her up.’

The salmon steaks are almost done, the potatoes and cauliflower ready. It’s a light fresh meal, she knows that, nothing too fancy, she hasn’t wanted that, and hasn’t wanted him to think she’s gone to too much trouble. But as he carries on, looking at the music collection, then walking around, looking at the paintings and photos, she wonders how much he has even noticed about the food, or what effort she has gone to. He stops at the fridge, magnetic frames hold snapshots of her and Leo, of her as a child, of Leo as a child with his family. Paul looks, is frowning again, ‘That’s Leo?’ Phrased as a question, but he knows. Nodding. ‘He looks nice.’ Turning away. He won’t look or mention him again.

They eat again. The food is good. He says as much. Her appetite is gone, she pushes the food around her plate, takes bites here and then, but she is no longer hungry, or ravenous as she had been earlier, wolfing down the avocado pear slices and prawns. Her hunger has deserted her.

They speak, she can hardly look him in the eyes. He is talking about his studies, his work, about taking his daughter out to the lion park, about going away to a game reserve with her and his family. She remembered his brother and wife, they have a child now too.

His sister hasn't married, not yet. His parents are fine, getting on, his mother close to eighty now, but still so healthy, his father, ten years younger. She aches, she wants to know more. She has carried the family around in her head all these years she realises, like a surrogate family, a family to replace one she had never known, growing up with a single mother.

As they finish eating, she asks if he has photos, and he nods. Brings out his cellphone again, as he did when they had coffee that time, scrolls through, leaned across the table, their fingers brushing as he hands her the phone. She flicks through – they are as she has remembered them – older, different, and yet the same. And yet, also, not the same. She sighs, suddenly, for all the time gone by, so much time lost, fallen, unknowable.

'Dessert, coffee?' she asks. But neither of them feel like it just yet – she leaves the white panacotta in the fridge with its topping of fresh berries, carries their wine glasses to the lounge. They take a couch each. Silence fills the room.

'Will you choose some music?' she asks. He walks across to the player, crouches, she watches, sipping wine, looking the curve of his back against the crisp white shirt he has put on. The melancholy sounds of 1980s singer Lesley Rae Dowling filled the room. 'Haven't heard that for years,' he grins. 'Talk about retro.'

'I watched her on TV when I was a kid,' Anna answers. 'I remember that video *The Spaniard*, Lesley riding on a beach on a white horse. I don't know, at least that's what I remember. Who knows hey. What we remember and what was ...'

Sitting back on the couch. Anna near the gas heater. He shivers, looks around for his jacket. 'Cold?' she asks, 'come sit near the fire.'

And so he comes to sit near the fire, near her and they sit in a silence filled by a singer who once filled her childhood. Anna gets another bottle of wine out, she feels delightfully spaced

out now, slightly hazy, reckless. A terrible mood to be in, she thinks, and then the thought leaves. Who cares? she thinks. She pours another glass for both of them, his finger brushes hers again, as she passes him the wine glass.

She moves in closer to him. 'Do you remember the morning you first played Loreena McKennitt for me?' she looks at him, an arm around hers now, tentatively, she can feel the hard strength of it through the shirt. He shakes his head, runs an exploratory finger down her cheek.

She says: 'I'd just spent the night the first night at you. We didn't do anything, as you know, but I spent the night sleeping in your bed. It was the first time I had ever spent the night with a man, and when we woke up you always put music on. Remember? That morning you put her on, I've loved her music ever since.'

'Whew. You remember that, you've got some memory.'

His mouth on hers, smelling of the wine they have been drinking all night, before she closes her eyes, succumbs, she briefly wonders what she must smell like, like wine too, and perfume, she thinks. It is all so different, this time, the romance of it, the wine, the flowers on the table, the peace and quiet of her own home. When they had been together, the last time, they had each lived at home still, he at twenty-seven, she, early twenties, there was no romance to it then. Although he'd slept at her, and everyone knew what they were doing, it had been more secretive, furtive, everything took place behind closed doors. And they had never kissed. Not like this – not so long and lingering. When she had once asked him why he didn't kiss her, he'd said, 'I get the feeling you don't like it, don't want it.' The hurt that had coursed through, she answered it with silence.

