

https://dspace.org/

Even Poodles Can Fly: a collection of essays, including a reflective essay

Thompson, Wesley

2020

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/31387

Thompson, Wesley Roland (2019) Even poodles can fly:a collection of essays including a reflective essay, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/31387>

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Even Poodles Can Fly

A Collection of Essays, Including a Reflective Essay

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

Wesley Thompson

0217023E

Declaration

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

_____

Wesley Thompson

20 June 2019

Contents

Coochie Coochie Coo | *4*

I, the Monster | *9*

Let's Be Penguins Together | *19*

Delinquency's Soundtrack | *25*

Windbag | *43*

Strange Light | *53*

Enchantless | *73*

Little Professor | *77*

The Dead Rat Under the Cap | *87*

Ambitious, Will Travel | *102*

The Misery of Cyan | *122*

Introvert's Response | *148*

Domestic Love Boat | *151*

The Furball Trinity | *164*

Chain Reaction | *171*

The Haze | *177*

Reflective Essay: Even Poodles Can Fly | *200*

Works Cited | *226*

Coochie Coochie Coo

In search of some of my early memories I:

Go swimming

There are swimming pools everywhere.

We don't have one at home but there are always pools at the parties my parents take me and my brother to at my mom's friends in Johannesburg.

My dad is drinking with the men but I bug him to come and swim and when he gets into the pool he turns into a sea pony.

I jump on his back and put my arms around his neck.

'Ready?' he asks.

He counts us down.

I take a deep breath and we dive under the water.

I hold on tight while we go from one side to the other.

When my dad is tired of being a sea pony he gets out and goes back to drinking.

There is always a shark in the water.

It lives in the big green plastic box on the lawn and it comes out of the hole in the side of the pool where the pipes are.

The deeper you go the darker the water gets and the more in danger you are of being eaten.

If the shark ever catches you he will swallow you whole or cut you up piece by piece and put a white bib on and eat you in his dining room with a knife and fork with some salt and pepper and tomato sauce.

And all that will be left of you will be your armbands floating on the water above a cloud of blood.

Go on holiday

We are at my mom's friend's house in a pine town at the sea.

My friend Clint* asks our friend Jo to show us her thingy.

She says fine.

We all know we are doing something bad so me and my brother and Clint and Jo go down the long driveway where it is quiet while the parents are sitting around the braai at the pool.

Jo says she will only show it to us if we show her ours.

We all chicken out except for Clint who pulls his pants down and starts jumping around and dancing and flapping his arms with his winky bouncing up and down and all around while he sings, 'La la la la la.'

We laugh.

Clint pulls his pants up and his face goes red. 'Your turn,' he says to Jo.

She pulls her skirt down but it is only for a split second.

My body feels hot inside all over.

Clint says it is not fair because he showed it to her for long and did a dance and everything.

Jo runs away.

We go to Shark World and sit on the stands while a creep wearing gloves cuts a shark open with a knife and its guts spill onto a silver table and it smells really bad.

* Some names have been changed throughout this collection of essays.

He reaches in and pulls more guts out.

He says they find all sorts of things in there like shoes and hair brushes and bottles and naughty children.

We make sandcastles at the beach.

We sit while my dad builds racing cars around us in the sand.

We are the drivers.

My dad says I am Airton Senna.

I am going to take off into the sea or crash into a wall at Imola.

He buries us up to our necks and we all laugh for hours.

Say 'Coochie coochie coo'

Our teacher at nursery school gets us to draw things.

I always draw animals because I love them.

She says if we pick our noses and eat it we will be eaten from the inside out by worms.

There is a boy who pees at the toilet with his pants all the way down around his ankles.

He doesn't know that you don't have to pull your pants *all* the way down.

Everyone laughs at him.

Our teacher tells the class not to laugh.

The boy is me.

There is half a horse that we sit on in front of a picture of fields for our photos.

A creepy man with bad teeth and long hair and a stinky breath tries to make me laugh but I don't want to.

My mom comes over and wipes my cheeks and asks me nicely to smile and I do it for her.

When I walk in Meyerton with her I only step on the pavement blocks with corners that touch otherwise I will slip through and fall and die.

Pretty women smile at me and wink when they walk past.

I try to wink back but I can't.

Both my eyes just close at the same time and the women laugh.

Every time I see a cute animal I say, 'Coochie coochie coo.'

I start saying it whenever I see fluffy animals I want to pet like puppies and kittens and baby penguins and panda bears and koalas and hairy beavers with teeth.

Play with balloons

My mom keeps throwing my colourful shoes away.

She says they are old and smelly.

I get angry and dig them out of the bin.

My dad tells the best bedtime stories.

In them there are knights and penguins and horses and children who fall asleep.

When me and my brother ask him where he gets the stories from he says they are just nonsense stories.

When my dad farts and I laugh he looks at me and says, 'What? I kicked him out because he didn't pay the rent.'

The room we all stay in has a very high roof made out of grass.

When it rains the water drips through and there are tinking pots everywhere.

At night the red dot of the TV turns into the eye of a monster that eats children.

Sometimes we stay at Nana and Pops and there are monsters on the ceiling and the walls.

They change shape all the time and howl when the wind blows hard before it rains.

When you finally fall asleep the tall clock that Pops built chimes and wakes you up and then you lie awake for hundreds of years.

Me and my brother look in my dad's toiletry bag and find little square packets with round things of all different colours inside.

We take them to him and ask what they are.

He looks cross and just says, 'Balloons.'

We ask him if we can play with them.

He says fine but only one each because they are very expensive balloons.

I, the Monster

I, the Monster, am at my desk working on an edit when a text from my mother comes through to say that my grandmother isn't doing well, she's not going to make it, and already I feel nothing.

'Let me know if you need me there,' I reply.

I soon forget about it and get lost in my work for a few hours until another text comes through to say that my grandmother is gone.

I leave for the old-age home.

Henley on Klip Retirement Village used to be a hotel. I have an early memory of the old place with its pool, the bar, and the green lawns leading down to the Klip: a picnic, the smell of beer on my father's breath, a packet of Camels on a blanket, cool drink in plastic cups, Simba chips and cold meats on rolls, and ducks squabbling for scraps.

The buildings are much the same now. Instead of hotel rooms there's a frail-care unit. Go inside and you feel the life drain from you. Old people sit in wheelchairs in front of a television, spoon-fed soup by nurses, yellow muck dribbling down their chins and onto their bibs. Others sit together at tables saying nothing, staring into space. Everywhere, eyes follow you, asking for a piece of your youth. Just a little, they say, I could do so much more with it than you will ever do.

I can't help wondering if death is a great gift to these people, but then I remember that they are the lucky ones, with access to 24-hour emergency medical services and personal butlers. This is the life after life that they worked so hard for.

There's still a swimming pool, but only the ducks use it now.

The wing where my grandmother lived is quiet. My aunt is leaning against the wall in the passage. My uncle is there too, standing to one side. I greet them and say that I'm sorry for their loss and then I go into the room where my mother is alone with the body, which has a sheet drawn over its face. A candle is burning on the bedside table, and there's a bunch of flowers on the body's chest.

I hug my mother and say that I'm sorry. She seems okay. I go outside and ask my aunt if I can help with any of the arrangements but she says no, the undertaker is on his way, everything is being taken care of.

We hang around whispering in the passage. The nurses come and go. Some stop to give us condolences or a hug and they say, 'I'm so sorry for your loss.'

I, the Monster, think but don't say that I haven't lost anything.

The undertaker arrives and I recognise him. He was my father's undertaker, a tall, soft-spoken Afrikaner.

After giving us a few minutes to say goodbye, the undertaker puts the body on a gurney and wheels it out to the Avbob van parked outside. We follow. After he loads the body into the back he turns to us and he shakes my hand.

'I know you,' I say.

'Yes, Thompson,' he says, but I'm thinking that he doesn't remember, he gets this often – how many people stop him in the supermarket and think of those who they've lost when they see his face?

'We shouldn't make a habit of meeting like this, though,' he jokes. 'Next time we bump into each other it should rather be in a pub over a beer.'

I laugh, and we shake hands again before he gets into the van and drives off with the body of the person who has just died.

A day or so later we return to the old-age home to fetch my grandmother's things. While I'm packing an old tapestry into my car two chipper seniors out on a stroll stop and one says, 'New arrival?'

'No,' I say, 'someone's checked out.'

'Ah,' the woman says, 'life's short.'

The other one, though, says, 'You have so much ahead of you. Much more than us.'

She smiles, but it feels like an accusation.

My deaf mother asks if I'll read her eulogy on her behalf at my grandmother's funeral and I, the Monster, say no, I can't do it, I won't speak.

My mother asks why, and I try to explain. I did nothing for my grandmother. I visited her once in the fifteen years she lived at the old-age home. She hated me. I hated her. To her I was a cheeky little bastard who had no manners and no respect for his elders. She was probably right. It was a case of bad blood. Should I now, just because she's dead, pretend to love her?

'Will you be a pallbearer?' my mother asks.

'No,' I say, 'I don't want to.'

She asks if I'll not even do it for her. To help her?

I try to explain my position again. Asking me to carry my grandmother and to speak at her funeral would be asking me to lie about who I am, about who I was to my grandmother and about who she was to me. It would be asking too much.

My mother turns away.

I'm young, maybe seven or eight, and sick with the kind of flu that attacks your whole body, and makes your stomach turn, and I'm sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table. We're alone. My parents are working, my brother is at school, and my grandfather is working in his shed. My grandmother puts a bowl of cooked oats in front of me. She adds milk and sugar.

'I can't have milk,' I say.

'Nonsense, eat your oats.'

'The milk will make me sick.' I push the bowl away.

'You are talking absolute rubbish. Don't be ungrateful. Eat your oats.' She pushes the bowl in front of me and stands there, glaring.

I take a spoonful and swallow. She goes to the sink. On the second or third bite I vomit all over the table and the floor.

She runs over and starts shouting. 'What the hell have you done?'

'I feel sick,' I say. 'I couldn't help it. It was the milk.'

'Clean your filth up!' She throws a dishcloth at me.

I get onto my hands and knees to clean the puke up, but while I'm down there I puke some more.

I'm maybe nine or ten and I have a new bike. It's a purple BMX. My brother and I have made a ramp in the driveway at my grandparents' house and we're taking turns ramping as high as we can. I go. I hit the ramp hard and the moment I'm in the air I know something's not right, I'm going too high too fast and I wipe out, grazing my elbow on the gravel. There's blood streaming from it, and an open wound, from which a piece of sharp stone sticks out. My brother rushes me inside to my grandmother, the only adult around.

Before she's seen the wound she says, 'Stop crying like a little baby.' Then, when she's had a look: 'Shut up. It's not the end of the world. You won't die.'

My parents arrive and take me to the doctor who removes the stone and sews the wound up.

My brother and I are a little older, sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table for lunch. We've just arrived after school. My grandmother gives us fried fish and chips with peas. We're done but we have to wait for her to finish eating. To leave would be bad manners, the worst kind. We want to go outside and play.

One of us farts. It's a small, pea-sized one but it comes out nervous and high-pitched.

My grandmother puts her knife and fork down and looks at us with big eyes. 'Who did *that*?' she asks.

Neither of us claims it.

After a silence she goes on eating.

One of us farts again. This time, it's louder, braver, it smells bad, and it seems to ask, 'May we be excused?'

'Ag no man!' My grandmother shouts. Her Afrikaans accent is pronounced now. 'Who made a bloody … *stinker*?'

My brother and I burst out laughing.

'Who did a stinker?'

We can't hold it in. We laugh so that our stomachs hurt. I don't know why it's so funny, but I suspect it has something to do with the word 'stinker'. It sounds like an ancient word. It sounds like a word that she only used reluctantly because she didn't want to say 'fart'. It's as if she is dressing the fart up in a little suit with a bow

tie and calling it Mr Fart. Signor Fart, from a bygone era. It also gives the fart a distinct green tinge in my mind.

The more we laugh the angrier she gets, the redder is her face.

Finally, she goes back to eating, and one of us farts again, this time silently, and we wait for it to show up on her face.

When it does she chases us out into the yard. For the rest of the afternoon we make farting sounds and say, 'Who did a stinker?'

I'm in high school and we're at a family lunch eating bowls of pudding in the garden, all the cousins together. We're having what in the family is called 'Marais Special', a sort of trifle that my grandmother makes, a sloppy mix of Marie biscuits, jelly, homemade custard, cream, condensed milk, and cottage cheese.

One cousin, a few years older than me and my brother, says, 'Guys, let's be honest, who really likes Marais Special?'

We look up at each other over our bowls as if someone has committed a heresy. We aren't sure we want to be part of exposing this dirty little family secret. For years we've been pretending not just to like the stuff but to be mad about it.

'Yes! Nana brought Marais Special! *Nana brought Marais Special!*' we always shouted while jumping up and down like crazed dogs whenever she brought a giant bowl of the stuff to family functions.

Then, one by one, we come clean.

'Never liked it.'

'Too much gross cheese.'

'The texture is weird.'

'It smells funny.'

My turn: ‘Tastes like puke.’

We’re at a church in De Deur to bury my grandfather. Outside, the male cousins gather. We’re to carry the coffin in and give eulogies. One of my older cousins hands each of us a shiny blue tie.

‘The Marais family ties,’ he announces, dangling the pun in the air.

My brother and I exchange a look. We can’t say it out loud. *These ties are fucking stupid*. They’re our cousin’s idea of showing our family’s strength. Grandfather’s strong young men are coming together to give him the send-off he deserves. But fine, we wear them.

We carry the coffin into the church and place it near the front. After the minister, each of us speaks. When my turn comes, I focus on a random memory of how my grandfather would criticise me for eating my rusks dry and for not dunking them in coffee. The moral: he was just looking out for me.

We carry the coffin out to the hearse and place it in the back when my grandmother begins to wail. This is not some usual sobbing that you’ll hear at funerals. At least, not at funerals I’ve attended. This is howling.

‘No! No! No, Jesus, why have you taken my Oscar away from meeeee!’

Some of us go over to help. My grandmother looks like she is about to fall but is waiting for someone to fall on. She claims me.

‘No! No! No, Oscar, why are you leaving meeeee!’

I hold her up as the hearse leaves the church grounds.

‘Nooooo! No Oscar, no Jesus!’

She pauses between sobs to look up into the faces of everyone around her before she goes on again.

‘Oscar, come back! Jesus, come back!’

In a way, my mother has prepared me for this by telling me that my grandmother can be a dramatic mourner. My dad calls it ‘attention seeking’.

I am living at home when my grandmother’s funds run out. Oscar left her a significant amount in investments, but frail-care isn’t cheap. My mother has decided to take my grandmother in.

My grandmother settles quickly. She has a full-time nurse who helps her around and prepares her food. It doesn’t take long for the complaining to start.

‘The food is terrible. *Disgusting! Rubbish!* She doesn’t know what the hell she’s doing. I want another nurse,’ my grandmother says.

My mother assures her that the nurse is qualified and deserves a chance, but the complaining only escalates.

My mother decides to make the food herself. She cooks enough oats for two, eats one portion and serves the other to my grandmother, who hardly tastes the food before spitting it back into the bowl.

This is the last straw.

My mother says, ‘I want you out of my house!’

My grandmother begins her funerary wail. ‘No! No! Don’t kick me out!’

My mother sends her to the room, along with her nurse, to pack her things.

‘Nooooo! My darling, I don’t want to gooooo!’

I stand in the passage and watch. My grandmother clutches my mother, but my mother lets her slip down to her knees, and then to her ankles.

My father, who is battling cancer, loses it in the next room. He comes in and silences my grandmother with one shout: ‘Get the fuck out of here now!’

At my grandmother's funeral, before the service starts, I go over to my cousin who, red-faced, with wet cheeks, is handing out funeral pamphlets near the door, and I ask her if I can see one.

'No, you can't,' she says sarcastically, handing me a pamphlet.

I decide to sit in the pews opposite the family, next to friends of friends who probably don't know what they're doing here. People who never met my grandmother. It's Friday, though, an easy half day, and there are snacks.

The minister speaks, and then my cousin delivers the eulogy.

I can hear but not feel the words, even as his voice trembles and threatens to give way. I've known my grandmother for almost as long as my cousin has, so why can't I feel anything? He breaks down and has to pause before he can go on. He talks about her cooking. Her fried fish and chips with peas. Her rusks. Her Marais Special. He speaks about what a wonderful person she was.

All I can do is sit there alone on the non-family side of the church and wonder if there's something seriously wrong with me, like *psychotic* wrong, for not feeling anything, or if maybe there's this broader problem: death shames honesty. Maybe when we bury our dead we resurrect them as martyrs just in case they're watching. If we are honest, there's a price to pay.

Still, maybe I imposed this exile on myself and should have just said the damn eulogy and carried the coffin.

After the funeral I phone my brother, who is working in Port Elizabeth and who couldn't attend the service, and I tell him that I refused to speak at the service and to be a pallbearer.

‘I don’t blame you,’ he says. ‘I would have done the same.’

At least then, I think, there would have been two of us sitting in the non-family pews. Itching to go outside, we, the Monsters, would have been making little green pea-sized farts and whispering, ‘Who did a stinker?’

Let's Be Penguins Together

We were walking in the woods on the golf course near Talia's house and I was holding her hand looking up at the tips of the pine trees when I said to God in my head, 'Please Lord, can me and Talia be married and live like penguins together forever?'

We could live in my treehouse, which was just a board nailed to the branches of the big tree next to the driveway, but I would build it into the biggest palace ever, with a lounge with a TV with games, a bedroom filled with teddy bears and toys, and a bakery where a little man would make us Chelsea buns and cakes and chocolate eclairs whenever we wanted, and he would sleep in a little hut on the lower branches, within whistling distance, and not be unionised.

There would be pulleys and ropes and buckets to send things up and down and chutes to send letters to the people in the house on the ground saying sorry, we can't make it to school today or tomorrow, or ever again, because penguins are actually born knowing how to fish already, so we'll go catch crabs and dolphins in the river and braai them on our balcony.

We would have ketties to shoot stones at robbers and semi-automatics to keep parents or teachers out, or we could always work up a fresh batch of burning tar to pour on their heads, like they do in castles.

I was once the Karate Kid for about a few minutes when my brother let me wear the bandana, but then he took it back and fucked me up even though I pleaded reasonably with him that once I took the bandana off I immediately became Mr Miyagi, and how can you pick on a poor disgraced old Okinawan immigrant who lost his pregnant wife to a vicious whale attack?

I was also the best Rambo because I could climb trees with my Uzi slung by a string around my buff chest, and my lip curled half way up my face when I spoke slowly to my enemies or people I had left behind in my old life as a school teacher with a wife and kids, long ago, when I was still welcomed by the government in my native country and before my acting career fell apart.

So I would kill any motherfucker who tried to climb up the tree to hurt Talia or steal her citizenship.

For money I could be a great carpenter of men like the baby Jesus or my Pops who made boring but highly functional chairs, desks, and frames for Nana's excellent tapestries, in his workshop that smelled of sawdust and furtive emissions, with the light coming in through the window with thousands of shiny little insect bears always dancing in the beams or spreading disease, etc.

I once tried to make a real pirate's ship with sails and cabins and fore- and aft-decks and little prisoners in the hold, with sails made from cloth, and ropes made from string, but it turned out to be more like a block of wood with holes in it.

When I brought it to school one day to show my teacher, who I was in love with, she quickly changed the subject, even though she could clearly see that my hands had been guided by the holy spirit.

This was the same bitch I picked purple flowers for one day. I carried those flowers carefully with me in the car all the way to school, and I gave them to her, but she said they were weeds and threw them out the window.

I never thought of marrying her again because I knew she'd be high maintenance, although I didn't stop to think that by the time I was 20 she'd be way past the spring time of her life, an old hag, anyway.

After that I wanted to be a farmer or a game ranger who cared for injured or lonely animals, or any animal that had been shunned by a romantic interest, that I would start a foundation or a non-profit for, and I would then marry my cousin instead.

If farming or conservation didn't work out for me I would be an artist or poet.

I had already written some great stories about Nibbles the clever hamster who shaved his head and figured out an extremely complicated way to escape from his maximum-security cage to murder his jailers with a pen-knife before eating his own babies and throwing himself to his death from the top of the bedroom cupboard.

If being an artist didn't work for me I could always be a detective.

Me and my best friend Richard once almost solved a crime where some poor little asshole's schoolbag was stolen and we made drawings of the footprints we found in the sand near the bathroom where it had gone missing and took these pictures to our teacher and told her to line everyone up at assembly and check their footprints, but she never did.

If I ever got fired from my job as a detective for sleeping with my secretary or all of my suspects, or if I went bald and got turned into a caricature by bad acting in a black-and-white Tarantino film, I could always become a famous ghost hunter.

Then me and Richard, who by now would be my little bitch, fetching me coffees and lighting my smokes or holding my willy for me while I peed, would finally solve the case of the headless motorbike rider who rode at a certain time every night on a quiet street in Apple Orchards scaring virgins.

The rider had been decapitated by a telephone pole that fell off the back of a truck but me and Richard believed he was actually a good ghost trying to ask for directions home who was just misunderstood for being headless.

He was probably also very hungry and looking forward to his mother's cooking.

So we'd help him find his head, give him a stiff drink, stand him on his bike upright enough to ride home and tell him to follow the stripy white line till he reached his gate and text us when he was safely there.

I always knew when a ghost was around because I saw in a book that when dogs and cats bark at fresh air it's actually a ghost.

And it could even be someone you really liked who, you would never guess, would in later years turn out to be a pervert – like Bill Cosby – just watching you whenever you're naked or taking a shit.

If that didn't work out I could just sit around the treehouse all day drinking beer and watching sports while Talia sold her body for money to a corporation, even if that meant her sitting upright in a chair at a desk all day answering a telephone or typing up minutes or doing online shopping for sexy cactuses for her boss's lovers.

And I would still love her even if she grew into a fat old cow with hairless armpits who just complained all day, which would be fine by me as long as she paid the bills and kept the porch spotlessly swept at all times, because that's something I'm very particular about.

Once we were married, I would tell Talia all of my secrets as long as she told me hers.

Like how once I went for a walk in the neighbourhood with my sheep dog, Rennie, and I got lost and my dad had to come find me, and in the car on the way home my dad said I was 'slightly too old' to be going around in the nude.

He asked me why I'd been naked and I said I was going on an adventure and it just seemed like a much better idea to go on an adventure without clothes on.

Or like how my brother says I once made a poo in the bath.

I was too small to remember it but he says he was playing with our bath toys, the diving men and the shark, when something small and brown floated past him and he looked up at me opposite and started howling, jumped out, called a parent and made far too much fuss over such a small thing.

I asked him if it wasn't just a small brown ship?

When he said no I told him he was definitely the one who did it.

Or how I once peed on the patio at my cousin's house and someone slipped and fell hard and I said it was the mangy Afghan.

Or how I never played with the boys but stayed inside to play Barbies with the girls instead.

I was always Ken and they were all my wives.

I drove around in my little car to all of their houses, except for the one that was a hobo, and they never knew about each other until one day the blonde one caught me taking the hobo to the skate park, and then they all found out about each other and started screaming and ruining each other's careers, and I was just left wondering why Ken was so orange?

But actually a lot of stuff would have made me the perfect husband.

I collected nearly all the X-Men cards, and Talia could have shared them with me if she wanted to.

I once nearly found a four-leaf clover and one day I would finish the whole of Pac Man.

I could do this thing where I could almost detach my arms from my shoulder sockets, and I could push my stomach out so that it looked like I was either fat or starving to death.

I could talk like a penguin with a purring sound coming from my mouth, and I could walk like one too, because penguins were my favourite animal to look at but chickens were my favourite to eat.

If Talia agreed to come and be a penguin with me forever I'd write her a poem, draw her a picture, and pick pretty purple flowers for her every day, and I would never poo in the bath or go missing naked again.

Delinquency's Soundtrack

You just a

This silky woman's voice comes on and I just stand there in the middle of the school hall staring towards the side where the available ones are sitting on plastic chairs talking to each other and laughing and chewing gum and watching the couples link up and go round in circles in slow motion on the floor that's lit by the disco ball as it spins.

> Just let me go
>
> Baby set me free
>
> Don't look back no
>
> Don't look back at me

It's a slow one and I think it's from a movie.

> You won't see tears
>
> You won't find pain

I want to go over and ask one of them to dance but my legs won't move. There's Melanie, top of the class, but she's too pretty. Talia's nice and has frizzy blonde hair but she's too busy talking to the hot one in dungarees called Erin who has a small nose and hair that's always in a ponytail.

> Cos I've loved and hurt

Erin looks over and smiles at me and then says something to Talia.

> And I'll never love again

I start moving closer but the song stops and I stop dead so I just stand there waiting.

So I just stand there waiting and then there's a beat. I don't know this song and I don't have any moves for it. Erin and Talia are watching so I raise both fists and move them up and down and side to side a bit like Mandela.

A woman sings.

You just a small prick man

Huh?

You just a small prick man

Huh?

You you you oh you you you you

You just a

You got a

You just a small prick man

Talia points at me and they start laughing.

I stop. My clothes are stupid. I'm wearing this black shirt from my cousin with 'Halley's Comet' written on the front under a picture of an asteroid shooting through space.

Teeny tiny weenie winey incey spidey small prick man

I've seen my cousin's one and it's got hair and everything.

How you expect me to find that fuckin thing?

You got a microscope on you baby?

I want to hide but there's nowhere to go and I can't just leave because that will make it worse. I'm too scared to look up so I just stand there doing nothing and staring at my stupid shoes.

Aw shucks look it's a baby jelly tot

You gotta be fuckin me

Put yo junk back sweetie

I ain't goin nowhere near no toothpick honey

Finally it stops and a slow song comes on and I look up.

Erin's gone.

Lovesch Schkies

Just the two of us are on the fields after school and Damon starts us off with his verse holding an invisible mic to his mouth.

I hear the echo in your voice

I read all your happy thoughts

He uses his free hand to touch his temple.

You're an open book to me

You'll never be lonely, falling, I'll catch your fears

Wipe away those happy tears

He runs his fingers down his cheek as if they're teardrops.

And while I'm only human

I'll never hurt you baby

He closes his eyes and makes a fist that he holds up above his head and I come in with the chorus singing into my mic.

There's no song like sadness under love's skies

Ask why

Love's skies

Now comes my verse and Damon stands back with his arms folded like he's the Walkerville Show talent competition judge and I pretend he's Erin and look into his eyes as I sing.

When I'm done we do the chorus twice and end on 'Love's skies' slowly fading out.

It's my first time at Damon's house and I'm here for a sleepover because we're going to sing in a competition at the Walkerville Show. It's a double storey but outside there's no lawn. It's only dry veld, dust, rubble, broken rusty things and eucalyptus trees.

'How many push ups can you do?' Damon asks.

I shrug.

'Count me.' He gets down and starts doing the fastest push ups I've ever seen.

'One … two … three …'

He speeds up until I can hear him breathing and he finally stops at seventy-five.

He gets up. 'You go.'

I only get to ten and my arms start to burn and I stop at twenty. I get up out of breath. 'How do you do so many?'

He shrugs. ‘Come, I want to show you something.’

I follow him into the house. It’s dirty with old furniture everywhere that has holes in it but it feels comfortable and warm and there are great beams of light coming in through the windows and falling across the wooden floors like tree trunks with specks of dust floating through them.

We go into his parents’ room and he shuts the door behind us. He goes over to a dressing table and opens a drawer. He carefully takes out a jersey and puts it on the table and then pulls out a magazine that he holds up to me. It says ‘Hustler’ and there’s a picture of a woman in her underwear on the cover. I’ve never seen a dirty magazine in real life before.

‘Cool! Can I look at it?’ I ask.

Maybe he hears something because he suddenly looks scared as he puts the magazine and the jersey back as carefully and quickly as he can and he closes the drawer and runs to the door. He opens it and we get out just in time. His older brother and sister and their friends are home. They come into the lounge and sit down and drink and smoke and ignore us.

In Damon’s room upstairs he shows me the six-pack of cans he’s been hiding in a bag under his bed.

‘Cider,’ he says and gives me one. ‘Let’s get fucken wasted boy!’

I wait for him to open his and then I open mine.

‘Cheers.’ He raises his can and I raise mine and then he starts to down the stuff.

I take a sip. It’s sweet and bitter at the same time. It’s not that bad but the bubbles hurt my throat and I can’t drink as fast as Damon.

‘Don’t be a pussy,’ he says. ‘Down it boy!’

‘Fuck you!’ I say and down the whole thing and burp afterwards with tears in my eyes.

Damon finishes his and throws the can on the floor and squashes it with his foot. I chuck mine down and stomp on it and he hands me another one.

‘Where did you get them?’ I ask.

‘Who cares?’ He shrugs. ‘Stole them, boy.’

I start laughing.

‘Fuck you!’ he says but he starts laughing too.

‘You dronk poes!’ I say.

We stagger around and fall over and get up and sip in between laughing.

We finish another one each and go downstairs to ask for a lift to the show.

There are stalls everywhere with all kinds of things on sale that look weird and sad, like teddy bears with eyes missing and little ceramic ducks, but the old people trying to sell the stuff look even weirder and sadder.

Damon has his bag with him with the cans and I follow him around. He goes to a table and picks up a vase and asks the lady how much. She tells him the price and he says, ‘Fuck you!’ and we run away.

We start saying fuck you to everyone we pass and we fall over and crawl around on the floor like drunks. We start a new thing where we run past kids with cotton candy and snatch fistfuls of the stuff that we shove into our mouths as we run away.

We go to the tent where the music’s coming from and hide behind it. Damon opens another cider and we down it in turns and then we go inside.

Someone says over the speakers in a fake American accent, ‘Next we have a little country for y’all from Erin and her friend Monica from Thornbush Primary School who’re gonna sing us “Moonshine Mo”. Good luck, gals!’

We stand near the entrance falling over and laughing but we stand up straight when Erin walks onto the stage. She’s wearing tiny denim shorts with cowboy boots. She’s got a cowgirl hat and a checkered red-and-white shirt on that’s tied into a knot above her stomach.

The music comes on and Erin and Monica start dancing. Monica pretends to play a violin while Erin sings but I can’t really hear the words.

Wedadadodanatona Mo

I bin here just a lyin lo

Whenyadone cheatin whenyadone so

Whenyadone a cheatin ol moonshine Mo

They have the whole place standing and clapping and cheering by the end.

‘Hey drunkie, shu we go’n do our song?’ I ask Damon.

He’s swaying. ‘Fuck you n your song boy!’

We laugh and go out of the tent. It’s dark. We start running around and looking for kids with cotton candy but then we spot Erin and Monica walking.

We sneak up on them and I jump up and say into Erin’s ear, ‘Wedadadodanatona Mo?’

She turns around and looks at me like there’s something wrong with me and grabs Monica’s hand and walks away quickly.

Damon and I start singing.

Theresch no schong like schadnesch under lovesch schkies

Aschk why

Lovesch schkies

I said the bell's gotta go

Damon's only told a few of us about it and we're standing in a circle in the school quad and leaning in so that no one from outside can see what we're doing. There's Matt and Athol and there's two new kids from Ennerdale called Maximus and Byron. Max is a big guy and Byron's funny.

'Bring it out, man, let's see,' Matt says.

Damon lifts up his jersey and untucks his shirt and pulls it out. He opens it on a random page. There's a woman squatting with her legs wide open and we can see everything.

'Poes!' Byron says.

It looks weird.

'Turn the page, sannie, let's see more,' Byron says.

We lean in closer and Damon flips to a close-up of a man with his thing in a woman's thing like he's growing into her or growing out of her.

'Moer!' Byron says.

'Hey guys, what's that?' We hear someone but it comes from outside the circle.

We turn to see but we keep the circle closed as Damon slips the magazine under his shirt and tucks it in.

There's a small kid called Preston hanging around. Preston is also from Ennerdale but he's not like Byron. He's polite and he speaks differently to Byron and Max like he's trying to be more English than them.

'Wat soek jy, poes?' Byron says facing Preston.

'No, nothing,' Preston says. 'I just wanted to see what yous were doing.'

‘Jy weet niksie, laaitie,’ Byron says. ‘We’re making music mos.’ Byron cups his hands over his mouth and starts to beatbox but then he stops and says, ‘You don’t belong here with the manne. Go eat your sarmies with the girls.’

Byron starts the beat again and Damon and me rap our song that we made up.

I said the bell’s gotta go
But the teacher said no
N I was huffin n puffin
N goin so wild
That I made a child

Preston’s gone so Byron stops and says, ‘Ou Preston’s a little poes, man. I don’t trust him.’

We all agree. Preston’s like a little old man trapped in a kid’s body.

‘We’ll meet after school behind the cricket nets,’ Byron says and we go to class.

The science teacher Mr Joubert comes into our class and tells our teacher that he needs to speak to Damon. He starts going through Damon’s bag. He looks angry like he’s looking for something and can’t find it. He tells Damon to go with him and Damon doesn’t come back.

We’re behind the cricket nets and Damon comes and tells us what happened.

‘Mr Joubert took me to Mr Martin’s office. He said that he knew I had a dirty mag.’

‘Moer!’ Byron says. ‘Did they find it?’

Damon starts rubbing his stomach and smiling and we all know it’s there.

‘Jou donner!’ Byron says. ‘I bet you it was that little poes Preston. Ou Grootbek. I think he’s having an affair with Mr Yohbear.’

Byron says ‘Joubert’ like ‘Yohbear’ and he also says ‘health’ like ‘yealth’ and ‘help’ like ‘yelp’.

Damon brings the magazine out and we start looking. On one of the pages there’s a picture of a black guy with a dick so long it could be the length of one of our arms. His name is Long Dong Silver and his dick is sixty-five centimetres!

The Fresh Prince

We’re in design and technology class and the teacher’s just left so we’re making paper jets and talking but we can’t leave our seats in case the teacher comes back.

Angelique is sitting across from me. We’re going out. I saved up money that I got from washing my dad’s car and doing stuff at home and I used it to buy her a strawberry marshmallow chocolate. I wrote her a letter and asked her if we could be boyfriend and girlfriend and she said yes.

She asks me if she can see my hands so I give them to her and she holds them and looks at them for a long time. Then she laughs and I ask her what’s so funny.

She leans closer so that no one else can hear and she says, ‘Did you know that you can tell how big a man’s thing is by looking at his hands? My cousin told me. The thumb is the size of it when it’s soft and the middle finger is how big it is when it gets hard.’

I pull my hands away and hide them under the desk.

We'll do it behind the design and technology class after school. Damon's going to do it with Chloe and I'm going to do it with Angelique. It's the perfect place because there's a hedge on one side and walls on the other side so no one can see us.

I'm so nervous that I'm shaking but Damon seems fine. He's standing with Chloe close to me and Angelique and we're all laughing because we've never done it before.

'I'm gonna get fresh with you, girl.' Damon leans in and kisses Chloe on the cheek. He stays close to her but she giggles and leans back as if she's scared. 'Let's do it, babe. Let's graunch.'

'Okay,' Chloe says.

They start kissing. Their lips are closed but then they open them a bit and we can see their tongues sliding all over. They stop and step back and Chloe looks like she's just gotten off the Miner's Revenge at Gold Reef City and Damon wipes his mouth with his hand but he's smiling.

It's quiet for a bit. I look at Angelique and she looks at me and we start giggling. I step closer and hold her hands. Mine are shaking but hers are soft and warm.

'Do it,' Chloe says. 'Ange, you'll like it. Everyone's doing it.'

My body won't move.

'Don't be a pussy.' Damon leans in and kisses Chloe again.

Then they start counting us down. 'Three … two … one …'

I close my eyes and lean in and it takes a long time but our lips come together and there's a spark like when you drag your feet on a carpet and then touch someone and you feel a shock. We open our lips and it feels like there's a slimy thing swimming around in my mouth but it feels nice and smooth.

We pull apart and I take a deep breath.

Byron passed a secret note around during science class to say we must all meet during break so here we are behind the cricket nets standing in a circle waiting for Byron to tell us why.

'Gents, Mr Yohbear is a poes,' he says.

Everyone nods. He's been giving us jacks in front of the whole class for nothing, for breathing oxygen, especially me and Matt because we sit together and sometimes make jokes but most of the time we try figure out stuff he doesn't explain like how to do the homework or what a Bunion Burner is.

'Die poes moet gebliksem word,' Byron says. 'We need to stick together. We need to protect each other like brothers.'

We nod or say yes.

'We need to form a gang. Not some bedonnered gang but a real one, like in Eldos or Ennerdale. That's where real kak happens, sannie.'

It sounds like a good plan.

'Who's in?'

We all raise our hands.

'Right, gents. Matt and Athy, yous will be our soldiers. It's one of the most important jobs. Yous run things on the ground. Maxy, you are our bodyguard.'

Maximus folds his arms across his chest that looks thick all puffed out.

Byron turns to me and Damon. 'Julle ouens is my generals. I'm the boss.' Byron looks around like he's checking to see if anyone wants to say something but we all keep quiet and he says, 'We're brothers now. The Majestics. That's our gang name. No one fucks with real gangsters, boy. No one fucks with The Majestics.'

Me and Damon are standing outside the music class keeping an eye out for teachers and Preston is hanging around like a little dog trying to sniff our butts. He comes over and holds out a plastic bag with little chocolate balls in it.

Damon takes it. ‘What’s this?’

‘Bokdrolletjies,’ Preston says. ‘For you ouens.’

‘Did you do something to them?’ Damon asks. ‘Did you lick them?’

‘No I didn’t.’

Byron comes out of the music class and sees us and comes over. He stands just looking at Preston.

‘Hello, Byron,’ Preston says.

‘Hello, poes,’ Byron says. ‘Wat soek jy?’

‘Nothing, I just wanted to give yous a gift.’ Preston points at the bag.

Byron looks at him again for so long that Preston starts staring at his shoes.

‘Just because your pappy works at a chocolate factory you think you’re a larney now?’

‘No, By, I just wanted to …’

‘You can’t mos buy your friends. You’ll never be a Majestic. You’re just a stinking little rat. Tsek poes!’

We flick imaginary blades out of our fists in the way that Byron taught us how by throwing our hands down and flicking our pinkie fingers out at the same time so that our hands look like switch blades and we start limping towards Preston but he turns and runs away.

‘Run little poodle run!’ Byron says and then he makes the noise of a dog crying.

We laugh and when Preston's gone around a corner we share the bag of bokdrolletjies.

There's a hot new girl at our school called Elan and she's from Cape Town.