But this is different, this is real in a way that it has never been with him before. She turns to him, till he is cupping her in his arms, he's shorter than Leo, but stronger, less wiry, more meaty. That's her first thought, and then Leo slips away, Paul's hands are on the buttons of her dress, parting them, the black lace bra peeking through, the gentle unlacing, as the dress opens. Heat and sweat between them, despite the cold night, the gas fire sputtering on.

‘Not like this,’ she says, leading him up the stairs. She pauses before the bedroom door, closed, then leads him to the spare room with its own double bed. ‘Here. We’ll be more comfortable here.’

He doesn’t seem to notice the fact that she hesitated, doubled back on her steps, opened the slightly chilly room. Folding back the covers of the plum bedspread, the cool sheets against her skin, him sliding in beneath her, as she gently, slowly undoes the zip on his pants, his own strong, muscular legs against hers. She sighs, she hasn’t felt him in years, as though it were the first time, her first time, and she had never had a man before. It’s new, yet, different. She keeps feeling that difference, it was then, it is now, it is like it had never been, as she soaks back through the layers, falling into sleep, too careless with wine to think, for once.

27

The next morning, that familiar and yet unfamiliar ugly taste in her mouth. Her head is heavy too, the dull throbbing of a hang-over headache. She leaves Paul sleeping, pads to the bathroom, the toilet, rinses her mouth out with water. That’s slightly better. It’s still early, the morning just beginning to blue, just past six. What time had they finally fallen asleep? She hadn’t looked at her watch, still firmly clamped to her wrist.

‘What now, Paul?’ she’d asked, at one point, but he’d already been falling asleep. And she had lain there, watching him sleep, the sparse fair hair, the straight nose against the white pillow.

‘What now, Anna?’ she had whispered to herself as she turned over, went back to sleep.

She returns to sleep. They wake late, it’s past eleven. She hears Paul in the bathroom, the toilet flushing, water running, before he comes bounding back to bed, naked, cold, grinning as he leaps under the covers again, encircling her waist. He’s in good spirits. Her own head still so heavy, her mouth tastes ugly again but she also feels cleansed. Yes that’s it, but at the same time, the enormity of what she has done, the terror of what she has let happen, invited in, can’t be ignored. So kick him out, she hears herself say. You’ve done it, now tell him goodbye. But she couldn’t. His arms encircle her, there’s a kind of release as she moves

against him. It feels right, so normal. What now, she thinks, as they lie there, drifting, coming back to life. I need some nurofen, she thinks, some food and then some nurofen to get rid of this damn headache. Paul's unperturbed. Perhaps he drank less, or perhaps more often than she, and can handle it better.

'You good?' he asks her. She shrugs. She needs to find her cellphone – what if Leo has been trying to get hold of her? What if her phone has died, but then of course he could have rung the landline.

'Yeah, I'm good,' she says, lying. 'Just need to find my phone, see if there are any messages from Leo.'

There, she's said it, the name, out in the open. He has a name, her husband, she's ignored it, so far with Paul, putting it away, but there it is, out in the open.

'Uh-huh,' he answers. She leaves him there, goes to the main bedroom, finds her dressing gown, ties it firmly around her nakedness, descends the stairs. The red light on her phone is blinking; Leo texting her goodnight. She hadn't responded, as she usually did, and of course, no wonder. There's another worried text from him this morning. She taps back a reply – she'd been so exhausted, went to bed early, slept in. Love you, Anna.

Paul, showering. She sits on the bed, listening to the sounds of the water, and then through the noise, his singing. She bursts out laughing, in spite of herself, in spite of her feelings. She's forgotten that about him, no man she'd ever been with since had sung in the shower. She had loved that – and he had a nice tenor voice. He was singing 'Over the mountain ...' some ancient ditty. She wonders where the hell he's dug that tune from. He comes out, a towel around his waist, wet, fresh, clean-looking.

'I'd better get you a dressing gown,' she says, 'I always keep a spare one for visitors, like a hotel!'

'Do you treat all your hotel guests so nicely?' His arms around her, kissing her ears.

‘Stop that!’ Laughing. How is she going to give this up? ‘You want some breakfast? Some French toast?’