Me and Damon are beatboxing outside the tuckshop and Roshan comes up to me and hands me a letter. It says '4 ur eyes only' and I open it.

I've seen u around baby

I think your sexy

Do u have a Valantine?

Love from Elan

xxx

'Elan wants to know if you're still in love with Angelique,' Roshan says.

'No I'm not,' I say. 'We broke up.'

I give the letter to Damon and he reads it and says, 'You should graunch her, boy.'

'I will.'

'So ask her to the dance.'

'I will.'

'So do it then.'

'Okay,' I turn to Roshan, 'tell Elan does she have anyone to go to the dance with her because I want to go with her.'

She starts smiling and she's about to run off but then I say, 'Wait. Tell her also that I think she's hot, and sexy too.'

She runs off and we go back to beatboxing and rapping. We rap songs by DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince like ‘Parents Just Don’t Understand’ and ‘Summertime’.

We’re walking back to class and Roshan comes running round the corner out of breath and says, ‘Elan said yes.’

Byron’s king but I’m The Fresh Prince, boy.

As we walk into science class we slow down and look straight at Yohbear and flick our blades out and say but softly so he can’t hear, ‘Vat jou Eldos toe, sannie!’

Me and Matt draw pictures of Yohbear having sex with other teachers and we pass them around the class. Everyone writes stuff on them like ‘My name is mister Jubear and I’m in love with miss Tallbot’ in a bubble above his head and ‘What a dick’ or ‘Meneer se naai’ so by the time the pictures come back to our desk we’re laughing so much that Mr Joubert asks us what’s wrong and we say we just remembered a joke from yesterday and he calls us to the front of the class and makes us sit there facing the board away from each other.

We wish you a Merry X-mas

It’s starting to get dark and we’re not allowed to walk around the school grounds but the dance has just started and I haven’t seen Elan yet so I ask Roshan to tell Elan to meet me in the quad at the nursery school because I have something to give her.

I sneak out the hall and go down to the quad and stand in the middle under a big tree where we used to play kissing catchers. I try to find the best way to stand leaning against the tree so I look romantic with a red rose in my one hand and a grey and

white bunny teddy bear I bought from Southgate Mall that has a heart on its chest with ‘I Love You’ written in the middle in my other hand.

I hear voices so I know they’re here but only Roshan comes over and I can see Elan hiding behind a pillar in the corridor.

‘Elan says you should give it to me,’ Roshan says. She looks pretty in her black jacket and she has big round earrings and light blue stuff around her eyes.

I give her the rose and the bunny and nearly forget the card in my pocket. It has two bunnies on the front and inside it says ‘Be my Valentine’ and I give it to her.

Roshan goes and it’s quiet. I can hear a beat coming from the school hall.

She comes back and says, ‘Elan said to give you this.’ She kisses me on the cheek. Then she says, ‘Come.’

I walk with her to where Elan is.

‘Hi,’ I say.

‘Hi,’ Elan says.

She’s wearing a shiny silver dress and she looks pretty like a Christmas decoration.

We walk back to the hall and I have nothing to say so I feel stupid but luckily Roshan and Elan are talking to each other about stuff like makeup so we get there and go inside.

A slow song comes on and everyone stops and looks at each other and I ask Elan, ‘Wanna dance?’

‘Yeah.’

I put my hands on her shoulders and she puts her hands on mine and we start spinning around slowly. We go round and round and round and I don’t step on her toes.

It's almost time to go home and Roshan comes up to me and says, 'Elan says thanks for the date but it's over and she can't be your girlfriend anymore.'

She walks away and I see my rose lying on the floor and the bunny lying on a chair just staring into space.

Matt tells us about a movie he saw where a guy puts a potato up the exhaust of this other guy's car and it causes the whole thing to smoke and it busts up the engine and the other guy has to hitchhike home but no one wants to give him a lift because he's a loser with bad hair and black stuff all over his face and he stinks.

'We should do that to Mr Yohbear,' Byron says. 'That naai thinks he's so *handsome* but he's one hond-ugly poes.'

The bell goes so everyone except me and Matt gets up to go to class and we stay on the grandstand eating our lunch and I say, 'I really wanna do it.'

'What?' Matt asks.

'The potato. We should do it on the last day of term. Me and you.'

'Yeah,' Matt says but I don't know if he means it.

We get up and I think I see something moving under the grandstand but it's just a stupid ratty pigeon.

It's the last day of term and we're in the parking lot while everyone's at assembly and we go over to Mr Joubert's crappy blue car and hide behind it so we can take out the stuff we brought.

Matt opens his bag and takes out the pictures that we drew of Mr Joubert having sex with the other teachers and we stick them to the windows of the car with tape. I

have some eggs so I take them out of my bag and give a few to Matt and we stand back and throw them as hard as we can against the sides of the car and they splatter.

We try to shove a potato into the exhaust but the pipe is too small so we have to wedge it on.

'Let's get the fuck outta here!' Matt says.

I see a sharp stone on the ground near the car and I pick it up.

'What you doing?' Matt asks.

I start scratching the paint on the doors and writing with the stone.

'What's that?' Matt asks.

It's a bit hard to read but it says, 'Merry X-mas'.

We wish you a Merry X-mas even though it's March and X-mas came early for you this year and here's your present with love and smoochies from The Majestics.

We run as fast as we can.

It's the first day of the holidays and we're at Matt's house blowing stuff up with tom thumbs in the yard and Matt's dad comes out of the house looking angry.

'Matt, get inside. Now!' he says.

We go into the kitchen and he tells us to sit down at the table.

'What's wrong, dad?' Matt asks.

'I just got a call from your school,' he says. 'Apparently you two vandalised a teacher's car.'

Matt tries to look like he doesn't know what his dad is talking about and he looks at me like he's confused but I'm sure he's thinking the same thing as me because all he says is, 'I wonder if Preston's enjoying his holidays?'

Windbag

1

I ascended to the peak of my musical career, circa 1997, by recording an album with the St Andrew's School for Boys Choir.

I would like to say that my musical talents were developed from a young age – perhaps even in the womb, where I first learned to play the piano and the saxophone – but I cannot.

The only instrument I know how to play is the concussion.

Although I was in the choir at primary school, our music teacher, Mrs Wimple, bless her woollen socks, was out of her depth. She stuck to what she knew – playing Chopsticks on the piano. Her main skills were rearranging us in our standing positions and showing us how to fake smile. She stood us all aside to play the tambourine in the wings so as not to steal the shine from her daughter, to whom she handed all solo opportunities. We performed at jamborees and school assemblies, singing songs like 'Heal the World', 'God Bless Africa', and 'Sleep Well Tonight, Grandmother'.

It was a surprise, then, given this muffled background, that shortly after I arrived at the boarding school at St Andrew's, in Standard 5, and auditioned for the school choir, I was accepted into the ranks.

We were all forced to volunteer to audition. We lined up outside the chapel and went in, one by one. Many, facing conscription, sang badly on purpose in order to be chased away from the chapel by Mr Snout, the choirmaster.

I walked in to find Snout at the back of the chapel, talking to the organist.

I was told to sing scales as high as I could, at first accompanied by the organ, and then a cappella.

Snout, bucktoothed, with thinning brown curls, a small paunch, and the performing energy of a cocaine-sniffing wild boar, stood leaning against the pews, listening to me belt out the scales.

When I was done, the organist said, 'You have an impressive range – one of the widest we've heard today.'

'Really?'

'It's your, how do we put this?' Snout said, less enthusiastically. 'It's your stage of life.'

He meant the degree of descent of my testicles into my scrotum and the resonance that the particular ovality of my balls lent to my voice.

'You're in,' Snout said. 'You're an alto.'

What the hell was that?

No matter.

2

Now I sat in the special pews at the back of the chapel with my fellows of the choir, blasted to a standstill by the organ, which was like a wall of wind and noise, brassy and flutey, a steamship of the future, operated by a woman with a blonde perm and a large nose organ and whose whole body came alive in the pushing of pedals, pulling of knobs, and trembling depression of keys, etc.

Here, the pews were more spacious and comfortable and we could slip each other notes – mostly maternal insults – and look down on the common, non-musical horde in the nave.

The chaplain stood before the altar in the distance, a small fat man barely peering over the lectern shouting things at us, while the flags of the school houses hanging on the walls were ruffled by the breeze.

In white and royal-blue surplice and cassock, we would proceed down the aisle in a great procession, following the head chorister, who bore the cross and was spat at by the commoners on either side, the chaplain himself hobbling on up ahead, his hands folded together above his paunch.

It all went very well for me until the first choir practice.

I slotted in with my alto tribesmen in the second row, above the trebles, and beneath the tenors and the basses. Immediately we began a rendition of the school hymn to warm up.

Something was horribly wrong. Why weren't all these idiots singing along with the organ? Were we not all singing the same song? They all seemed to be doing their own versions. Couldn't they see how hard the organist was working the pipes? What was the value of her if everyone ignored her perfectly good playing? It sounded like all these imbeciles were shouting at, over, and under each other.

I stood with my mouth hanging open, but then I decided to stick to the tune for the poor organist's sake.

When the song ended, Snout announced that we'd practise in our parts, starting with the trebles.

These bastards sang so beautifully, soaring.

Then came the basses, who sang so deeply it was as if their balls were made of brass.

Then the tenor ethnic peoples, with their smooth, sweet song.

And last was us, the altomen.

I sang quietly, confused, trying to adapt my voice to the middle-of-nowhere pitch that the altos sang.

Finally, I got it: we were separated into little teams to sing different parts that combined to make up the great clashing noise that was our collective output.

We sang the hymn again, all together this time, and I felt as if I was drowning. I had to stand closer to my clansman beside me to try and use his voice as a guide. I wanted to sing with the trebles, but they sometimes shot up too high, and I fantasised about being a bass.

Who was this madman waving a stick at us with dizzying speed and raising his hands – as if resurrecting the dead – and then lowering them – as if burying us – his eyes wild with passion? I didn't even know what a 'conductor' was.

Sheets of music were slipped before us for the next piece, a new song we were to learn. I knew, then, that I desperately wanted to learn how to decipher these beautiful squiggles, dots, and curvy lines that were like the mathematical but playful doodles of the childrens of aliens.

Snout stopped us every now and then between verses to teach us musical terms, but I failed to catch on, and this is how I came to understand the following:

Accent: when you put on an accent while singing to sound more angelic/British.

Carol: a small, mouse-like boy of the front row.

Melody: a stripper.

Diminuendo: a gallant Italian dwarf mercenary honoured for his bravery at the Battle of Agincourt.

Fine: you tried your best. Congrats.

Before judging me for not knowing how a choir works, or what a conductor was, or what all of these musical things were, please remember: this was in the pre-Internet era, when kids were still stupid, happy, and still *kids*, not depressed little robot adult-baby smarty-pants.

3

I bumbled on.

We sang at old-age homes around Bloemfontein and toured to Kimberley, where we sang in a beautiful cathedral with a high ceiling, while orderlies made holy smoke come out of ornate burners, and my mother, who came with my dad to proudly watch us sing, cried tears that I thought were of joy at our warbling but turned out to be of devastation at the death of Lady Diana.

Snout was a hit with the grannies. One of our best numbers was 'Oh When the Saints Go Marching In', and just before the final word, which we would build strongly up to with 'go marching …' Snout would throw his conducting stick behind him into the audience, seemingly by mistake.

We'd hold while he went to get it. He scrambled on all fours until he found the thing, and then he made his way back, sitting on various grannies' laps, before driving that last word of the song home with his baton: '… *in!*'

The audience lapped it up.

Snout was a wonderful entertainer, and his various flirtations etc. scarred us all for life.

Once, when a dignitary from the Department of Education came to the school, we were pulled out of class to do a special performance for this Esteemed Excellency.

Snout got carried away in his aggressive conducting and sent the lectern crashing to the ground mid-song, but we went on, undeterred, while he turned puce, collected his stick, and continued waving like a lunatic.

Sometimes, at choir practice, Snout would embed himself in our ranks and point out individuals who were off tune.

I learned the great skill of singing very loudly in the parts of the music I knew well, and retreating when I knew I would lose my way, but withdrawing almost deliberately, with great finesse.

There was something called ‘Special Choir’, which was basically like the first team of choir. These bastards got to go on cruise ships all over the world. I kept checking the noticeboard to see if I’d made it, but my name was never there.

I improved my rhythm, and was now able to count the beats in a bar with something of an internal metronome. I could retain my voice part, but only on the first beat, which always received more emphasis.

I would try to block everyone out and sing my part as if I were a soloist carrying the whole choir, but apparently this is not the way to do it. One is supposed to practise listening to different parts, training your ear, and to work on your own part until you understand its role in producing harmony. (**Harmony:** Melody’s arguably hotter twin sister.)

I now realise that all of this was part of my greater training to become the perfect gentleman. At least, on the outside.

‘All the nice girls love a Saints boy!’ we sang. ‘All the nice girls love a star! For there’s something about a Saints boy … when you know what Saints boys are!’

My chivalrous development continued apace as I entered high school and learned what Saints boys were.

This was the school that had produced Brett Kebble and Glenn Agliotti. (Saints would be quick to claim the likes of Phillip Tobias, Chris Froome, and Joe Root, but these people collectively attended the school for the sum total of two minutes.)

Here, you learned how to volunteer for tuckshop duty and to help the PTA moms running the place for charity by serving your friends pies, donuts, Cokes, international calling cards, chips, chocolates, and R50 notes in exchange for 2 cents or any brown coin.

At socials, Saints boys played a game called ‘Hunt the Grunt’, wherein they would compete to find the ‘ugliest’ girl to kiss, insult, and abandon.

We learned to steal from Pick n Pay (‘Pick n Pocket’), to cheat in tests, and to steal electricity from the grid.

But the grannies loved us, too, in our little basher hats, which we tipped to adults, saying, ‘Sir’ and ‘Ma’am’ whenever they passed.

Once, for some important church event, a whistling solo went up for grabs.

I practised in my own time, whistling like a songbird, but Snout handed the solo to a red-headed senior.

I knew they had given him the part in pity on account of his ginger hair (or perhaps because of his brain disease, which required him to stay in his room for most of the day inhaling steam).

This baritone would go on to win a bursary to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he took up his place as part of a quota.

4

My family was very proud of me when I told them we, as the choir, would be putting out an album. Especially my dad, who started buying classical music and actually listening to it. He would sway his head from side to side, looking drugged, while driving through the Johannesburg CBD to Brahms or Mozart.

I was rewarded for my efforts of learning how to be an impostor by being the first recorded artist in the family. (We should hold on to all those VHS tapes of me in various choral arrangements.)

We recorded the CD in painstaking hours of take after take in the chapel, careful in the pews not to make any noise, silently turning over our sheets of music while we sang, freezing in pauses, and holding our breaths until Snout gave us the okay.

A blind musical expert was called in to listen to the recordings after each take. He was installed in the vestry along with speakers and a computer, but we never saw him. He was there to sniff out those of us who were off. I was petrified.

After each take, Snout and the organist would run off to the vestry, listen to the recording with the maestro, and return with his sage feedback.

'Someone is off in the altos!' Snout would announce, breathing heavily.

There would be silence. We'd look at each other awkwardly, and it is a credit to Snout and my alto people that they didn't just oust me directly and send me to rugby practice, where I could hone my skills of avoiding contact.

But how precise was this blind man's laser-guided ear radar-sonar aural system? What if they brought him out of the vestry and placed him in front of us? Would he be

able to say, ‘Second row, fourth from left – there is your mole.’ Or worse, if they embedded him in the pews?

My confidence lessened each time Snout returned, angrier, saying, ‘It’s the fucking altos again!’

So what I did was: with each take, I sang less and less, so that by the final, wrapped take, I was not singing at all.

It is tricky to master, but I highly recommend this technique to anyone who happens to find themselves in a similar situation:

1. Imagine that your body is an organ that expels air without noise, aside from, perhaps, a faint hissing, from the opening that is your mouth.

2. Make an o with your mouth, tense your neck muscles, and blow air out of you, constricting your throat so that your neck veins bulge with the beauty and depth of the sound that you are not producing.

3. Keep a serious face. This will be fitting, because you are likely to redden somewhat with asphyxiation.

4. Pretend to be whatever voice part takes your fancy (for me: virginal bass).

5. From time to time, look at the chorister beside you and shake your head while frowning in mild disgust.

I was much less destructive as a windbag. I believe my hissing only came through in pauses on the recording as harmless static.

I was the perfect chorister. At least, on the outside.

My dad bought the CD with much excitement. I think the album sold quite well, most likely because it enjoyed the benefit of the most cornered market on earth: proud school parents.

My dad made a fuss of reading the song names on the back, some of which were in Latin. He knew I wasn't in any of the Special Choir songs, the Chamber Choir ones, or the solos, but he listened with the look of one under the influence of some powerful soporific, while he swayed his head from side to side as he wove through the traffic, his hands at ten and two on the wheel, taxis making close claim of the inches around us, while he seemed to listen, to really listen, as if he'd practised listening, for my individual voice amidst the din.

Strange Light

A camera followed me everywhere I went.

Not a real one, but one that I made up in my head. It was plugged in on the other side – however that worked – to her brain.

She could see everything I did. When I took a shower, say, the view would go up from my ankles – not my toes because they were skew and ugly – to my knees, and then up my soapy thighs, but it would stop where my bum started, and I wouldn't let it go further, or to the front, because those parts belonged to me, and I didn't want to give them away.

It would appear suddenly just after I woke up, with the blanket covering me from the waist down and my chest bare, so she could see my stomach and my arm behind my head, with light streaming in through the window of my dorm room.

When I'd get up it would follow me to my cupboard and run over the smooth skin of my back but stop just there while I pulled my underpants down and threw my towel around my waist.

At breakfast, in the dining hall, it would zoom in on my mouth while I ate toast, and she would see little specks of spittle mixed with gunk at the sides. I'd stop and push my plate away.

It came with me to athletics training, and she'd see a sheen of sweat on my legs and arms and see me lying there afterwards out of breath, cramping so badly that I had to ask someone to tie my shoelaces.

Sometimes I would let her take control. Then my hands would become hers, and they'd run over the smoothness of my tummy down to where the hairs were fine and

then thicker, but I'd take back control if she got too close, and then yank the cable and the connection would be lost.

It followed me into class. She'd be in Business Economics, watching me draw in the margins of my History workbook. The bell would ring, I'd go out and pretend not to see her standing in the corridor, clutching her books to her tummy and chest, while my friends were swarming around hers, exchanging letters, making jokes and plans for the weekend.

While she walked across the fields back to our sister school, she'd see me, through the camera, standing at the noticeboard outside the library, defocusing so that I could see my reflection on the glass, and she'd know that my thoughts were with her but that I was just too shy to talk to her, and that I wouldn't allow the camera to look deeper, because that bit belonged to me, and I didn't want to give it away.

It first started following me around after my friends told me she liked me.

She had told her friends, and they had told mine.

'You're fucking with me,' I said to Nate, my chubby friend with curly hair, a round face and cheeks, and sharp teeth.

'Why would we? Just go talk to her,' he said.

But I'd have nothing to say?

I wasn't smooth-talking and easy going or handsome.

A girl liked *me*?

My hair was always weird and thin and I couldn't style it with gel like my friends did. It just sort of fell flat and the wind blew it all over.

I had these weird summer-school pants that my mom bought from the second-hand shop – where me and my brother got all our school clothes from – and they were

so old that I thought the holes in them must be from Nazi bullets, and the faded brown stains must be spilled royal blood. My shoes had big holes in the sides so that when I wiggled my toes I could make them talk.

I had a weird nose. A big one, thanks to my dad. And thick lips that were sometimes too red. And pimples, just beneath the skin – acne vulgaris, my debate team captain told me.

I couldn't tell this to Nate. Or to Kyle, my old roommate, a rich Taiwanese kid with a big head and short spiky black hair. Or to Miles, who was too good-looking, tall, and who had a perfectly symmetrical face and thick hair, and deep, warm brown eyes.

They laughed at me anyway, maybe because they could see that I just didn't want my nice bubble pricked, and they enjoyed making me sweat.

But as the days went by, with that camera following me all over the place, I couldn't help wondering about her: who was the short, cute girl who was always laughing, who had long brown hair and a clumsy walk?

I went running.

My thoughts did too.

The world stayed behind.

But the camera came along.

Left, up to the corner of the school, and then right into a long road past the park where my parents took us when they visited from home, and up towards my hill, Signal Hill.

The sun was just beginning to rise over the city, the air was cool, and the birds were singing in the trees.

A gravel track turned left off from the main road, and up I went on a concrete path, with lungs full, sweat running down the back of my neck, until I rounded a steep corner and was at the top. I jumped up onto a pylon and sat with my legs dangling over the edge, looking over my city.

It was small. There, to the left, was downtown. Further out, left, was the stadium, where we did speed work on the athletics track on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Closer in, almost right in front of the hill, was our school. The cars were like Micro Machines. It was difficult to see any people on the school grounds. This was like some small town I might have once built while playing Sim City on the computer at home during the boring holidays.

Who was to say this city was more real?

Up here I could simulate all those characters going about in their own cities down below.

Oom Thys, my coach, might be pacing at the foot of the hill in the suburbs where we did inclines early on Saturday mornings, looking down at his slippers, bent from his height, waiting for his athletes to walk down to their starting places. He would be holding his hands behind his back, coughing up phlegm. His nose would be red, his eyes bulging behind his big dark glasses, and maybe, like I always did, the athletes might be wondering what he'd looked like in his days as an Olympian.

'Head down,' he'd say to me. 'Head down and concentrate, soutie.'

One day after training he called me and James – my only English-speaking companion in the group – over, and asked, 'Do you know what soutie means?'

I shook my head.

‘You see, the Englishman has always had one foot in Africa and the other in England. His dick has always hung in the sea, collecting salt.’ He dangled his fist from his elbow. ‘And that’s why he’s called soutpiel.’

Then he asked me, as he always did, ‘How’s the hostel treating you? Are they feeding you well? How are things at home?’

I had let him down. I was caught stealing from Pick n Pay with Miles last year.

I looked for the small shopping centre where we were bust. There it was, touched by the sun, on the outskirts of downtown. A crappy place.

We’d been stealing for months. Mostly out of boredom. We created special holes in our school blazers that we slipped our stolen items into – batteries, chewing gum, pens, any random thing – but one day an old lady spotted us and reported us to security.

We were taken to a small back room and searched, and then handed over to the police, who took us to the station and put us in a holding cell. The housemaster on duty bailed us out. We were suspended from the hostel, and I stopped training.

Oom Thys welcomed me back, but he always had a message for me: ‘Be careful of girls. They’re no good for athletes.’ And on nights before races: ‘Tonight, you sleep with your hands *above* the blankets.’

Lily might be waking now, in her city.

My friends all had girlfriends. Why couldn’t I?

One day I waited outside the senior school for her. I stood there shaking, staring at my shoes, as she walked past with her friends.

I looked up, she looked at me, her eyes lingering for a while, and then she carried on talking to her friends and laughing at something.

They rounded a corner and started on the path to the fields. I kicked at some eucalyptus leaves and crushed them underfoot, thinking I'd let her go.

But then I started running. I ran towards her and they slowed down as I drew up.

She looked at me, her eyes full of surprise, but her smile fading.

'Hi … Lily,' I said.

I felt my cheeks all hot, and I thought I could feel my hair out of place from running.

'Hi,' she said.

'How are you?'

'Good.'

'Listen, I hope you don't think I'm weird.' I paused for too long. 'I just wanted to say hi. So hi.'

'Hi.'

We walked on, the pace slower.

'I want to write you a letter. Would that be okay?'

'Yes, that will be nice.' She smiled.

'Great! Have a good day!'

'You too.'

Her nose was small and it crinkled when she smiled. Her eyes were bright, blue, and her skin was soft and smooth, and there were tiny freckles on her cheeks. She had this way of leaning her head to the side when she talked, and her voice was full, like it was bursting with something.

I ran to the dining hall, with my spine tingling, and my ears throbbing.

I was late for lunch.

Everyone was lined up outside the dining hall.

I slotted into place hoping that Armand, our prefect, wouldn't do anything about it, but also weirdly not caring.

He stood on the landing on top of the stairs and counted us with his finger, mouthing the numbers.

I couldn't help it, I started laughing. I thought it might be his teeth. Or tooth. He only had one front tooth.

'Do you think he knows how to count?' I whispered to Miles beside me.

Miles laughed. And then we couldn't help it, we stared down at our shoes while our bodies shook and we tried to breathe in between.

Armand stopped counting and looked at us. 'Do you have a problem?' he asked.

He walked down the steps and stood in front of me. 'Do you have a fucking problem?'

'No, Armand,' I said.

Miles laughed some more.

'What's so funny?'

'Nothing, Armand.'

I looked at his feet. He wore his first-team rugby socks, like those with honours were allowed to do, and his shoes were huge. I was choking on laughter.

He began to shout, 'You were fucking late, you little shit. You think you're special?'

I looked up at him. His face was red, and his tooth seemed to flap with the force of his words.

He sent us around the field as punishment. While we ran, we sang, 'All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth!'

Alone at my desk in my room at Prep, I sat before a blank page with a pen in my hand, wondering what to write.

In primary school I'd sent lots of love letters, but those had been simple, mostly 'Roses are red' ones. I'd also kissed girls. When I got to high school, something happened, and all of a sudden I was shy, and girls were like aliens.

I started by writing her name at the top. I tried to make it look nice, but it ended up looking like the decorative headers I made in my History book, all bold and straight and square. I decided it might be okay.

Then I wrote:

Hey ...

So here I am. This is my letter. You have a nice smile. It's Prep and I'm thinking about how nice it was to talk to you. Here's a drawing of a hedgehog on a hill.

(I drew a small picture beneath the paragraph.)

Tell me more about you. What's your favourite colour? What music do you like? What other stuff do you like? Do you like hedgehogs?

I signed it off asking her to write back, but only if she wanted to, and folded it up and wrote her name on the front.

I put it aside and started studying for History. All I had to do was commit everything to memory and vomit it up the next day. I was good at it, but only because I worked hard and studied late into the morning, taking Thins to stay awake.

The bell woke me up and I lay there staring at the ceiling for a while, listening to the hostel coming to life, imagining the wanker on duty who'd rung the bell, standing at the end of the corridor where the bell switch was, in his boxers, adding extra trills

after his one long one, thinking he was being funny, maybe overexcited with all the power at his fingertips. Him and his boner had ruined my dream of her.

I jumped out of bed, undressed, put a towel around my waist, went to the bathroom and joined the queue of boys leaning against the wall yawning and swinging their toiletry bags from their fingers.

Someone in one of the two showers was singing Pavarotti.

Allen, at the front of the queue, shouted, 'Hurry the fuck up, dick heads!'

The singing got louder.

'Who's in there?' Allen asked.

'Your mother,' the singer answered, then went on singing.

'Get the fuck out, Hog!' Allen said, recognising the voice as Colin's.

Steam poured out of the top of the showers, which were like cauldrons, and collected in a cloud trapped beneath the ceiling, drifting to be sipped at by the whirring extractor fan above the toilets, where everyone smoked cigarettes.

Colin got out and slung his towel over his shoulder while he walked towards the bathroom door. We could all see his Jelly Tot. He never seemed to mind showing it, but he noticed that Kojo, a tall black guy who was behind Allen in the queue, was looking, and he said, 'Cock spy!'

'Don't be cock shy, little hog,' Kojo said.

Colin made a flicking gesture at Kojo, reminding him of the rumour that when Kojo was in hospital for a rugby injury he got a boner while a nurse tended to him, and she had to use a special nurse's flick to get rid of it.

Kojo and Allen and the others started making squealing pig noises, and Colin showed them a zap.

I never really got involved unless I had to respond to an insult.

When my turn came I got into the shower and my dream came back to me. In it I was with Lily in a house somewhere, maybe in her bedroom, and I was trying to plait her hair, though I didn't know how, and she was laughing at me, though I could see she was enjoying it.

I sat next to the broken heater fixed to the wall in Accounting class, and I scratched a lyric from a song into the faded paint of the old thing: 'Do you feel, love is real?'

If our teacher left the door open, I could see out into the quad, where the girls stood after getting out of Mr Lindsey's History class early.

Our teacher, Mrs Kriel, was a sweet lady. She was tall, Afrikaans, very Christian, and had a short grey bob and huge round earrings. She wore these dresses that looked like they were homemade from old curtains, that covered her up from her ankles to her chin.

I sat there with the lyric repeating in my head until I lost the words and it became a hum, while Mrs Kriel went on about debits and credits and 'booooks', which she always pronounced with extra Os, followed by a faint echo as the boys in the class mimicked her.

In the quad, the girls started coming out of class and they stood in the corridor in a group, talking and laughing and looking around.

There she was.

Lily looked into our class and I looked away quickly.

The bell went.

My hands were shaking. I threw all my stuff into my bag and clipped it closed. Then I got up, slung my bag over my shoulder, and left the class. I waited outside for Miles and Kyle, feeling Lily's eyes on me.

‘Let’s go, lover boy,’ Kyle said. ‘Want some gum?’

He handed me a piece of Wrigley’s minty shit.

I swallowed a whole fucking piano down my throat.

We walked over and all I wanted to do was run as fast as I could, away from there, out into the sunshine and onwards into some haze where I could be alone, or maybe it would be easier to turn back to Accounting class, where I could be safe and go back to staring at the heater.

My knees were weak. Miles and Kyle were joking, maybe even teasing me, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying. I could just see Lily standing there, watching us come over, smiling.

Finally, we were there. I went straight to her.

‘Hey,’ I said. My voice was all thick and weird, sounding like some old man’s croak.

‘Hey,’ she said.

I cleared my throat. ‘So how was class?’

‘It was boring.’

‘Mr Lindsey’s a fat old turtle wriggling on its back.’

Where the fuck did that come from?

She laughed.

We started walking towards the entrance of the senior school. Miles and Kyle were making jokes and the girls were laughing, but Lily and me were off to the side, in our own channel.

‘So … how’s life?’ What a dumb fuck question. Right up there with *What’s your favourite colour?* and *What kindergarten do you attend?*

‘Umm … okay, I guess.’

How was she so calm? She seemed totally relaxed. Maybe bored, even? Was my fly open? Shit.

'I'm in trouble for smoking,' she said.

'You got bust?'

'Our housemaster caught me and Maxine smoking in our room.'

Max: Lily's roommate, a short, pretty Taiwanese girl who Miles was crushing on.

'Fuck,' I said, 'that sucks.' I looked down quickly and saw that my fly was closed. Thank God. 'What's your punishment?'

'We have to do extra Prep.'

We were out in the parking lot under the eucalyptus trees. White seeds drifted down, and there was a strange light from the low clouds that caught in a curtain of her hair and glowed orange and warm above her shoulder. I could see the fine hairs on the back of her neck.

She was talking about extra Prep, and I was listening, but I was watching how her nose crinkled when she smiled and how her eyes lit up with laughter.

'I had a dream about you,' I said.

'What was it about?'

We were at the school gates.

'I'll tell you tomorrow, maybe.' Then I remembered the letter. 'This is for you.' I handed it to her. 'It's probably totally shit, so don't expect anything. I'm a bit slow, you see.'

She laughed. She looked into my eyes for a second before looking at my shoes, and then she walked away.

Fuck. My shoes. Did she notice how busted they were?

Her favourite colour was dark blue. There was something mysterious and peaceful about it, she said.

She liked bands like RHCP, The Pixies and Smashing Pumpkins.

Hedgehogs were cute, and the one I had drawn was adorable, but why was it blue?

She loved cigarettes, though she was trying to quit. Sort of.

She liked dancing, but she was very shy.

She took Art, and she wanted to either be an artist or a fashion designer.

She was a Sagittarius and into star signs and stuff, and she sometimes thought she could read people's minds.

She lived in a shithole town in the middle of nowhere.

Her letter came folded in a special way, delivered by Kyle, with my name on the front and at the top of the page, drawn artistically with flames coming off it. She signed it off, 'Stax of love, L'.

I read it a bazillion times, and the pages smelled nice, with a scent of her mixed in with the ink.

I walked down to the junior school quad with Miles's bag of 2-cent coins that the stupid call phone there swallowed thinking they were R2 coins.

The quad was dark. There was a big tree to one side that never had leaves, and its shadow was cast in moonlight on the cobbled pavement, a million little dark rivers running and splitting off everywhere.

There were stairs leading up to our old class, where our teacher, the school chaplain, would read *The Hobbit* to us in English in Standard 5, and around the corner was the principal's house, where we stole mulberries in summer.

I called the girls' hostel phone. Someone answered and I asked for Lily, waiting nervously. When she came on the line I nearly hung up, but I recovered quickly and said, 'Hi, it's me,' feeling stupid because she might not know who *me* was. Like, *Hi, it's me, some random pervert, how are you?*

'Hey!' she said.

I tried to make my voice sound better. Clearer, less thick. I didn't know if it worked.

I asked her how her day was. That sounded weird, like we were some married couple, but she said that it had been okay.

'How's your punishment going?' I asked. *Stupid*: like, *Are you enjoying being tortured by some smelly old cow in extra Prep?*

She said it was going okay.

Then there was an awkward silence.

I cleared my throat and said, 'It was nice seeing you the other day.'

'Me too,' she said.

I laughed. She laughed.

Then the words came easier. On the phone I didn't have to worry about how my hair looked, or if I'd blown my nose properly, or if I'd forgotten to brush my teeth.

I asked her about her hometown and what her life was like, and soon we started to open up, dreaming about our younger selves.

She told me about her years in England, and how she missed the fields and the poppies and the country lanes. Also, they had hedgehogs there.

I told her about how, in Standard 5, shortly after I came to the school, we started climbing all of the roofs, looking for places to hide where we could spy on the teachers, and how we were bust bunking out once by Roelof, our housemaster who'd been struck by lightning. He made us scrub the urinals in the hostel with steel wool and Vim. But after being bust for stealing last year, I was trying to be better.

She was always in trouble for something, she said.

We spoke until someone on her side needed to use the phone, and we said goodbye quickly, but before she hung up she said, 'Come visit me on Saturday.'

I stayed in the quad for a while, looking up at the sky. Then I ran to my room.

The days were slow, but Saturday finally came, and I walked over to her school in my full-school uniform, complete with blazer and stupid fucking basher hat.

I met her behind the chapel. We sat on a step at the back door of the building, surrounded by a wall of conifer trees.

I felt like a giant idiot in my full-school. She wore a long-sleeve top, and her hair was untied, and it fell down over her back.

She picked a conifer leaf and twirled it around in her fingers before sweeping it along the bricks of the step, looking down, her face hidden by hair.

We spoke about school, and our friends, and although it was sometimes quiet, and that made me feel like I was boring, I liked being there, alone with her in our own little bubble, with the clouds passing through the dome lazily above the tree tops.

She smelled nice, like her letters, and every now and then she laughed at something I said and looked up at me briefly before looking down again. I liked making her laugh.

She told me she was a day dreamer. She was shy, and quiet, and she loved seeing the beauty of things, which she sometimes tried to capture in her drawings. She loved using charcoal, and she went crazy sometimes in Art class.

She asked me about my dream. I told her that in it I was trying to plait her hair but didn't know how.

She laughed, then straightened a strand of her hair and showed me how to plait.

I had to go.

When we got up, she hugged me goodbye, and I felt her soft hair on my neck.

They were strange days filled with strange light and when I wasn't with her the camera followed me so that almost every thought was of her and the world was so different that I added a line beneath the lyric scratched into the heater in Accounting class: 'Do you feel. *Life* is real.'

It wasn't a question but it wasn't a statement either.

When I ran, I ran with her, but my thoughts went ahead, into some strange place, where they'd be burned up by some fire and dissolve into strange light.

Her hands always had paint or marker stains on them.

They were always busy. When we sat on the step behind the chapel, or on the stairs in the quad, they played with twigs and leaves and blades as if trying to paint the world around them.

I wanted to hold her hand. So badly.

But the chance never came.

I was scared she'd pull her hand away as soon as I tried, and though our hands sometimes touched while we walked I could never bring mine to reach out to hers.

One day, while we walked on the hockey fields, our hands brushed and while they were close together I curled my fingers around hers, and she curled hers into mine.

Her skin was soft and delicate and for a long time we had nothing to say. We just walked on the field holding hands. I worried that mine was too hot and sweaty, but she didn't seem to mind.

When we got back to her hostel I let go. She turned to me and hugged me and said she was really happy that I came, and as she turned to go I stopped her and said, 'I just wanted to know. Are we … are we … you know, going out?'

'You mean like boyfriend and girlfriend?'

'Yes.'

'We are,' she said.

I walked back to school, dazed.

I was late for dinner.

I walked into the dining hall and sat down at my place, while everyone was eating.

I glared at Armand, a few tables down, who stared at me blankly, chewing.

I sat drinking a milk while I looked over at the staff table.

There was Mr Fulton, the wannabee principal, with his stupid moustache and a dumpy face that made him look like a fat walrus, the same one who last year falsely accused me of pulling a zap at an old lady but failed to apologise when I was proven innocent.

There was Father Creep, housemaster of the junior hostel and school chaplain, who led us on our Standard 5 Drakensberg hike. He took his favourites – all the

prefects – to masturbate with him on a giant boulder in a river, timing them to see who would finish first. His stupid eyes were small and beady and red, and his paunch separated him from the table.

There was Mr van Rooyen, who for no reason last year threw me into a wall near the boiler room in the senior school and accused me of smoking. When I went to his class later to ask him what I'd done wrong, he tried to bribe me with a cool drink and I saw in his eyes that he was scared.

And here, at our table, was Ruan, a farm boy a year ahead of me, who liked to kill domestic cats for sport, who jerked off onto a banana that a member of his first-team rugby team had to eat for 'initiation', and who told me to shut the fuck up and that he would kill me if I ever questioned him.

My superiors.

I wasn't hungry. I just wanted to be outside, running.

Oom Thys called me and James over after training and asked, 'Have you ever jerked off in the bath?'

I shook my head.

'Have you ever seen how it floats when you're done?'

That was it. I waited for some punchline, but it never came.

I started walking off, but he called me back.

'You look happy these days,' he said. 'Have you got a girlfriend?'

I smiled, and just said, 'Sort of.'

He looked at me seriously. 'Everyone's got to live. There's more to life than just athletics and school. What's happening to you is a wonderful thing, but you just have to be careful. Before you know it, you might be doing something you will regret.

It might be confusing and feel strange, but you'll make sense of it. You have so much potential. I believe in you.'