‘Love it.’ Still nibbling her ears, wriggling away, when had he become so affectionate? There’d always been a coldness to him before, a distance that both attracted and repelled her. A distance that meant she always needed to come closer, and the closer she tried, the further it felt he was emotionally, even when they had been lying in the same bed together. Did people really change so fundamentally? Has she changed so much, that he felt it was not okay to come closer?

She’s still tired, too tired to register the conflicting waves of emotions that sweep through her. Guilt, yet she’s soothed. Refreshed and clean, and yet, what now? She can’t think. Food. French toast. Roll bread in egg, fry, make some more, eat. She’s better after eating the eggy bread doused liberally with sugar on top. Paul next to her, eating hungrily too, dressed in the barely-used dressing gown she’d bought for guests when she had moved into the house with Leo.

And now she’s telling him that she has always wanted guests to feel welcome so she had gone out and bought dressing gowns so that people staying over would be more comfortable. She hates having to travel, and staying with friends or family and having to take a dressing gown. A pet hate. She’s going on about nonsense, she knows, prattling. She, who never prattles. He stops her, has finished eating. Serious now, ‘You okay with all this, Anna?’ A hand, indicating the dishes, the night before, the wine glasses, the two of them in dressing gowns.

‘I don’t know, Paul, I honestly don’t know.’

‘Why did you invite me last night, if ...?’

‘I can’t tell you why I’m doing anything, Paul. You know what, that meeting at the Eagle Warriors? I engineered it I knew you’d be there. I needed to see you again. It wasn’t a casual thing, I planned it.’

Paul, looking at her. She's dizzy suddenly, I'm losing him again ... 'I don't mean that in a bad way, Paul. I've thought about you for years wondered about you. .. I was so pleased you were okay, doing alright, but I wanted to see for myself. I didn't intend any of this ...' her turn to wave her hand around.

The face softening. 'Isn't it a good marriage, Anna? I thought, the way you spoke about Leo, that I don't know, all was ok, and you were in love with him?'

'I am, it is, all that! But I've never stopped thinking about you, Paul, wondering, hoping you were fine, thinking that you know maybe we met at the wrong time, that if we'd met sooner, or later, you know?'

Paul, 'You must think about why you're doing this, Anna.' Stern, hard, yet the face soft, she can't cope with all this contradiction. It's like looking into the past again. Yes, he'd once said that, the first time, or the time they had gone camping, had spoken late into the night, discussing why she was doing this. He'd said it then, 'You must think about why you're doing this, Anna.' The same tone.

He sits, there, the mixture of hard and softness.

'Did you ever think about me?' she wants to ask. But knows the answer, fears the answer. Or was I just a momentary flash across your mind, from time to time, you know, that woman you were once briefly involved with? The woman who thought she wasn't thin enough, couldn't see herself properly in the mirror? Well, look at me now, slim, trim, proud of her body, weighing herself, exercising. Not ashamed. I did this for you, Paul.

Instead, looking at him, saying I'd better clear up. But instead, 'Sit,' he says, gathering the plates, running water over them, pulling open the drawers of the dishwashing machine, stacking dishes. He looks so domestic in his white towelling dressing gown.

'Why are *you* doing this, Paul?'

He turns around. His face blank.

‘Am I just a stop gap while you figure out what you’re doing with your wife? Am I just a convenient fuck?’

His face, falling, then hard and immoveable as stone. ‘Don’t do this, Anna,’ he said, ‘what we had last night was beautiful. I don’t understand it, but it was beautiful. Your marriage, I don’t know, maybe you’re confused, maybe it’s because you miss him, but you invited me here last night, and you’re not some innocent party.’

Pulling back, so easy to lose him again – again the contradictions. So what, I’m married now, he can walk out the door, go away again, I have a husband coming back in a few weeks. So why do I need to see this through – why am I so desperate for an ending, a beginning?

‘Why don’t you bath and get dressed?’ He comes toward her. ‘Let’s go out? Take a drive out then a late lunch, what do you think?’

Again, it would be so easy to say no, go, leave, again, and yet she can’t. As she showers she half imagines him leaving, sneaking out away, too scared, again, to see this through. Well, that would be another answer, she decides.

But instead, when she comes out, there he is, sitting in the lounge, having picked up a book, dressed in his clothes from the night before. ‘Still cleanish, well I dressed in them before coming, they’ll have to do.’