He was filthy, the dirty old bastard, but I loved him. He was one of the few who really understood.

I stood in the silence of a sleeping hostel in front of the mirror in the bathroom late at night, looking at the thinness of my body in the burning white glare of the fluorescent lights.

Did she like muscles? I didn't have any.

I wanted to kiss her.

I asked Nate about it, and he told me to practise on the mirror.

Wouldn't my thick lips get in the way? What did I say so that the kiss could start, or did I even need to say anything? What if our teeth crashed into each other? What did I do with my hands? And my tongue?

I leaned in towards the mirror, with my eyes half closed, and opened my mouth a little as I came closer. When my lips brushed the glass my eyes shot open and I saw with horror how weird I looked, like a panting dog or something.

I stepped back. What kind of weird perverted lizard was that?

I practised on my pillow so that I didn't have to see myself, and it worked, I thought, because it was soft, and I could do it in the dark and the camera might not see me.

We walked on the fields, holding hands, and she spoke about her life at home, and I tried to listen but there was a refrain in my head that told me to kiss her.

Clouds gathered overhead, and there was thunder.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked. ‘You seem quiet.’

‘Nothing,’ I said.

We walked around the quad, on a path that led to the front gate.

I was late again, and I had to get back.

The rain started to come down in big fat drops, and we started running, laughing. Half way to the gate I stopped and held her arm and said, ‘Wait.’

There was lightning.

I pulled her closer and we leaned in to kiss and it happened, with the rain soaking us, and when I opened my eyes I saw that she, like me, had forgotten where we were.

Then we started running towards the gate. She kissed me again, and I ran back to the dining hall, with the sky full of strange light.

I was alone in the chapel not praying but thinking how blue was the dome behind the altar, my mind empty but for an early star.

This life was more real than the next or the last, maybe, but who the fuck could say?

Not the fat bastard behind the lectern.

Not the turtle wriggling on its back.

Not the little words in a book.

Or even the little blue hedgehog on his hill.

Maybe that camera had something to do with it.

And the light.

There was too much of it to be real, that strange light.

Enchantless

I believed my high school sweetheart, Lily, had supernatural powers.

She was beautiful and mysterious, with pale skin, a button nose, blue eyes, and soft brown hair. She was quiet and shy. She could read minds, tell fortunes, and walk into dreams. The sketches she did for me of elves and nymphs shimmered at the edges, as if her hand had been flickering with some occult flame. I was careful with my thoughts around her.

My fantasy took wing from her magic. She became my queen, and I was her knight who, when I bunked out to visit her at her hostel, bolted through the darkness on my steed, a fire-breathing, many-headed donkey that was sturdy but surprisingly fast. My dark armour did not reflect the light but absorbed it.

My dorm room was in the turret of a tower in the junior hostel, where I was installed as a tutor in matric, and my bed was a magic portal I lay on staring out the small window at the lazy clouds or the stars, dreaming of her, knowing that our souls were like two planets burning brightly around each other, touching on delicate fringes.

I didn't know what my quest was. My friends wanted to get laid. I was fine with being a virgin. When I was with my queen in her bed, I would stroke her tummy, caressing her, for hours. We would kiss. But that was it.

One night, I had an out-of-body experience.

I was lying on my bed, thinking about Lily, when a blankness came over me. I lost awareness. I came to with my mind separated from my body. I was floating just below the ceiling in the corner of my room, looking down on my fleshy capsule, which was like a foetus curled on its side.

I saw visions of great famine, and a mushroom cloud caused by an atom bomb. They appeared as stock images, but I could feel the human suffering behind them. I forced myself back into my body, and ran downstairs to the common room. It was dark, filled with faces that shone silver reflecting the TV screen.

I found a seat in the front row beside one of my classmates, who read the terror on my face and asked me what was wrong.

I tried to explain about the atom bomb and the starving children and that witchcraft was at play in my room. A guy called Thabo who had lived there the year before had been cursed by someone who wished evil on his family, and he carried charms and used muthi to ward the evil spirits away.

I don't think my classmate heard me over the sound of the movie. He nodded blankly. I looked into the whites of his eyes and considered asking him if he wouldn't mind holding my hand for a bit or if I could lay my head in his lap while he stroked my hair until I felt better.

I spent the holidays at home playing Warcraft on the computer for twelve hours straight per day. I always chose to be the Human Race because I liked most their paladins, a holy order of knights. I amassed them in great hosts, keeping one aside to oversee the battles – me, a great knight who swept in to tip the balance of power when things were going wrong; who swooped down upon the orc peons and the goblin berserkers, butchering them in massacres; or who ranged like a scout alone in the wastelands to learn the enemy's movements and discover new sites to build castles in honour of my queen.

Then my mom would come into the office to close the curtains and switch on the lights and ask how I could sit like that in the dark with the glow being so bad for my eyes, especially without any breaks.

I'd mutter under my breath that paladins had special holy vision and didn't have need for lights or other mortal things, and war didn't just suddenly let up for pee breaks.

One night, back at school, I bunked out with some friends to an old boy's flat, where people were drinking, and a psychic was reading palms and telling fortunes. I was scared of this psychic, who was probably in his thirties, and who had long hair and a beard and looked like he hadn't bathed in a while.

An old boy told the psychic he had been in a fight with one of the members of a Greek family who owned a string of nightclubs in town. The Greeks were hunting the old boy. Could the psychic help?

The psychic used a marker to draw a triangle with a dot in the middle of it on the old boy's forehead. He took the old boy to the bathroom and told him to stare at himself in the mirror and concentrate on the dot; after a while he would see the face of his enemy.

A few minutes later, the old boy screamed, 'I see him! The fucker's staring right at me!'

Before we left, I let the psychic read my palm. Surely the moment he took my hand my skin would pulse with arcane energy to reveal my true identity as a paladin?

He told me I would marry soon after leaving school and have one child and die a horrible death.

Obvious: I would wed my queen and we would have a little princess and then I would die heroically, going down in a blaze of orc arrows.

I wrote to Lily to tell her about the psychic's prophecy, and she replied saying that his words rang true.

She attached a drawing of a cigarette in flames with the line, ‘Life is like a cigarette – it only ends when you want it to.’

My hand began to stray a little from her tummy, and I now had to rush back to my dorm room to get rid of the pain in my crotch caused by spending too much time in the saddle.

One night, I came riding by the light of the moon into the old courtyard.

I halted, outside my queen’s chambers, to pat and give comfort to my steed, from whose nostrils great jets of steam issued, silver ribbons blown stiff with arousal.

I threw pebbles to brush gently against my queen’s window to rouse her from slumber and let her know that her knight was here.

Her face, pale as a ghost, appeared behind the pane, and she beckoned me in. I slipped into her chambers through a side door.

We lay down upon her bed so that I could immediately go to work on her tummy.

We whispered together in the darkness. She moaned softly.

Soon I was pantsless in an awkward missionary position above her.

I was not ready. I remained in that position until my back ached.

But my queen gripped me and pulled me into her.

My skin pulsed with arcane energy.

A blankness came over me.

I lost awareness.

I came to with my mind separated from my body, floating just outside of myself.

At once, the mysteries, both dark and light, flared to life.

And it was over, too soon.

Little Professor

These are the things I got out of studying English Literature:

• student loan

• identity crisis

• nervous breakdown.

When I matriculated all I knew was that I had to go to university to study *something*.

I had just found out that my soul mate, Lily, had been with other people the whole time I'd been thinking ours was a magical fairy-tale romance.

She took my virginity.

She broke my heart.

I had to go for a blood test.

There was a poet living in me.

And a little novelist too.

And they both wanted to write.

I had been writing since I was a child.

My dad helped me type my stories up on the orange-screen computer at home.

'The Best Mini Stories by Me', featuring Penny the penguin, Nibbles the hamster, and Peter the polar bear.

I wrote poems in primary school.

Like this one:

'Shoes are nice. They are so nice they actually make them twice. Even nice brown mice like to wear shoes and eat rice.'

I wandered the big hall at registration, going from desk to desk, trying to pick the least horrible things to go with all the English Literature courses to make up enough credits.

Politics. Sociology. History.

These seemed least bad.

There were no writing courses.

I had good matric results and could have studied something lucrative and exciting, like Accounting, but I went with my heart.

My heart.

That small bleeding animal – some vulnerable species, a koala bear, maybe – living in my chest.

Studying literature would help me to understand that creature, I thought.

The lecture halls were huge.

There were hundreds of people, all of whom seemed uninterested in making new friends.

But I made one or two acquaints.

We sat in back rows.

Sneering at each other.

The city was huge.

There were millions of people, all of whom were not Lily.

My brother was in his second year of Chemistry.

I went to house parties and clubs and bars with him and his friends.

But I was not there.

I was somewhere else.

On a step behind a chapel.

With Lily.

On a field in a bubble.

With Lily.

On a bed in a chamber.

With Lily.

Places absorb you so that when you're gone they still glow with your energy.

I could not look at her photos.

Or read her letters.

I felt panicked at the thought that we can't go back in time.

I nearly failed my first few English Literature essays.

I went in search of the hearts of the authors we studied and mixed in some blood of my own.

What I lacked, my lecturers said, was research and reason.

I must double my time in the library.

Patch up the heart.

So I did.

Before writing my essays, I did as much research as I could.

I devoured this stuff like Zoo Biscuits.

The literary critics seemed to be trying very hard to sound poetic.

As if they were making up for the failure of their own art.

Or an absence of heart.

They made sense just for the sake of it.

To sound good.

To baffle you with how genius was their way.

I left my heart out in the cold on benches outside the library overlooking the lawns, where I wrote poems on scraps of paper, craving only the company of books and pigeons.

Meanwhile, fat warmongering dreadnoughts of the library laws bobbed on, looking for a scrap.

They should know by now the contours of my imprint burned on their tiny brains through their eyeballs like the sound of a word shaped into a name.

They should know the sickness of my heart by the song it gave to the wind to carry to their little ear holes.

The sound of a koala bear mewling.

And did not at least one among them – the ratty one, perhaps, whose neck had been plucked nearly clean of feathers – know my suffering?

Did that fellow not also have a queen nesting somewhere with a stranger?

Were we not, in fact, like brothers, in search of the same thing – some crumb with which to nourish the soul, even for a split second, before going back to wandering the great frosty plains leading to the library steps?

But no.

These were university pigeons.

They were intellectuals.

You could make out their spectacles in the red rings around their eyes.

They had the unmistakeable spring in their step of academics.

They argued amongst themselves with ferocity.

They had long puffed out their chests and sealed them off from stabs of the cold raging heart.

Even they, like everyone else here, had moved on from high school.

With all this research and practice my essays began to sound better and better and say less and less.

I did well.

So well that in one African Literature lecture I was almost singled out for an essay I wrote that the lecturer said was genius.

‘Thompson?’ he called out. ‘Where’s this Thompson fellow?’

I made myself small in my chair while everyone turned to me and the only other white person in the class.

I escaped.

When I passed friends and acquaints sitting on the Great Hall steps on my way to my important work at the library, I felt as if they might imagine me in a suit, holding a briefcase.

They might cry out to each other: ‘There he goes! There goes the little professor!’

I was in search of my own unifying theory of literature.

My own God particle.

I could turn a phrase that in one go would dissect a book and explain life itself.

One day as I hurried by one of my peers called out to me, ‘Why so serious?’

I replied so that he and all the other little squabs could hear: ‘If you come with me we’ll go and sit on the edge of the world and drink slush puppies and contemplate the meaning of existence.’

The tails of my words slashed his face as I turned on my heel and resumed my stride.

My student loan was accruing interest.

To pay it off, I worked these jobs, which I added thusly to my CV:

• Food and Beverage Attendant, Digger's Meatmongers, Vereeniging

• Beer Sales Executive, ICC Cricket World Cup South Africa 2003

• Head of Print-Media Marketing, various companies, corner William Nicol Drive and Witkoppen Road

• Chief Taster and Quality-Control Officer, New and Experimental Products Division, market-research company, Bryanston

My brother, who worked some of these jobs with me, spent his earnings on beer, cigarettes, and DJing equipment, while I channelled my monies into servicing my debt.

I went out with him to rooftop clubs in the inner city.

In secret corners I harked at lights shining like pinpricks through hazy clouds of marihuana.

Apartment buildings towered over hushed conversations fuelled by THC about the active ingredients of life.

I used these and any opportunities to sharpen my tongue like a pencil whose shavings contained the brain droppings of God.

And then I received a letter in the post.

In her hand.

Redolent of her.

Sweet Lily.

My Lily.

Great redaction of my heart.

Queen in which all of this came together as the ultimate mystery.

She was coming to the city.

To study fashion at LISOF.

To live in an apartment in Tyrwhitt Avenue in Rosebank paid for by her father.

To be closer to me, whom she could no longer live without.

When she was settled I went to see her.

Her flat was old, with wooden floors and a big window overlooking a courtyard.

The place glowed with her as those old spots radiated in my heart.

We sat on the floor, presided over by style icons on the walls, and drank wine.

She was going to be a famous designer.

She would have her own label.

She would set various runways alight.

Her favourite song was one by Gwen Stefani:

If I was a rich girl

Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na

See, I'd have all the money in the world

If I was a wealthy girl[1]

I told her it was a nice song and that it would be great for her to be a wealthy girl.

I was also into that sort of thing in my own way.

I played with the tortoiseshell, Tallulah, who had crawled too quickly into my heart and prized it open like a furry oyster from which, if only Lily wanted to, she could have plucked a worthless bead of love.

Then I went to the bathroom and released all my pent-up farts under cover of the sound of the flushing toilet.

Na-na-na-na-na

The moment I stepped onto campus the following Monday, something in me changed.

As I sat on my bench fresh anger flew into my mind like a rabid pigeon.

Who was this little idiot who had come to the city to study fashion and be famous?

Who believed she was descended of royal Tudor blood but was obviously just a fat over-bloated walking ego with dumpy legs and arms?

I didn't have time for this.

I had more important things to do.

Life was no fairy-tale.

Fashion wasn't some glamorous industry.

It was a sweatshop.

If she wished to toy with someone's heart like a ruthless fashion kitten she must find someone else to stick her pins into.

I was a brain man now if ever you saw one with your own eyeballs of gelatinous flesh.

Oh, let's just sit around all day drawing things.

Let's try on this coat here or that skirt over there.

Let's play dress-up with mannequins.

No.

I refuse to be your fucking mannequin.

What do you know of love?

I wrote to Lily to say I couldn't do it.

I went back to my work.

Finally, I achieved the results I craved.

I tried to forget Lily.

I discovered postmodernist literary theory.

The real was replaced with a simulacrum.

There was no such thing as originality.

What was love anyway but a social construct?

I could see underlying power relations everywhere.

In adverts on billboards for Vicks VapoRub, for example, which used children as slaves.

I could see in the poor little ones' faces the visages of greedy CEO bastards.

I could see through Gwen Stefani's skirt as she gyrated atop a pirate ship using the mast as a dance pole surrounded by Japanese schoolgirls.

There was no certainty in the world anymore.

I worked myself to exhaustion.

What need did one have of sleep when on the verge of important literary discoveries?

My final exam approached.

I sat to write that paper not as a boy who believed in fairy-tales but as a man who knew life as a cruel parody.

My brain had grown inside my skull.

The atoms of grey matter had swollen with the effects of the growth hormone/steroid known as Literary Criticism.

I had a breakthrough.

Poetic formulations of such beauty and meaninglessness, the like of which I had never thought possible, came to me like manna sent from heaven.

But not by god because (s)he/it – along with the author – was dead.

From where, then?

From me.

But who was I, really?

I didn't know.

A stranger in a strange city.

I had a nervous breakdown that night.

My brain snapped.

Maybe from the constant strain of denying it was trying to bend back on itself.

To the past.

To those places that still glowed with me.

Then the tears came.

I could not stop them.

And my heart said: 'You have lost your way. Go back to what you desire. Take Lily back as your queen. Trust me on this one. You'll never regret it.'

---

[1] Gwen Stefani, 'Rich Girl', *Love. Angel. Music. Baby*. (Encore Studios: 2004).

The Dead Rat Under the Cap

1

After washing and rinsing my hair, the hairdresser sat me in front of the mirror, put a cutting cape over my chest and began to work my hair through with a comb. She brushed it back so that my hairline was visible, high up on my forehead. There was a tuft in the front where a thick fringe was supposed to be, the beginnings of a forest where you could make out the trees from the wood. She trimmed the sides deftly.

When she came to the top her hands stopped moving and she looked at me in the mirror.

'Are you okay with going bald?' she asked.

'I don't know. I haven't thought about it,' I lied. I felt hot. Small, nervous beads formed on my forehead.

'Some men don't handle it very well,' she said, going back to the sides. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-one.'

'That's very young to be going bald. I have sixty-year-old customers with better hair. You might want to think about shaving it off. I can do that now, if you like.'

'No, thank you. We can leave the top.'

'You can come in any time. I won't charge you.'

It's none of her fucking business, I told myself when I got home, looking at my cut in the mirror. I pulled all of the hair back. In front, there wasn't enough hair for it to stay back under my hand.

Of course it was her business. What's a hairdresser supposed to do with a bald head? Polish it? Trim the earbrows?

Although I was sure many people had noticed my thinning hair, the family hairdresser had been the first to say something about it. She had stuck her question into me like a blunt object. I respected her greatly and hated her for it at the same time. It was as if she knew me more deeply than most for talking so directly about this dark secret, which I'd been carrying around under a cap.

That beige baseball cap that fitted too snugly. I wore it to the gym. I wore it to pubs with friends. I wore it to class. I wore it to family functions. I wore it until its beigeness turned into a faded brown and it had frayed bits coming off the back. I wore it until the seam on the peak unravelled and there were patches through which the bone-white plastic shone.

I wore it until it wore me.

2

When I was young, bald guys were *old*, like they'd come from some Mesozoic era. Sometimes they were wise. Professors or poets, but mainly scientists with horseshoe fuzz spiralling out of control, smoking and singeing from lab explosions.

There was Clive Rice, captain of the South African cricket team, who looked like the team's grampie. Then came peanut head, President of the Republic, FW de Klerk, whose dome shone brightly in parliament. In movies, baldies were baddies,

big-shot businessmen who hid their baldness under a wig that the wind tore off without mercy at the worst possible moment.

If they weren't villains in wigs, they were family men with nothing to hide. Lovable, comical guys, clownish in their baldness like only Homer Simpson could be. Or, they were spiritual and wise, like Mr Miyagi in *Karate Kid*.

So baldness wasn't how you looked but who you were.

I never had good hair. My mother entered us into those mother-and-child photo competitions. She looked great with her curly brown fro, blue eye shadow, shoulder-padded yellow top, and huge earrings. My hairline marked the midpoint of my skull. My hair was blonde and thin. When you smile, your hairline smiles with you.

We never won anything. It went the same way with the baby bum photos. I still feel like my mother needs to ask for my retrospective permission for those shots. I imagine pasty white buns, not unlike two soft bald heads, in an unfortunate mosaic of rear ends on a magazine page. Ah yes, my son's little buttocks, but aren't they adorable?

3

I had to lose the fucking hat. It was beyond the point of becoming an embarrassment, and sometimes between washes it started to smell funny, an odour maybe related to the dead rat of a secret I kept under it.

I was a newly minted English Literature graduate. I'd spent four years in university libraries devoted to my masters, dead bald white guys, and now I had to get out into the world, to find my place in it, and to make some money.

The best thing, I decided, was to go and teach English in Taiwan. How could I have known? What I was really doing was travelling to a new world where every face was a stranger and in which I had the licence to give myself a personality transplant. There, among throngs of beautiful heads, I could be as bald as I wanted to be, because no one knew who I was.

How could I have known? I'd chosen a country in a continent with the lowest occurrence of baldness. This was a people of handsome hair. Jet-black, industrial stuff that made up the bulk of the global trade in extensions and wigs. Gorgeous women with long black tails, and even prettier men with curtains swept from their eyes and flicked back with abandon.

I wore the cap on the flight. I promised myself that I'd take it off soon after landing, when I was safely in the hotel room in Taoyuan, near Taipei, where I was to live. Flying heightened my insecurity. There was something about being seated helplessly while stewardesses looked down on my baldness from the height of the aisle and their beauty.

When I arrived, I locked the door and threw my bag on the bed. I took out my shears. I removed my cap and stood in front of the bathroom mirror. I set to work over the basin, maintaining the Number 1 I'd given myself shortly before leaving South Africa. The worst thing would have been for me to have been stuck in a strange place without my clippers, because then my hair would have grown out and my new cover, deliberate baldness, would have been blown.

I showered, dried myself, and went into the room and turned the TV on. There was hardcore porn on every channel.

Leaving the cap behind, I went out into the streets, walked into the first restaurant and used my phrasebook to order some soup. I was smiling a lot. I noticed that the waiter would look at the top of my head when I spoke. At least, I thought that was where he was looking.

But no one dragged me into the square and made a circus clown out of me. I was still smiling when I got back to the hotel.

I hardly touched the cap again. I was afraid that if I put it on I might never get it off.

The strange country had its ways. I didn't last long. At work, though I lived in fear of gangs of vicious five year olds beating my ego to a pulp, taking pot shots at my bald head, I survived and did an okay job of teaching English.

I moved from the hotel into a flat next to the railway line. I shared it with a shy Taiwanese girl from the south who I hardly ever saw. My room was tiny. There was no mattress on the bed, but only a thin blanket. When I asked the landlord's daughter about it, she told me that the bed was quite luxurious for someone my age. When the train came past at 3, 4 and 5 in the morning, you couldn't sleep.

The landlord's daughter took me around Taipei. We went to Taipei 101, then the world's tallest building. We ate dumplings at night markets and shopped for clothes among the piles of handbags, boots, coats, trinkets and tee shirts with bad English inscriptions, like the one that had a drawing of a car wash on the front, captioned: 'Car Wash: Best Handjob Ever'.

We went shopping at the department store in town where she picked out a jacket for me that she said would be warm enough in the winter cold.

We ate spaghetti bolognaise at the Western-themed restaurant where she sucked the pasta up mercilessly into her mouth as if the dish was made of one long ball of string, helping it along with chopsticks, making a slurping sound and laughing at how slowly I ate.

We went to Chiang-Kai Shek Memorial Hall, where she showed me the dark-blue and burned-orange pagodas, the gardens filled with junipers where quiet pools brimmed with koi, and the sweeping views of Freedom Square.

We held hands while we walked in the streets and the metro, with people staring at us.

I liked the warmth of her body as I pressed into her from behind on the scooter while we drove around at night and the way she swore at gangsters who drove too fast in the dark streets.

She told me about her boyfriend, a Brit, a teacher who had broken her heart, and on the roof of the building where I lived we watched the lights of the city through the fog and kissed while it drizzled.

It was too much life for me. I was too insecure, too self-centred, to handle all of those eyeballs on my head. I came home after a few months, defeated, but at least capless.

4

'I've heard that studying makes you bald,' my mother said to me one day. 'Studying and stress,' she said.

We were sitting outside at home under the trees. It was Mother's Day, and maybe fitting that we were discussing the heads of hair that my brother and I had

inherited, and the weirdness of the fact that we both went prematurely bald, even though there aren't any bald men in the family. My dad had better hair than me at the age of sixty-five. So did my grandfather, at eighty-odd.

My brother once suggested that male pattern baldness is caused by too much testosterone.

There have been some weird theories. In the 1920s, Isidore Nagler wrote, 'The extraordinary forceful concentration that we impose upon the mind when masturbating causes perhaps the central nervous system to react upon the cranium, thus causing the expansion and induration of the same.'[1] With hairy palms, apparently, you could make yourself bald too, within six months of the first self-abuse.[2]

Ancient Egyptians prayed to the Sun God to cure baldness, implying a divine cause.

Around 400 BC, Hippocrates observed that eunuchs didn't go bald. He was onto something, even if his 'cure' for baldness consisted of a mixture of herbs and pigeon droppings.[3]

The Romans preferred a paste of hippo and other animal fats smeared onto the pate, while Caesar, who possibly invented the comb-over, and who would hide his baldness behind laurels, thought mouse dung would be effective.[4]

In the 1940s, James Hamilton picked up where Hippocrates had left off. Hamilton studied prison inmates who had been castrated (mostly for sexual offences). He found that those who had become eunuchs before puberty never went bald. Those who had been castrated while going bald, stopped balding. The buck stopped with the balls, it seemed. In particular, it appeared as if testosterone was the cause of baldness.

To prove his theory, Hamilton injected non-bald inmates with testosterone, and they subsequently went bald.[5]

My brother was right. Baldness is caused by an excess of dihydrotestosterone (DHT), which is produced by testosterone coming into contact with an enzyme called 5-alpha reductase. Bald men have elevated levels of 5-alpha, which means we produce too much DHT.[6]

DHT, along with a genetic predisposition to baldness, causes the hair follicle to shrink and travel up the hair shaft. The hole in the skin closes, trapping the hair in, the hair-growth cycle stops, and your sons go bald.

5

I arrived in Taiwan for the second time, without a cap. I'd failed to find a job at home, had squandered my savings on the first trip, and had decided to come back to face up to the challenge.

I arrived by train in Pingtung, in the south of the island, and checked into a hotel across the tracks. The bed was round and had fluffy pink heart-shaped pillows, and hardcore porn was playing on every TV channel. Some German stuff, Asian, and one, *Tarzan and Jane*, in which I couldn't stop admiring Tarzan's massive locks.

The owner of the cram school I was to teach at picked me up the next day and showed me around. Pingtung was rural compared to Taipei. As we rode and walked about, everyone stared at us. The people, my boss explained, were not used to seeing foreigners.

One day I got onto a bus heading into town. I missed my stop and then couldn't get off anywhere because I was hopelessly lost.

As I stood, clutching the rail, watching the passengers get on and off, I noticed how many old women there were. I looked down at one woman seated near me. She was almost completely bald. Her hair was so thin that the white of her scalp shone through.

Suddenly, I noticed that all the little old ladies were bald. Or at least, most of them were. I felt peace flood over me. I used the bus again, feeling at home among my little old bald ladies.

My girlfriend Lily, who I had reunited with at home, joined me in Taiwan. We moved into a flat and settled into the rhythm of working six days a week, from two in the afternoon until late at night.

We adopted a stray cat we found in a local park, named her Pip, and watched her grow from a scrawny rodent into a spindly teenager.

We got drunk on quarts of Tsingtao and braaied on our little balcony, heading out on a scooter one night and getting lost somewhere in sugarcane fields near a military base.

We went to the Beaver Dam, a local pub where foreigners met, and fell over as we tried to share a bicycle on the way home.

We huddled together in our flat while the building shook from the after-effects of a magnitude-seven quake that struck just off the coast, and then, a miserable year passed, we boarded a plane and called for wine to calm our nerves as we headed home, wondering if Pip would make it.

6

In an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, co-creator of *Seinfeld*, Larry David, who plays a semi-fictional version of himself, is sitting in a restaurant with his friend Jeff Greene, played by Jeffrey Garlin, when a waitress comes to take their order. Greene orders something to drink, but before David can order, the waitress starts to walk away. David has to call her back, as if she had forgotten him on purpose. He explains to Greene that this is an example of 'bald discrimination'. David says that it happens to him all the time.

'How do you deal with it?' Greene asks.

'Well, you know, you just get used to it. And I get support from my bald brothers,' David says.

'There's meetings?' Greene asks.

'There's no meetings but, you know, we see each other on the street … Nod … Give a thumbs up. You know, we love each other. Me and my bald brothers.'[7]

As far as I know, there's no secret code among bald people acknowledging some common struggle.

I've made up my own bald code as I've gone along. Here it is, roughly, and in brief:

While you're still coming to terms with your hair loss, avoid metaphors and sayings referencing hair, such as, 'Let your hair down' or 'It went straight over my head'.

Beware of the word 'bold' because it can give you a fright sometimes.

Get used to search engines using photo-recognition technology to target you for baldness cures.

You'll have to buy less shampoo now, but you'll be needing more facewash.

Always reference Dr Phil.

Say, 'I'm not going bald, I'm just getting more head.'

Wear sunscreen, always.

Don't wear your sunglasses on your head.

When meeting new people while wearing a hat, remove it so that you don't surprise or shock them later with your baldness.

You don't need to buy a new car. Especially not a convertible.

7

I applied for the position of Assistant Publishing Secretary at a book publisher in Johannesburg a few months after returning from Taiwan.

I arrived at the publisher's upmarket offices for my interview and stood shaking in the foyer as I announced myself to the receptionist, who told me to take a seat. A tall, beautiful woman with short brown hair arrived and took me to a boardroom.

I sat there alone imagining, as I'd done for the last few days, my interviewer: a young Wall Street type, some publisher version of Hugh Grant, a besuited guy with a perfect head of hair to match his turn of phrase.

The brunette, who was from HR, came in and sat opposite me. She smiled, and I felt more nervous. Her teeth were perfect. She had great hair. Her figure was slim, hugged by an expensive-looking dress.

My future boss walked in. He was tall, and his head shone under the bright lights.

I never experienced any of Larry David's 'bald discrimination' in the workplace. I was promoted rapidly, going from Assistant Publishing Secretary to Digital Publisher in a few years. I felt almost normal.

8

'Have you ever thought about treatment for your baldness?' my mother asked me.

I thought she knew me better.

There are hair transplants, a treatment that has come a long way since the seventies, when it was known as 'plugs'. Back then, specialists would punch holes in the back of your scalp to harvest healthy hair, which was then transplanted in barren areas. This resulted in unsightly clumps, but the process has been refined so that the follicles are harvested individually or in pairs.[8] The likes of Jacques Kallis, Shane Warne and Wayne Rooney bear this out.

There's the wig, first invented in 3000 BC by the Egyptians, but as a fashion item, not specifically for baldness.[9]

Toupees have evolved from one-size-fits-all nightmares to highly customised jobs. The hair is mostly sourced from China and India, where some of it is harvested at temples in ritualistic donations, but much of it comes from people living in poverty who sell their hair to survive.[10]

There's hair in a can. Basically, sheep's hair cut up really fine and statically charged to stick to your bald spots.[11]

Various drugs target the cause of baldness in order to arrest it. These are aimed at lowering the amount of DHT in the blood.

But there's something off about Kallis going from being a hair ambassador for Shoulder to Shoulder to a baldness survivor for some hair studio. There's the cost too, at around R200 000.[12] When I see Rooney on TV I don't see hair where his pattern baldness is meant to be. All-time great England striker, Alan Shearer, seems more authentic with his unashamedly bald head, the same cosmetically unenhanced one he used to net a once-record 46 English Premier League goals by header.

No drugs or other people's hair for me. I outgrew my wig, a beige cap, some years ago.

The World Health Organization classified male pattern baldness as a disease in 1992. But it's a curious illness, one that, for me, might best be treated by not being treated at all.

9

If you think you're comfortable with your baldness, try online dating, where you're reduced to a photo. Studies have shown that women are much more likely to go for men with full heads of hair on online dating sites.[13] To add to my worries, I had braces on my teeth that lifted my bite in such a way that my two front teeth, which had been ground to stumps, looked like they had been punched out.

When I moved out of the city to a more rural setting, my chances of meeting women, because I worked from home, were close to zero. After a year of being single, I decided to try a dating app.

Many women's bios relegated me to the third division. 'Must have good hair' or 'Bald guys need not apply', they stated. I made sure that the pictures I chose for my profile left them in no doubt about my baldness.

At first, I was selective, but after some time and no matches, I decided to experiment by accepting the potentials that the app wanted me to meet. I got a few matches and struck up some conversations, but I got nowhere. I'd never officially dated. I'd gone from one long-term girlfriend to the next. My chatting-up skills were poor. I didn't get a date in two years. Maybe that classifies as worse than 'poor'.

But finally, as I was about to delete the app, I matched with someone.

She was much more gorgeous in person. I wore a Homer Simpson tee shirt under my jersey to the date. On it, Homer has headphones on, and he's jamming out in his undies.

---

[1] Isidore Nagler, in *The True Cause of Baldness*, published in 1922. See Gersh Kuntzman, *Hair! Mankind's Historic Quest to End Baldness* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Random.com Books).

[2] Gersh Kuntzman, *Hair!*

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Larry David, 'The N Word', *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 6, Episode 8 (HBO: 2007).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Homa Khaleeli, 'The Hair Trade's Dirty Secret', *The Guardian*, https://goo.gl/f7nXXF (accessed 18 May 2017).

[11] Gersh Kuntzman, *Hair!*

[12] Paul Willis, 'It's Seriously Depressing to Lose Your Hair', *Vice*, https://goo.gl/L3jPrm (accessed 18 May 2017).

[13] See, for example, 'Women Prefer Men with a Full Head of Hair', *The Telegraph*, https://goo.gl/aNBHxs (accessed 18 May 2017).

Ambitious, Will Travel

In a navy-blue collared shirt that my parents had bought me for my Matric Farewell, black boat-like shoes and dark-grey trousers, I stood shaking in the foyer of the publishing house while the receptionist finished her call.

She hung up and looked at me. Her eyebrows were raised, as if she was asking, 'Who the fuck are you and what do you want?'

'Hi,' I said. 'How are you?'

'Busy,' she said.

'I'm here for a job interview.'

'What position?'

'Assistant Publishing Secretary.' It sounded important the way I said it.

She dialled someone and said, 'Someone's here for the assistant position.' It sounded lowly the way she said it. 'Take a seat.' She pointed at a red couch next to a bookshelf.

I sat down. A pair of gangly wooden sculptures leaned over the couch on each side – marble-black, waif-like humanoids with large heads, long arms and extraterrestrial eyes. They were neither happy nor sad. They just seemed to stand in silent judgement of the visitor. They made me think of Mia Couto's story of the old man who dies trying to dig a grave for his wife, saying she'll surely die soon even though she's healthy. I thought of the travel article I'd written earlier that morning on luxury accommodation options in Mozambique, and the contrast. I called myself a professional writer, but if I was honest, I added 'and data capturer'.

A woman in a black dress with a red bow tied at her waist, Gatsby style, introduced herself as the person from HR I'd emailed a few days ago to apply for the

job. Her hair was jaw-length and jet-black, and she wore pearl beads doubled around her neck. Her skin was like porcelain.

I followed her to a boardroom.

'Help yourself to some water,' she said. 'The Publishing Director will be with you in a minute.' She left and closed the door behind her.

I poured myself a glass and ran through some questions. 'What would you say is your biggest weakness?' Easy: I work too hard. In fact, I work so damn hard you won't have enough work to give me. 'Where do you see yourself in five years?' My goal is to be a publisher. I think my skills are best suited to the editorial side of the business.

The woman from HR came in, sat down, and smiled at me. A tall man swept into the room, pulled a chair out and sat with his ankle resting on his knee. His expression had a coldness to it, a business-like detachment.

'You're here,' the Director said.

'I made it.' I smiled, thinking of my car, an 80s-style Toyota Cressida that I called The Big Green Clean Machine, parked in a wide visitor's bay outside, as if set down there, twelve merciful kilometres from home, by a prayer.

I offered him my hand, introducing myself.

He barely brushed it. 'What work experience do you have?'

He had my résumé in front of him and I realised that he hadn't read it.

'I taught English at a cram school in Taiwan for a year. I did bookkeeping while studying my English Honours, and I've been working as a professional writer for the last year while studying Publishing at Wits.'

'A freelancer, you mean?'

I nodded.

‘Why should I hire you?’

I hadn’t really prepared for this question, asked so bluntly. ‘I’m ambitious,’ I said. ‘I work hard. I’ll do whatever it takes to do this job well. It’s impossible for me to disappoint you because I can’t afford to disappoint myself.’

Rent was R2 500. I made just enough to cover that plus basic groceries. Often there wasn’t enough for petrol to get me to university and my girlfriend to her job interviews.

‘Do you have any questions?’

‘No.’ It was over. I’d failed.

‘Thanks for coming in. We’ll be in touch.’ He stood up and walked out.

I was sunny side up, but my fucking fridge was empty. I had to get this article on the Seychelles done and then move on to fourteen more to make my daily target.

A place exists in the remotest of magical dimensions, I wrote, a place with breathtaking views, untouched beaches fringed with crystal-clear waters and all-year-round summer. The Seychelles comprises 155 magnificent islands situated in the warm, azure Indian Ocean, some 1 500 kilometres east of mainland Africa.

My beaches were always untouched. Sometimes they were white and neverending. The views were always breathtaking, the waters azure, crystal-clear, and the places remote, just how my client Louise, Lou, liked them, existing in year-round summers of a thousand adjectives.

Scuba dive with tiger sharks in the deep, snorkel in the shallow waters, eyeing the million-colour fishes, swim with bottle-nose dolphins, hike through lush tropical jungles, or view the beautiful reefs from a glass-bottom boat. The Seychelles is the playground of millionaires and budget travellers alike.

Ninety-one words, two mentions of ‘Seychelles’.

Now Mahé, per brief.

Dance with the dice at the stunning casino on Mahé, one of the largest islands of the Seychelles, and check into a bungalow on a whim with the beach on your doorstep and luxury at your command.

Now for the conclusion.

This exotic island paradise is your gateway to the holiday you’ve always dreamed of: explore untouched beaches, discover rare moments tucked into the folds of fate, melt with amber sunrises and sunsets, meet someone new or raise a toast to that special, defining Seychelles moment.

I needed my own special bathroom moment. I got up and went through to the bathroom adjoining the bedroom. The toilet was ancient, like the rest of the flat I shared with my girlfriend, Lily. It was less of a flat than a section of a house at the foot of Northcliff Hill. You could see the place where Rodney, our landlord, had boarded up the door joining our flat with their bedroom. Through that flimsy barrier, we could hear Rodney taking neverending pees in the early hours, and we would sometimes hear him and his wife getting busy.

My eyes glazed over with deadening work.

A place exists in the shadow of Northcliff Hill, I thought, where writers who have come to Johannesburg to pursue their dreams nourish their ambitions, 250 words at a time, R10 a shot, at four cents a word. Here the carpets are so brown you’d swear that that was their original colour. There’s no washing machine like the period-piece bathtub and your arms and legs to work it. The paint doesn’t peel but flakes in mysterious curls, each one telling a story, like the cigarette burns in the furniture that whisper of the illustrious ones who’ve come before you. Here, on the one working

plate of the old stove, you can reheat your soup for breakfast, a spoiling broth of ambition served lukewarm.

I washed my hands and went back to my desk, finished the Seychelles piece and moved on to Bird Watching in the Kalahari.