She could have taken a shirt off the row in Leo’s cupboard, but of course she can’t do that either. Yes, it probably would have fitted, but of course she can’t do that, the worst kind of deception.

He drives them to a small country restaurant beside a river. They eat in a large airy dining room, both again ravenous. She can’t believe how hungry they are again; they are silent, talk desultory. There are unsaid things, but nothing to be spoken about in public, so they eat bread with butter and she has a thick wedge of fish and equally thick wedges of chips and he has a steak and chips. After they decide to walk along the river that runs though the property. It is

still warm, early May, and the days gently warm. The river, a thin trickle in some places, light glinting off the greeny-brown water, both wearing dark glasses against the harsh sun. They are the only ones walking apart from a family: man, woman, two children. They both stare wistfully. She can only imagine what he's thinking. She puts her hands through his, 'You miss your daughter?'

Nodding, 'I miss them. I miss being a family, you know?'

Anna nodding back. 'It's something Leo and I have talked about – having children. He's never been very fussed about it, says it's my decision. I never wanted them; I don't know if you remember?' Paul, shaking his head. 'But lately, I've been starting to think, what am I missing out on, not having children, not having that experience? I don't say I want to get pregnant, to be honest I'm horrified at the thought, swelling up, giving birth ... but there are so many babies needing homes. So many orphaned babies...'

'How does he feel about that?'

'Fine. I think. Well he's never said he couldn't you know. I don't know. He's never said he's *against* adoption, put it that way. '

'They change your life, children. You'll see.'

'I'll see?'

Silence. They watch the river, ducks glide across it in the late afternoon sun.

She feels him breathing next to her, and it all seems so right, although so wrong. His chest, rising, she feels for the hardness of his muscles underneath his shirt. She's silent, looking at his profile. Why are you doing this, Paul, and I need to know: Would we have stood a chance, Paul?

But she doesn't ask the questions. She knows the answers, and knows too, that she doesn't want to know. Don't spoil a lovely afternoon, just watch the water and the ducks and Paul breathing in and out, and then, he will drive you home. And then? She shivers.

28

What's your marriage like, Anna? Why are *you* here?

It was the unasked, unanswered question that Sunday. The obvious – and yet he hadn't asked it, she hadn't tried a reply.

Now they sit, on this Wednesday night eating supper at yet another restaurant – this time they have gone to a fondue restaurant Anna knows. Sometimes she thinks it's as though she knows Johannesburg through the restaurants she chooses to frequent and the malls. It means, at times, that the city grows boring, monotone.

She's chosen this restaurant, the Swiss Inn, which serves fondue, with yet another nod to the past. This, though, she only realises later, when they are sitting in the warm, plushly red seats, dipping bread into the cheesy mixture. It comes back at her, suddenly, the night she had first held a fondue and the last as it turned out. She and Paul were not yet involved, as she supposed they'd say. She'd invited two friends to try a fondue with her, and he'd phoned, earlier, at a loose end. They had started going out to plays by then. Come over, she'd said, if you'd like to join us, we're having a cheese fondue.

They sit in a booth at the back of the restaurant. She's careful now – what if they meet someone she and Leo both know? She hasn't said anything to Paul, but he knows, her caution now, in the face of her earlier abandon and neglect of her life. He doesn't sit next to her or even close, he doesn't make an effort to hold her hands, or to show that, in any way, they are connected intimately. She sips at her glass of cold drink, no more wine for the moment. She has to keep sober, clear-headed. He'd phoned, she'd said yes, yet again, although this time the move was from his side. But, she isn't going to get tipsy, drink too much, fall into something, no idea what she is getting into.

And yet he shows no sign of unease, their bread meets, a piece falls in, and he plunges a fork in, digging around the cheesy mess, pulling faces, making it all light and humorous. It was what she had always loved about him, back then, what she still enjoys. The seriousness undercut with fun, with cheesy, pulled faces, the childish heart at the centre of him. Is Leo like that? Is that why she is with him? She sighs again, Leo, like food caught in a dry throat. Leo, her husband, the man who will be back in the country in two and a half weeks. Guilt, guilt made physical, it made it hard to swallow, talk, laugh. Why hasn't Paul asked about him? Why doesn't he talk about the future? It is as it had always been, back then, the lack of future. Paul has all the time in the world: and she, younger than him, has no time, no time at all. How strange. How she thought she never had time – to accomplish things, to live, to marry, to have children. And yet she does everything later, it seems, she'd had sex for the first time at twenty-three, married in her late thirties – and now children?

He is talking about taking a course in creativity now. He'd found it online, a course based on Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. 'I just feel,' he says now serious, 'if I can do a course this course, maybe I can free my creativity, you know? I mean it was there once, you know that, but with kids, overseas, coming back, I just can't seem to find it. I want to paint again.'

She nods encouragement. He says, 'You lose something when you get older, don't you find?'

'What's that?'

'What have I lost? A certain spontaneity, a certain trust in my abilities. When I was in my twenties I thought nothing of spending a whole night writing painting – now I think, what for. Can I afford to spend all that time on something so frivolous? And of course if I do I'll be tired in the morning, I'll be tired all day at work. Everything will suffer as a result. I wouldn't have thought that, back then.'

Back then. When they had first started going out. He even said he sometimes spent whole Friday nights playing computer games – not rising from his computer till two, three in the morning.

‘True,’ she replies. ‘It happens. You get more tired perhaps, you start shouldering all these responsibilities. But you’ve got to keep your sense of play, fun. Maybe doing the course will help you retain that? Remind you of it – and sometimes you have to be utterly selfish.’

Selfish. Is that what she is doing? They drive home along silent, dark streets, winding through the suburbs to get to her home. It’s early yet, they’d eaten quickly, he’d paid for their meal, too full for desserts, time to go. At the door, pausing, she asks him in, for a quick nightcap, just a quick one, she promises herself.

‘Work in the morning and all that!’ he smiles ruefully back at her. She pours him a beer, a small liqueur for herself, settles on one couch, he on the other. It is back to formality, a distance, nothing said, but she’s resolved. The thought of perhaps never seeing him again cuts through her and she shies away from the thought. The best would be to never see him again, she knows that. Cut him off like an addiction, and yet she knows she can’t do that, not yet, if ever. She can’t explain it. She’s tried, analysing it over and over.

She puts on music, flute music. He swallows beer, she has her liqueur. Time ticks on, noisily, time, slipping away, as always. She sees him glancing at the clock. A companionable silence, broken by the sounds of swallowing, music, time ...

Now or never ...

Never?

‘Paul?’ she asks. Turning to her. The face questioning. ‘Come sit next to me?’

A hesitation, then he moves along, ‘You sure?’ Arms next to her, arms reaching out to her.

‘Paul... I don’t know where this is going, or where it’s going to lead, or not lead ...’ he stiffens next to her. ‘But, I need to know, I want to know, did we stand a chance? All those years ago? What did I do wrong? Was it me? Remember that night, you said you were very fond of me, but you weren’t in love with me?’

Paul still stiff next to her. ‘Paul, I just want to know. I’m not blaming you or anything like that ... I just want to make some sense of it. Was it never going to be anything but whatever it was? Were you always going to be looking for someone else?’

‘Anna,’ his voice gentle. ‘Why do you always have this need to go back all the time? Isn’t it enough that it’s over, water under the bridge?’

‘No, it’s never enough.’

‘Okay, here’s a memory for you. Remember one of those nights, near the end, after the end? We’d gone to Quasimodo’s in Troyeville, at the top of your street? God, what a romantic setting – candlelight dripping, eating at antique chairs and tables which were for sale? I even remember you trying out the fish pie, eating it. Always saying you needed to lose weight and then ordering things like pies.’ He sighed, ‘Do you remember that place? That night? You seem to remember so much?’

Anna sighs, ‘I do. I just wonder what’s coming ...’

‘We sat there. We were both a bit awkward and silent that night. So many things had been said by then. I didn’t know what to make of you. I liked you, I liked you a lot. I didn’t know why you were always in such a hurry though. I wasn’t ready. But I liked you enjoyed going out with you, being with you. But love? You hadn’t said you loved me – but what did you expect me to say? No I wasn’t in love – I was still trying to get over Bryony and the whole fiasco and disappointment of that. I wasn’t ready to fall in love, but you didn’t know that, Anna. Hadn’t been through that.’

‘I realised, long after, that I loved you,’ Anna’s voice quiet. ‘Only after it was all over.’