There was a world, apparently, made almost entirely of rolling red sand and tall dunes. Ostriches, not a bird, appeared on the horizon while you walked with San guides who pointed out the more than 100 avian species. Double-banded coursers. Larks. Swallow larks. *Finch* larks. Several chat species. The African pipit, for fuck's sake! Not to mention the more than 20 raptor species ready to swoop down and pluck your eyes out. Watch out for elephants, rhinoceros and Americans. Tear up the dunes, why not, in a 4x4. Take a twilight game drive in an open Land Cruiser, why not, and hump your wife afterwards to the sound of crickets in thickets. Close the flaps and zip it up. It might not necessarily be your wife. You get confused in the dark. Sometimes these things happen in luxury bush-tent camps. Go on quad-biking safaris with space-age Bushmen. Crown it all off with a blowjob on a sand dune while you watch the magnificent fucking sunset with a cigarette in one hand that you lit off a smouldering log and a Windhoek in the other.

I realised what was bothering me. I hadn't been paid. I opened my email and sent Lou, who was offline, a note. Hi Lou, I said, this is a reminder that you still need to pay me. Let me know if you need me to work out the amount. Thank you. I left the internet-browser window open and started another piece, on Madagascar.

I saw a new email come in out of the corner of my eye. It was from the HR woman. We were very impressed with your résumé and your interview, it said. We'd like to offer you the job of Assistant Publishing Secretary. Please find more details of the offer attached.

I opened the attachment and my eyes stopped at the amount: R5 250 per month. I tried to remain calm, to work my way to the end of the article, delaying my pleasure, extending the shock of it.

I hiked through the jungles of Montagne d'Ambre National Park, trying to spot the rare blue-nose chameleon, stopping to picnic in a quiet glade near a gushing waterfall, listening to the chatter of the rainforest. I took in the scent of exotic ylang-ylang, vanilla and lemongrass at Nosy Tanikely, and I snorkelled at Île Sainte-Marie. Then I got into my canoe, Crusoe-style, and rowed up a river, peering through the undergrowth for the elusive Madagascan lemur. I ditched the canoe and trekked inland to a breathtaking waterfall at the foot of a mountain, where I found him. The lemur said, 'In 250 words or less, you can tell Lou to fuck off. You have a full-time job now. Godspeed.'

I replied to the publisher saying I'd take the job, when did they need me to start?

I arrived for my first day of work early, wearing the same clothes I'd worn to my interview, hoping no one would notice. I went straight to reception.

'Hi,' I said to the receptionist.

'Hello.' She smiled.

Was this the same person?

'How can I help you?' she asked.

'I'm the new Assistant Publishing Secretary. It's my first day.'

'Hold on.' She dialled and spoke to someone.

I hung around the desk awkwardly.

A young woman with a sandy complexion, short and friendly looking, arrived and introduced herself as the Publishing Secretary.

I followed her through the offices to the Publishing Department. There were rows of cubicles where people sat behind their computers. Some were on the phone and others were hunched over papers at oval-shaped side tables. It was very quiet. We stopped outside the Director's office. He sat at his desk, typing on his laptop, referring to a printout on the table, his brow creased.

'He's here,' the Secretary said.

'Good, good. Show him around,' the Director said, without looking up.

The Secretary's desk was right outside the Director's office. It was hemmed in on all sides by piles of paper and books. There were boxes on the floor with textbooks beside them, with printouts of lists on top.

We went around to the different departments and the Secretary introduced me to a few people. I felt nervous, cold and sweaty, and I couldn't wait to be shown to my desk where I might hide until I could catch up on my nerves. We ended at the kitchen.

'This is the plunger you'll use to make his coffee,' the Secretary said. She showed me that it had the Director's initials marked in Tippex on the bottom. 'This is his favourite mug.' It was black with white polka dots. 'He likes this Kenyan roast at the moment.' She held up an orange bag with ornate lettering. 'But when it runs out he'll ask you to go to Woolies to get him something new. He takes it black with no sugar. You know how to use a plunger?'

I realised: I was to be the Secretary's assistant. I'd missed the clue that had been hiding in my job title all along. I was the assistant's *assistant*. Chief Cook and Bottle Washer, as my dad would've said.

‘I have one at home,’ I said. I didn’t give a fuck about coffee. I wanted to get started on books. I wanted to learn as much as I could as quickly as possible. I wanted to get my hands dirty making books and I wanted to have all their secrets. But I would do whatever it took. I was like that blue-nose Madagascan chameleon. I just wanted to blend in.

We went straight back to the Secretary’s desk.

‘Pull up a chair,’ she said, pointing to a vacant desk nearby.

I rolled a chair over.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘There are no desks for you at the moment.’

‘Whose desk is that?’ I pointed at the one I’d gotten the chair from.

‘It’s Phil’s. Philemon’s. But he’s very sick. He hasn’t been in for a while, for a few months now.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’

She shrugged. ‘Help me with these lists. Go through them and make sure that the school grades in the titles match the category they’re under. Grades 7 to 9 for Senior Phase and Grades 10 to 12 for FET.’

‘What’s it for?’

‘Submissions. It’s really important we get this right.’

I didn’t know what that was.

I was sitting at Phil’s desk a month later when my first payslip came, delivered by a junior from HR. It came in a sleeve slightly larger than an envelope. It was pink at the top with a black-and-white pattern that looked like a barcode covering most of it, hiding the figures inside. You had to slip something, like a ruler or a pen, between the sides that were stuck together, to get it open.

I pushed the newspaper I'd been working on aside. The Director had tasked me with reading the papers every morning after making him coffee. I had to search for articles that would be of interest to the publishers. I got the feeling, every morning, as I handed my articles out, that they went unread.

I slid a ruler into the payslip and opened it. There was a column for 'Basic Salary' and one for 'Deductions', with a total, 'Net Salary', at the bottom.

My salary had shrunk miserably. I hadn't stopped to think that there would be deductions. Petrol was costing a fortune. I had started cycling to work to save money.

I closed the slip and went back to the newspaper, but my eyes glazed over. Who was Phil? What sickness did he have? It felt wrong to be working at his desk. I tried not to disturb anything. I felt his eyes on me, as if in using his desk I might take his job while he battled his sickness in bed somewhere.

I missed my desk at home. It was *my* desk. I missed the crappy internet. I missed my laptop, even though it overheated and the fan made a strange sound trying to catch up with the fever. I missed the feeling of *making* something. In my old job my income was directly related to my productivity. Here I could work as hard as I could or waste away and my salary would be the same. There wasn't much to do. I'd ask the publishers if I could help them with anything, wanting to be involved with making books, and the answer was always no. What could I possibly help with? I had no experience with books and I was incompetent. I'd become a master of the tape dispenser. No one could make a box like I could. My skills at pushing a trolley laden with books from the storeroom up the elevator through the office were second-to-none. I did my permissions work – applying to copyright holders for permission to reuse their content in our textbooks – efficiently. But the rest of the time I sat around

without work, trying to look like I was busy, hoping I wouldn't get fired because the company didn't really need me. Had this place made Phil sick?

That fucking stupid Madagascan monkey, lemur, whatever, had been wrong. Could the idiot quote the price of petrol to the cent? Did it know what it cost me to run The Big Green Clean Machine twenty-four kilometres to work and back every day, and what PAYE or UIF meant? No, because the smug bastard swung from trees.

I had a new desk, in my own cubicle, with my own computer. It was directly in front of the Secretary's desk, so she could see what I was doing, but she was hovering around somewhere, as she liked to do, talking to the publishers. I opened my personal emails. There was a message from Lou with a fresh batch of articles, replying to my request for more work. I had nothing to do, so I decided to sneak one in.

Every year, more than five million tourists come to pray at St Patrick's Cathedral on the corner of 50th and 51st Streets in Manhattan, New York, I wrote.

There was the soft rustle of keyboards. Great minds were hard at work here.

Worshippers come to light candles of peace and prayer, to listen to the serene organ music, to confess their sins, and to find quiet between the cubicles. The crypt, small, clad in grey marble with ornate turquoise doors, is home to tombs stacked one on top of each other. Many have been laid to rest here – those who have given themselves up to a lifetime of sacrifice and service – those who have come to shrivel up and die in an ancient tomb called Office.

There was a presence about my shoulders. Something was blocking out the light. I turned around and there was the Director, standing behind me with a harsh, accusing look on his face.

'What's *that*?' he asked.

‘This?’ I turned to my screen and then back to him, puzzled.

‘Those websites.’ He came closer and stood right behind me, over me.

‘I was just doing some research.’

‘For what?’

‘Travel.’

‘You’re going to …’ he leaned closer so that he could see ‘… St Patrick’s Cathedral in New York?’

I was quiet for a while. ‘I finished my permissions work and I have nothing to do, so I’m doing travel articles.’

‘For who?’

‘A travel site.’

‘Ah,’ he said. He seemed pleased. ‘You know that your contract doesn’t allow you to do any work outside of this company, for anyone else?’

I shook my head.

‘Did you read your contract?’

‘No.’

‘Any work you do on the company’s time that isn’t the company’s business isn’t allowed unless it’s cleared by management.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘Legally, we could force you to pay the company back for the amount you earned doing this work while wasting our time.’

‘I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.’

‘Good. Coffee please, then.’ He went into his office.

I caught a glimpse of the sky through one of the windows. It was inky. It had drizzled, and the roads had been slippery that morning as I cycled to work. It was a

monochrome Johannesburg. I had all the time in the world to colour it in but no means to do so. Did the Director detest me because he could smell the stink of ambition about me?

I was like a great fly sticking to every pore of the building, coffee tray in hand.

One day I served coffee to the Director and his guests, officials from the Department of Education, in a boardroom.

He didn't stop to acknowledge me as I came in and placed the tray on the table, but as I was leaving he called my name and I froze in horror as I half turned and he said to my back, 'You know, you'll make someone a great wife one day.'

His guests burst into laughter and were still laughing when I retreated.

A few months in, the Director called me into his office and asked me to take a seat next to a person from Cape Town who I knew to be the author of a software programme designed to help young learners develop their reading skills.

'How would you like to publish this product?' The Director held up a sleeveless CD case with the software's name written in a black marker on the CD inside.

'I would really like to,' I said.

'Good, that's it for now.'

I went back to my desk. At last, I had my break.

I spent the next few weeks working with the in-house designer to create the artwork for the sleeves that would be used in the double-CD case and for the silkscreen printing on the CDs. I hustled printers for quotes. I rewrote and proofread the copy

that would be used on the packaging, and I tested every CD before signing off and sending the shipment to the warehouse in Swaziland for distribution.

The software sold in huge amounts in licence fees, and I felt like I was finally contributing, and I wouldn't be fired for being useless.

The best time to write was at lunch, when everyone was out and technically I was on my own time.

Visit an enchanted beach, I wrote one day, the site of a haunting shipwreck on the Skeleton Coast, to enjoy a lunch of oysters, sausages, meats, fresh fruit, freshly baked bread and champagne.

I ate my sandwich between typing. I retreated further inland.

Surreal sunsets dominate the horizon. The sun melts in sticky orange, giving way to a deepening blue before a starry canvas opens out and the moon is hoisted higher up on a string. This is the place known to the San as 'The Land God Made in Anger' and, to the Portuguese, 'The Gates of Hell', where whale and seal bones and the husks of wrecked ships litter the coast and giant thorn trees are set against the bluest dome.

The Secretary came walking slowly past, supporting a tall, thin black man whose face was drawn and wan. He was emaciated, like the wooden sculptures in the foyer.

'Let's see if he's in,' the Secretary said. They stopped outside the Director's office. 'He must be out for lunch. I'll tell him you came around to say hi.'

The man looked over to the empty desk in the corner, Phil's desk, and then his eyes wandered to me. I realised that I was staring. I said hi. He smiled and nodded, and they moved on.

Six months into the job a circular came around advertising the post of Marketing Assistant. I applied right away.

On a Saturday, while working on the Quirimbas Archipelago at home, I received a reply from HR to my personal email account. Could I make it to an interview next week?

Maybe that bastard lemur had been on holiday across the Mozambique Channel all along? Maybe he'd been hiding there for the last six months in his unexplored tropical paradise, sipping on mojitos, snorkelling the reefs, smoking a reefer on the beach with his Mozambican honeys, cruising the crystal waters in a dhow, or eating a fucking cashew nut?

'Tell us why you think you're suitable for this job,' the Marketing Manager said. She wore a fleece with the company logo on it. She was a friendly Spanish woman who was always busy, but always smiling. The woman from HR sat next to her, taking notes.

I had no marketing experience. I didn't know if I *was* suitable for the job. 'For the past six months I've been working as the Assistant Publishing Secretary,' I said. 'The job has exposed me to many different areas of the business. I've been responsible for a range of important jobs essential to the efficient running of the Publishing Department's office.'

- Buy new Kenyan-roast (Woolworths)
- Buy club sandwich (Director) and ensure whole-grain not white like last time
- Apply precise force to plunger to ensure superlative strain and release pungent aroma plus toasty flavour

• Read newspaper to find enlightening articles for publishers

• Make cardboard box

• Trolley books to office ex storeroom

• Permissions

• Submissions

• Set out tray of snacks for important guests and ensure serviettes and side plates

• Absorb insults

I continued: 'I was responsible for packaging this software.' I placed a double-CD case of the literacy programme on the table in front of the Manager. 'I think I would be good at helping you make all the marketing materials you produce, like the company tablecloths, banners, calendars, pens, tops and caps.'

The Manager turned the case around in her hands and then put it down. 'What *really* motivates you?'

I felt like she would know. Just by looking at me, she could tell that I was a publisher, not a marketer. In time I'd grow to like the silence. I'd ferret about the building, secretly leaving my phone off the hook. People in the market were just names and the market was a faceless blur. I couldn't sell anything.

I confessed: 'My real interest lies in making books. I want to work on the editorial side. But I also want to get as much experience as I can in all aspects of the business. I'm eager and ambitious, and it doesn't really matter where I work at this stage. All I need is a chance to prove myself.'

What really motivated me? Why had I applied for the job? Put differently, *why* was I ambitious? I was stealing toilet paper from the company bathroom. I brought my own empty roll to spin toilet paper onto it to take home. I didn't want to be

defined by the quality of the coffee I made. I wanted to feel useful and to be productive. I didn't want to be someone's fucking wife.

'Thanks for your time.' The Manager made a note and looked up at me and smiled.

'Thank you,' I said, and ferreted my way back to my desk.

A few days later I was at my desk, working on an assignment for my Publishing Studies class. In groups, we had to conceptualise a publishing company and create a business plan for it. We would submit a report, but we also had to present our idea to the class. Our company was called Nomad Travel Guides, and I had to put the slides together for the publishing side of the business.

I started with some slides about our market. There were two segments we hoped to reach with different products. The first was 'Budget'. This person was in LSMs 4 and 5. He was an urban dweller, likely renting in the city or on its outskirts. He was single, 20 to 35 years old, and earned R3 000 to R5 000 per month. He was starting out in his career. He was in debt. He travelled 2.4 times a year. He watched his pennies closely.

The second was 'Luxury'. This person was in LSMs 8 to 10. He was 30 to 55 years old, and he worked in upper management. He had savings and was financially savvy. He was prepared to spend generously in return for the promise of quality. He travelled 4.1 times a year and when he returned from his trips he handed all of his slips to the Assistant Publishing Secretary to process for reimbursement. These included the likes of gourmet sandwiches, steaks, sushi, expensive coffees, wine, and eggs fucking Benedict for breakfast.

'Hey mona,' I heard someone say.

I looked up and there was Kabs, the Storeroom Manager from the Marketing Department, a gentle giant with a mouth full of stumpy teeth.

He was grinning widely. He leaned closer with his hands on my oval-shaped side table and spoke softly. ‘You applied for the position?’

‘Which one?’

‘Marketing Assistant.’

‘Why?’

‘I saw you. There in the room with our mother.’

‘I did. What’s it like to work there?’

‘Nca,’ he said. ‘Better than here. You like your boss?’

The Director came out of his office and Kabs left.

At lunch I joined Kabs at a table in the canteen. He was sitting with a few of the other guys.

‘Have you heard how white people pronounce the president’s name?’ Kabs asked me as I sat down.

I shook my head.

He put on an accent. ‘They say, “Tarbow Mabeki”.’

Prince, from Customer Services, said, ‘Mara guys have you heard how uMartin calls Jabu?’

Jabu was Martin’s assistant.

Prince put on an accent. ‘“Jarbew. Come clean here, Jarbew. Take those boxes to my car, Jarbew. Take out the trash, Jarbew.”’

I ate my sandwiches, happy to be quiet, to listen and laugh.

Kabs, seeing my white bread, reopened his lunchbox and took out two chicken feet. ‘Hello,’ he said to me. Everyone was watching. He took a chicken foot in each hand and then made them walk, one foot in front of the other, on the table towards me, and then he asked in a high-pitched voice, ‘Do you want some scufftin?’

The next day at lunch Kabs and I went to Al’s Gourmet Chicken, down the road from the office park, and sat at a table inside near the kitchen. We ordered a quarter chicken and chips each to go, lemon and herb for me, and extra hot for Kabs, and some beers for the wait.

‘How long have you been at Marketing?’ I asked.

‘Few years now,’ Kabs said, sipping his beer. ‘I was at Production before, and I was a Sales Rep before that.’

‘A Sales Rep?’ I couldn’t fit Kabs as a travelling salesman.

‘Ja, me and Phil.’

‘You worked with Philemon?’

‘Boy, those were the days. We used to wear suits. Guys always wore suits. It wasn’t like now with jeans and tee shirts. In those days me and Phil would hit the road. We went all over the country. KZN, Cape Town, PE, Pitori, Bloem, and Mpumalanga, or as you white people say, “Mapumalangar”.’ He sipped his beer and laughed. ‘They gave us a company car. We filled the boot with books and went town to town on a company credit card. We drank and ate like kings, boy, and the women … Yoh!’ He made hourglass shapes in the air with his hands. He stopped and stared out into the street.

‘Then what happened?’

‘New MD. Me and Phil were out. I went to Marketing to be a Storeroom Manager, and Phil went to Publishing to be a Driver.’

‘What happened to Phil?’

The person at the counter called our number.

‘Women,’ Kabs said as we got up to collect our food. ‘He loved women.’

At my desk, I opened my emails while I ate my chips. I stopped eating when I saw that one of the messages was from HR. I opened it and read.

We would like to offer you the job of Marketing Assistant, it said. Please find more details of the offer attached. I opened the document and looked for the amount. R7 000 basic.

I went back to my Publishing Studies slides for Nomad Travel Guides, trying to prolong the pleasure of the news.

I decided to change the logo for Nomad Travel Guides. Instead of the two skinny stick men we had walking off into some unknown distance, I wanted to have a Madagascan lemur. He’d be wearing shades and smoking a cigar, and grant you whatever your precious wandering heart desired.

That night, I wrote my last article for Lou.

In the midst of flowering jacarandas and palms, we pulled into the Grand Train Station of Maputo. We went into the old colonial building and sat down to a Laurentina, a light Mozambican beer, while a road-weary traveller pulled up a chair and began to tell us the story of the lost Kruger Millions. Legend told that Paul Kruger brought his gold to Maputo by train in the wake of the Boer War, as he fled

the British Army. Were one to be in search of treasure, the old traveller said, the Grand Train Station of Maputo might be the best place to start.