‘I’d said to you that I couldn’t commit to you – you were so inexperienced, how could I be sure that you wouldn’t go off and find someone else, someone you were really in love with? I wasn’t sure of your motives, Anna. You seemed so desperate. What if I was just a convenient something?’

‘And that night?’

‘That night, we’d come back from our last trip to the Kruger, remember? I’d decided. I knew I didn’t love you, but I had decided that you deserved better. You had to know that. I didn’t want to let you go, I knew that, but I wanted us to go away that December together. I was going to talk to you about that. I’d even found a place. I wanted to try, to I don’t know, get to know you again, away from the pressures of the city, our memories.’

‘You didn’t say anything about that!’

‘No, before I had a chance to, and I was building up to it, you started speaking about us, how glad you were that it was over. Then you said it, you said it had been terrible and the worst was the sex, remember? You said the sex had been lousy.’

Anna, silent, a sinking, dropping feeling.

‘You know what that does to someone? I was still in love with Bryony, still battling to try and believe I was worth something – and you were helping with that, Anna, and I was getting there, somewhere. And then you said it, you crushed everything. I just couldn’t wait to get you home, to say goodnight, to leave you. You hurt me, Anna, you crushed everything. That was it for me.’

‘So, you’re saying if I hadn’t said that ...?’ Anna’s voice trails off. She remembered the night well – the romance of it amongst the distinct lack of romance. ‘Don’t you know how hurt I was in turn? I was dying inside. The only way I knew of protecting myself was by hitting out in turn. It was my protection. I wouldn’t have said that if I had thought ...’

‘But you did, Anna. You said it. You said it to hurt me. I knew that. But I also knew that I didn’t want to be with you then – if you could wound and hit out like that. If you cared so little about me that you’d say such a thing. I thought if you truly loved me or felt something for me, well then, you wouldn’t have said such a thing, no matter how hurt you were in turn.’

‘People say hurtful things when they are hurt in turn ...’

‘I know that, now, I realise how I must have hurt you then. But at the time, well, I was a different person. We both were. We’re older, maybe we’re wiser?’

‘I’ve spent years, years, wondering, thinking maybe, what did I do wrong. Were you the one ...’ Tears spilling down her face. ‘If I hadn’t said that one thing ...’

Paul spends the night.

29

Then there is a weekend away. It’s unexpected and unplanned. The beach cottages where she had stayed with her group of friends are suddenly available. A friend of a friend booked, paid, and can’t now go, does she want it, at such late notice, but perhaps if she has a friend who wanted to go away? A chance to escape a Johannesburg winter for a few days?

And Paul is available. It seems he isn’t yet done with her, the idea of them, still not reconciled with his wife, if ever. Still undecided about what to do. They both have leave due, they will go down on the Thursday, returning Monday night.

And so, they drive, leaving mid Thursday afternoon. Paul doing most of the driving through the five hours to the cottage on the north KwaZulu-Natal coast. Rain and lashing winds follow them almost all the way there and Anna worries that perhaps the inclement weather is going to dog them through the weekend. But, miraculously, it stops soon after they arrive.

The cottage smells musty and damp after the rains, but lighting a fire in the weathered grate soon gets rid of the fustiness. It is all as Anna remembers it from months ago – the rusticy of it, the weathered beams showing, the whitewashed walls. She had sat here, this past summer, with friends, and friends’ children missing Leo, missing Paul, wondering what it would be like to be here with just one other, walking the beach, hand in hand, sharing a bed, longing for more than she had at the time. Always longing, she thinks, always longing for something. Like some sort of affliction.

She hasn't planned on returning, and not in winter. Although the days are warm still, the nights are chillier, chilly enough that the caretaker had left bags of chopped wood to use in the old fireplace. They sit there now, sipping from a bottle of wine, eating cheese and crackers by its crackling hissing flames. They had stopped for a quick burger and chips earlier, but Anna found that had barely filled the gap. She was so hungry lately, she couldn't figure that out. She was ravenous. Nothing seemed to fill her and her clothes were becoming snug as a result. She throws the thoughts away, sipping, Leo due back in a week and a half, she pushes the thought away. For now there is the cottage, the high bed wrapped in its white bedspread with the colourful throws she remembered from last time – except she isn't in one of the single rooms now, but the main bedroom.

She hasn't spoken to Megan in days, hadn't seen her since that last time, crying in the parking lot and then at Megan. She feels guilty about that too – they see each other often, although work and its demands sometimes prevent them, but not to have spoken? They keep in touch via text messages and emails always, but she hasn't mentioned this thing with Paul. She can't risk it – she knows Megan would hear the crack in her voice, would know at once, there then. There will be plenty of time to tell her, once this is over.

They wake early, surprisingly after the lateness of their arrival, the drive through rain that took longer than they had first guessed. Paul running on the beach, 'Time to start getting in shape again,' he'd grinned that morning, 'it's been too long and nothing like running on the beach just after dawn. That clean feeling.'

Eating at the rough, round wooden table, more French toast, arms around her, 'I'll always remember you for your breakfasts of French toast,' as he draws her close in a hug.' That first icy chill then, that sense of foreboding, but it's nothing she hasn't guessed at deep inside somewhere.

'This is like the holiday we never had,' she tells him that afternoon as they stroll along the beach, hand in hand, carefree, careless. She knows she isn't likely to meet anyone here that she knows back home, the chances so slim.

‘It’s as though we’re together and the world doesn’t exist here, there’s nothing but us.’ Paul’s arm around her waist then, tightening imperceptibly.

The sun rises, sets, the days stretch on languidly; for once Anna felt as if she had time on her side. Curious as Leo is back so soon now, back home for good, she knows, and she has to break this thing apart, decide, and yet she refuses. This is a time not to think, decide, just to feel, be.

They rise, eat, walk on the beach, make a fish braai one night, eat at a ramshackle restaurant another, famous for its seafood, a recommendation from locals who ran the art gallery, where they go shopping one morning. The art doesn’t appeal to either one of them, but a pair of wooden bookends do. There’s only one pair, rough, wooden bookends carved thickly out of tree trunks. They buy it, as though they are a couple, thinks Anna as Paul pays for them. Admiring them back at the cottage, ‘They’ll need regular oiling back in the dry Highveld,’ the woman at the shop says, and she and Paul admire them, again, back at the cottage. He says he’s bought them for her, a ‘memento’ he says. She asks: ‘What if she split them, shared them?’

‘You can’t do that,’ he says. True, you can’t do that and what else would they do? Someone has to keep them. Yet more chills, they will part, surely, when this is over. But how can they? No, no, no thinking, you promised, she thinks to herself as she pours pasta into a pot that night, the sauce simmering with its feast of prawns and mussels and calamari rings. No thinking.

And it has been like that. Quiet contemplative days, beach days, catching the sun before it dips and the temperature drops, deciding what to eat, whether to go out or stay in, and the nights reading by the fire. There’s no TV in the cottage, just an old CD player with a radio, which they sometimes turn on. They are both content, both needing the break, the sea, the utter stillness of no pressure, no sounds, the lack of hurry. Talk is desultory light, they speak about the books they are reading, the music they play, the birds who sweep along the beach, calling. They don’t talk about after, beyond, a time when they will go back to Johannesburg, driving tar roads, back to lives, responsibilities, a husband. She doesn’t want to ruin the holiday, for once there will be no mad back and forth, no circling through the options,

winding herself tighter and tighter into knots. There is no solution, none that she can see, at least.

But on this last night, the urgency returns. She makes the pasta; they eat, as usual, with just music as the background to their thoughts. But already the tension is back. Her mind busy with thoughts for packing. They will be leaving early the next morning, making their way back home, slowly, through the Midlands, shopping, stopping for lunch, seeing a part of the world both haven't been to in years. They eat, but her mind is tying itself in knots again. As she brings bowls of ice cream to the table, spooning berries over the vanilla mounds, she says, 'Eat up, there's more, and it'll melt if we don't finish it.'

His hand at the nape of her neck then. Smiling at her. 'These last few days have been an absolute dream, you know that?'

'Mmm, for me too. You know that too.'

Leaning back in the couch. 'What's next?'

For an absurd moment she thinks he is asking her where they are going next, what holiday they will take next week or the week after.

'What's next?' she repeats. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing. That's such a bleak word, Anna. So harsh.'

She brings more ice cream to the table, more berries. They eat in silence. Leo's name hovers. Leo who thinks she is at a beach cottage with a friend, Leo who trusts her implicitly, enough to leave her for six months, secure in their new marriage.

'Why did you marry Leo, Anna? Were you in love, are you in love?'

She nods miserably. She wants to say, because he reminded me of you in so many ways. Even in looks. He was the closest thing I found to you.

But she doesn't say that, doesn't admit it out, loud something she's never said. Not to herself, not to Megan, and never ever to Leo. Words are wounds. She knows that now.

'I love him,' she says.

'You wouldn't leave him, you couldn't leave him ...' the question that has remained unasked.

'For you?'

'It's a natural enough question. Although I haven't wanted to ask it. Don't want to ask it.'

'Let me guess. It's the wrong time again?'

'I'm also still married, Anna, you haven't forgotten that?'

'I have, or I've tried to,' she laughed bitterly. 'You don't feel married to me.'

'I have a wife and two children ...'

'And ...'

'And, well, maybe my future lies with them.'

30

Packed, early, she leaves the key in the slot by the door, hidden under rush carpet, as instructed by the caretaker. It's another warm day as she leaves the cottage. The sea is that dark, almost wine blue, flecked slightly with waves, a slight wind blowing. She stares out. It's picture perfect.

Paul, carrying the cases to the car, watches her. And she turns and snapped him too, packing the car, another pale blue car, against the dark blue of the ocean. It's early and they are quiet.

They have planned to go straight home now. There is no point in lingering. Anna wants to be gone, she was even been up earlier than normal, impatient to be away, home, away from this man.

The sadness lingers in the car, present in the silences as Paul negotiates the gravel road leading away from the cottage, and the sea toward the road leading to the highway. Anna switches on the car radio, then slips in one of Paul's CDs, a Neil Diamond album, some things haven't changed so much, after all.

She looks back at the cottage one last time, she'll never be back, or at least never quite the way she'll want to be back there. It holds too many memories. Perhaps in time she can erase them, might have to, or their friends will wonder why she suddenly refuses to visit a place she has said she loves so much. But for now it is ruined, it will take time. Time, always time, its lack, its abundance.

She wants the years to roll on now, quickly, as she knows they will, they must. But instead, now, she has to be content with the contact of tyre on gravel, Neil Diamond singing *Sweet Caroline*, how many times has she heard that now, through Paul?

And in the silence, Paul's words, repeating, over and over. 'I saw her last week, Anna, that Thursday morning, the day we went away? I had to meet her. I think we're going to do it. But I didn't want to disappoint you, I'd said yes, and you know, I also needed time to think.'

'So, you went away with me, had sex with me, and all the time you were thinking about her, going back to her?' The voice a thin screech, she could barely get her words out.

'I didn't know. I just didn't know. I didn't know between the two of you – but I have a life with her, Anna, you know that. I have a child. She's said she's prepared to come back to Canada with me. A friend of hers was robbed, she's had enough. And her parents are prepared to come with, start a new life at their age. That was the biggest thing, not leaving them here.'

‘So, are you choosing a country or a woman or your children or what?’ The voice a thinner whisper now.

‘Anna,’ his hand in her hair again. ‘You’re married yourself, you’ve said you’re not going to leave Leo. You’ve said that. Didn’t you mean it? I thought ...’

‘Hopeless, hopeless ...’ shaking her head. ‘I couldn’t do that to him, us, you, me ... but we haven’t had a chance, Paul, we’ve never had a chance....’

‘But Anna, perhaps we never *did* have a chance?’

31

Tide rolls in, out, endlessly, ceaselessly, as familiar as time itself. She kicks off her shoes, sinks her toes into the sand, watches it squish around her them, now so swollen, her ankles thick, one of those many women who retain water, her gynaecologist says, not unkindly. The wind ruffles the light billowing dress she wears in the heat of summer, her stomach pushing out now, just a few more months to go.

The tide rolls in, the water is the temperature of a lukewarm bath, soft frilly waves caress the hot, swollen feet, she feels a rib through the thin skin of her belly. A man calls, softly, then louder, the sun blinds her temporarily, the voice coming closer and closer, till he’s there, arms around her and the future. All she has now.

Look, she says, showing him the shell she found earlier, its pearly pink colour pretty against her hand, which still dusted with sea sand.

Ends