We headed out through the marble-white pillars into the streets, past the pavement cafés and the marketplaces, towards the beach, where we joined the elusive Madagascan lemur for a mojito.

In 250 words or less, he explained that this would be our last meeting, and then he handed me my treasure, a contract of employment for the position of Marketing Assistant, which I tucked under my arm before we set sail on a glass-bottom boat, gliding over the azure waters, while the sun sank and gave way to a clear navy dome sparkling with a thousand adjectives.

The Misery of Cyan

1

Author seems to be able to say exactly what needs saying just with his body language, moving from one statuesque pose to another, always ending in a model of pensiveness with his chin in a pincer of thumb and index finger or his hands clasped before his face while he looks to some only-he-can-see horizon. This is a mark of the successful alignment of his personal brand and core values. His cufflinks glimmer. He has on a jacket but no tie today. His laugh is easy and distinctive, almost to the point of being practised.

His manuscript lies on the table before us at Grand Central in Melrose Arch, downstairs from the office. Café music plays.

Managing Director is going on about the industry. Why books are so expensive. Why we can't launch around Christmas because we'll be drowned out by all the big international titles. Why we'll rather start with a smaller run and reprint. How little publishers make. Why we can't pay authors more. These things have become standard. I've started saying them myself.

Author uhums and then starts his pitch. He gives talks on personal branding, he says, to massive corporations, and he's self-published all of his books, and sells them out, routinely keeping the printers busy, but he's looking for a professional touch now. He only has so much time in the day. Seconds tick loudly, he says, when they're ticking on a line of personal-brand watches you're designing. He flashes me the big

thing on his wrist. On the watch's face is a black-and-white, stylised logo of Author's head.

He tells us how many lives his books have changed. Then about this one, its unique formula of the 7 Ps for successfully reinventing your personal brand. When he met Oprah, he teased her about writing a foreword for his book, but she said she didn't do forewords. There will be lots of photos. Richard Branson was a hoot at the leadership summit. And at another event, after everyone left, Author found himself rubbing shoulders with Clinton and Tutu, and a photographer rushed into the room to capture the moment. It's on his laptop. He'll find it. There's also the pic of him undergoing his traditional initiation into a Swazi regiment – Author is the only American ever to be inducted into the unit. That's an embarrassing one, he says, because in it he's topless. There are lots of photos of him on rooftops backgrounded by the Joburg skyline. When he arrived here a decade ago from the States with nothing but the clothes on his back and only knowing one in 930 million Africans, he'd never have dreamed that he'd be sitting at this table with one of the continent's major book publishers.

Director riffles through the MS. She says that we'll have to apply for permission to use the many quotes in the book, but Junior can do that no problem. Junior will have the contracts over as soon as the meeting's done, if not sooner. It's scary how good he is with Copy Machine.

Laugh.

Author asks me how long I've been in the industry.

'Three years,' I say. 'I studied Publishing but I'm still learning a lot.'

'It's such a cut-throat industry,' he says, and then he asks, smiling almost slyly, 'How long do you think you'll last in books?'

Laugh.

Director kindly takes it upon herself to answer for me: Many people don't make it in publishing because you have to wear so many different hats. In South Africa, we don't have the luxury they have overseas of employing people for different tasks. You can't just be an editor or a production expert or only good with contracts – on top of that you have to really be able to network and make connections that ultimately turn into books.

'Man is a knot, a mesh, a web into which relationships are tied,' quotes Author, of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which he's included in the book (will we need permission for that one, too?).

I think about the article pinned to the board above Copy Machine of an interview that Director did with a magazine. In it, Director says that she loves networking. She's so good at it that she could network with a doorknob. A few of us stood around one day in the nook that Copy Machine lives in next to Director's office, and Operations Director, a small, older Indian lady, whispered to us, 'But who of right and stable and sound mind would want to network with a bloody doorknob?'

Suddenly, Author and Director unleash a torrent of namedrops from their respective, extensive, personal networks, drawn from invisible clouds suspended above our table, almost as if they are trying to compete with each other in terms of the number and quality of friends they have in high places. My mouth swings open like a trapdoor but shuts suddenly.

'Man is a knot, a mesh, a web of doorknobs,' quotes Author, 'and all you need is a personal brand that sings in order to unlock the doors to Successland.'

Author's pocket kerchief grins in upside-down triangular smile.

‘That,’ Director says, ‘or you really need to know how to service an asshole with your tongue.’

Laugh.

‘Not just any asshole,’ Author says, ‘but the right one, too. When I landed in South Africa with only the shoes on my two feet, I slept my way into one of the most powerful families in this country, headed by the most powerful personal brand in history. And through servicing that one minor asshole, I was able to access many others, including the asshole of the great man himself.’

‘That’s why we’re actually publishing you!’ Director laughs. ‘To find a way into that family. It’s the ex-wife we’re really after, but we’ll take whoever we can get.’

Laugh.

It’s all over. I’m free to crawl upstairs to the office, to tend to Copy Machine. Everyone kicks it when it breaks down and calls it names and says, ‘I don’t have fucking time for this, I’m late for a meeting,’ but I learned how to open Copy Machine and reach gently inside to reconfigure its parts and restore its carbon soul, to feed it bits of paper that roll up over its tongue in smooth gratitude, to know the pleasures and miseries of its monochromatic dreams and awake once more to tend to its toner requests with sweet ministrations.

2

This is my favourite time of day to be in the office. The sun has long retreated into its shrivelled sack. Its sinking caused the metal filing cabinets to fill up with orange light as people left in a stream. The lights came on, and now it’s quiet, aside from the

occasional laughter from High Street of, I imagine, young professionals out to drinks and dinner. Through my window the sudden movements of people opening and closing curtains or cupboards in their brightly lit hotel rooms across the way stir me from my thoughts as I look up from the MS, but I soon slip away again.

It's comforting to know that it will only take seven steps to totally reinvent my personal brand. Before working on this book, I didn't even know that I had a personal brand. Am I really more than this bundle of energy and thoughts inhabiting a suit of flesh and bones? Now I know: my attitude and the image I project create something called a personal brand, which is like a coat you wear over your suit of fleshy skeleton, and you can switch coats at any time with Author's proven system.

By being involved in the production of this great work, I could help thousands to undergo such a journey for only the modest sum of the cover price of the book.

Not only that: Director has agreed to let me co-edit the book with Line Manager. I've gone through the MS to get a sense of the edit, and already I know some of its fundamentals in terms of writing a motivational self-help book on personal branding:

• Evoke religious imagery. The black of personal failure; the toil of striving to realise the pure self; the plague of self-doubt; the seven sevens of the seven numerologies of the number seven; the trial and the test; and the eventual triumph of those who persevere and step into the light of promotion.

• Invent formulas. They look good on the page.

Labour Potential + Smile = Worth of Human

• Invent useful tools, like the online Valulisor Calculator™, which will allow your readers to determine their individual personal-brand worth. How it works is people log on and rate the personalities of their colleagues using various metrics that are compared against normalised indices from data harvested from hundreds of thousands of independently vetted case studies.

• Be highly conceptual, using terminology such as 'Executive Function' (capitalise), and make up words such as 'Nexting' or 'Perfectionising' or 'Brandululisation'.

• Use strong metaphors like cocoon to butterfly.

• Insert lots of quotations by famous thinkers, leaders, and visionaries, including all of the following: Oprah, Branson, Churchill, Martin LK Jr, Tutu, Obama, Shakespeare, Plato, Socrates, Jesus, Mandela, Gandhi, and Mother T. Inspirational quotes are in no way nervous, rickety crutches.

• Make statements so simple and obvious as to appear profound: 'For those who dare to dream big dreams (use alliteration) success is always within grasp.'

• Weave brand names, such as Nike or Audi, into your personal story subtly – not in some subliminal way agreed to with clients in exchange for money, but in the manner of a friend simply making intelligent and valuable by-the-way suggestions for great products, such as certain cars that might happen to show advancement through technology or whatever. Just do it smartly.

• Suggest readers use visualisation – a technique deployed by such sporting greats as Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong – to imagine their success. If necessary, readers can role-play receiving awards from friends at parties and braais – junior of the month, etc. – in order to create an affirmative environment in which dreams can come true.

I've realised, through working on this text, that like Napoléon Bonaparte, I must crown myself. If I want to be taken seriously, I must anoint myself with a coronation in the hallways of my imagination, which will enable me to walk in the officeways of life with an aspect of regality. If I don't hallow myself, no one will.

With time, if I'm not careful, through a neurological process known as Troughing, in which the pathways in the brain become too well-worn with sameness, I could find myself becoming bitter.

Then, with my ex, Lily, having left me to a girlfriendless flat with only a cat who growls at me when I try to give him attention and bites me when I try to claim some for myself, I might become envenomed and rancorous, left working late at night at the office with no home to go home to, wondering: What happened to that person who was once prepared to do anything to win promotions?

Working on this book is allowing me to realise the redemption to be gained in working hard on my personal brand, because if I'm a nobody at home, and I've lost who I was along the way in becoming a somebody at work, I can just work harder to become even more of a somebody at work, so that I'll never have to go home again, except to feed and water Cat and gingerly carry away his excrement.

Me sits in storeroom behind stalls at Cape Town Book Fairs, suited to neck in brown, furry costume of children's book character called Jasper.

Me no knows what Jasper is. Is it a bee? Is it a boy? Is it a creation of talentless children's book illustrator?

Head, lying next to me on floor beside piles of boxes and marketing stuffs of Company, is huge.

Face is smiling. Hair dots top of head like bald. Nose red, shiny, and eyes black of demon.

Me wonders about ones who wears suit before me. Who of Jaspers becomes CEO of Company as reward for good behaviour and dancing in suit for childrens?

There is knock at door. Me puts on head, heavy of thick skull of plastic. It is hot inside and smells of vomit. Fan inside skull no working. Battery dead.

Me looks out of mouth of Jasper, vision blurry through gauze.

Me stands and opens door. Audrey from Marketing there, smiles, eyes droopy like beagle with blonde hairs.

'Ready?'

Sure.

Audrey holds out hand. Me takes it with Jasper paw. Feels nice and warm. We can mate after?

Audrey leads, smiles and waves at first mini-person hiding behind legs of parent.

'Hello!' Audrey says. 'Who's this? It's Jasper! Come and say hello to Jasper!'

Me makes high voice and says, 'Hellooo,' and hops from foot to foot, waves, and bobs head from side to side.

Mini-person starts to choke and mouth turns down and eyes go sad and cry. Makes howling.

Audrey squeezes Jasper's paw hard, whispers, 'Shhh, Jasper's not supposed to fucking talk!'

Okay.

Parent says, 'Hello Jasper!' and forces mini-person to wave.

We arrives at book reading. Lots of mini-persons on laps of parents, looks scared, but big ones forces them to smile and wave and enjoy for cost of show and lovely book.

Story time!

Audrey reads sweet and voice full of ups and downs and oh no!s and veeery nice!s and me plays along to great story of Jasper problem: he no wants to go to school to learn how to be busy bee because he just wants to play his toys.

Me dances and acts and stretches and eats and runs, book whores everywhere.

Mini-persons starts to earn parental money worth, clapping and laughing along to music and song time. Puppet arms and cooing doves.

Then question time.

'What is Jaspar's favouritest things?'

Easy, Audrey do voice: 'Jasper likes ice-creams, puppies, toy trannies, balloons, and walks in parks.'

'What calar Jaspar he likes?'

'Aha, blue, but also purpol.'

'What his most nicest toy is?'

Uhm … Ahhh. Mhrrrrm.

I can answer. Must be – of how much times and funs I has with it – my penis.

Okay, time for goodbye.

Me dances and foothops and waves. Another parent pushes its mini-person in front. Mini-person looks into Jasper's mouth and starts to cry. Mom asks what? Mini-person points and says, 'There's something moving inside Jaspar!'

Me freezes but knows that mini-person sees through suit to Santa murderer and bunny fucker inside.

3

I find Author seated at a table on the sidewalk outside Europa Café in Melrose Arch. He's wearing dark Aviators and a navy pinstriped jacket over a white shirt buttoned to the neck. He has two pocket kerchiefs today – blue and red – dark jeans and tan, leather shoes.

When I arrive, out of breath, and say that his pocket kerchiefs are cool, he gives me a smile that seems to fade fast and he says something I can't hear but that sounds like 'square'.

I put the MS with its Post-it-stuck editing queries on the table next to his open laptop, and smile hello to the waiter who appears and takes my order of a plain filter coffee, which is the easiest thing to order without hesitation anywhere in the world.

I sit down by pulling out the high-backed chair with my arms, moving my buttocks to the side, using my legs like cranes to lower my buttocks until they touch down on the seat, and then swinging my knees up and over so that I am facing Author, with my notepad in front of me ready to receive professional writings from my Company-branded pen, which is not red but friendly blue.

I have jeans on my legs but they do go around to cover the saddle comprising other bits, and a white-and-blue striped collared shirt, which clothes my torso, and over that is a white pullover that easily slips off if you use your hands to grasp it at the back and then pull with your arms so that it goes over your head which is attached to your neck.

Author's sitting back with his arm stretched along the top of another chair next to him and he's sipping an espresso like he could be in an advert. My chair seems too

straight to sit like him so I try to see if his chair is different to mine. Maybe it has a kind of invisible reclining function or he knows something that I don't. I make the decision that it's okay if I sit straight because my back is rigid and that says something about backbone and hard work. My coffee is black and sugarless and makes no apologies.

I'm your editor. I might not have the personal brand or the network that you have, but I know how to check a set of dyelines, what grammage of Solid Bleached Sulphate (SBS) board to choose for your cover stock, and whether a spot UV or a matte laminate will make for the sexiest jacket your book will ever wear. Me: I take your book from diapers to dressing gown. I *do* work with, and for, Line Manager, but I can do everything that she does and may as well be called Publisher, not Junior Publisher. Even though it might be made of paper – 80 gsm creamy bond – this is my crown and I wear it well. A hat made of books.

I can't see Author's eyes behind his glasses, so he could be looking at or past me.

You can always almost smell the leather of the Aston Martins that go past here, and you don't even have to turn your head to the road to see who's sitting in the car purring at the robots, because it might as well always be the same one, with a blonde in the passenger's seat and an oldish white guy behind the wheel wearing a sporty multi-coloured helicopter cap with a wind-powered propeller on it.

We haven't said much, probably because we're both too comfortable in our chairs and surroundings in general, but Author says, 'Here are the pictures I owe you for the picture section – do you want to go through that now?'

He hands me a flash drive and turns his laptop to the side so that I can see the slideshow he starts of pictures of him with celebs.

‘What’s their resolution?’ I ask, but he ignores that because he’ll probably get to it later.

He asks me how he should approach writing the captions, and I answer well: Keep them short, simple, and make sure to give the reader an idea of context – what, when, where, how and why – and basically focus on location and date and time and the who’s who and things like that, and also extra information that the reader may not glean from a reading of the text, such as, just for example, if you were doing such and such on that day, leadership training for infants, say.

The meeting has been going very well so far, but he has been calling me bro ever since I arrived and I start to worry that I can’t satisfy filling out and giving substance to that moniker.

It’s been a while since someone called me bro and even longer since I called someone that. I don’t say it if it doesn’t feel right. I can’t bring myself to return the favour in a mutual exchange of respect rightfully earned, so instead of bro I just call him br and don’t follow through with the o hoping he won’t notice.

He’s very different from when he met with me and Director. He’s much quieter today and he doesn’t seem excited and he’s not dropping names or talking about his awards etc. but that’s probably because he’s deep in thought and feels the comfort I do of working with a fellow deep-thinker who he doesn’t need to impress any more than he already has.

When, I wonder, though, was the day I stopped being a bro? I once really knew how to smoke a joint. I knew how to roll big fat ones that were given the fond nickname, ‘Jarty Points’. That was in my first year at university, when I could talk at ease for hours with my bros, but soon the bro was educated out of me in the library, and when I got my first job in publishing I became a career man and shed the bro

label to become a highly successful Junior Publisher at the most prestigious publishing house on the planet.

I know that by saying bro and acting different at this meeting, Author's doing something he calls, in his book, Code-Switching, which is when you pick up what someone's like just from the visual and other clues their personal brands exude, and you change your speech, behaviour, etc. in order to be able to speak down to them.

I've been trying to code-switch all along in this meeting to be more professional-casual, but maybe I've been wrong and Author must be right: we are bros meeting here on the sidewalk, almost like friends sipping on beers. Conducting work almost in a Jamaican way, so calm and cool – a pair of buffaloes soldiering on without even knowing it.

Even though my chair is so straight, all you have to do is tilt me sideways in your imagination so that I'm almost staring at the rooftops in my Aviators, on a beach somewhere.

I remember that he's still getting to my question about the resolution, the precise number of dots per inches, of the pictures, so I make the decision to remind him, asking him this time with a smile on my face that is suggestive of an in-house joke between us of this remembering not to forget: 'What's their resolution?'

But it's like he's too high on our casual productivity to know, and he chooses to delay answering the question again. Maybe he wants to prolong the meeting in general. I don't blame him. It could be he doesn't answer because he knows he can trust me with these kinds of small but crucial details. The pictures look very grainy, but that gives them a realness, as if you'd never suspect the pics of Author with celebs have been Photoshopped.

‘We’ll just tile them small like thumbnails in the 8-pp pic sec,’ I say, ‘and print in b/w, if necessary.’

But he seems to be initiating the same smoothness with which he welcomed me here to imply almost telepathically or body languagically that the meeting’s over, bro.

He says, ‘One last thing, can we include this quote somewhere in the MS, too?’

He slips me a piece of paper before going back to the pose I found him in with his arm draped over the empty chair beside him as if it could be a celebrity, sipping another espresso, and I only read the note when I’m back at my desk in the office, saving it for then, and it just has a quote by someone called David Byrne, founder of American band Talking Heads: ‘I’d like to be known for being more than just the man in the big suit,’ but under that there’s a scribble that says, ‘Put this somewhere, thanks bro’ – and that’s the part I really cherish.

Speaking of style, pizzazz, but more importantly, sex appeal, Junior had his fair share of personal triumphs, none more singular than when he made his entrance at the launch of internationally renowned fashionista, trends guru, and style icon Dion Chang’s book, The Flux Trends Review*, one of the first books Junior had worked closely with an author on and taken almost from conception through to gorgeously designed, printed and bound set of leaves.*

On the day of the launch, he arrived home earlier than usual to get ready. He had a loose configuration in mind of what to wear, and he planned to ask his girlfriend, Lily, who’d studied fashion design at LISOF, to help him choose the final arrangement.

But when he tried on his combinations and modelled them for Lily, she seemed too preoccupied with her important domestic tasks, and soon Cat installed itself on

the kitchen counter abutting the bedroom door, growling, so that, thusly trapped, Junior was forced to work out the conundrum on his own.

Every new combination failed worse than the last, until finally, surrounded by piles of discarded items, Junior reached into the cupboard to extract a brown, corduroy jacket he'd bought from a thrift store. He put the jacket on over a tee shirt and jeans, and consulted a mirror. There, he saw that he wore the jacket of a much smaller and older man. The sleeves crept nearly to his elbows. He decided – in a brilliant turnaround of events demonstrating not only an ability to upcycle, but also his uncanny eye for boho chic – to roll up the sleeves. The sides of the jacket on the front hung open like stable doors, but that was where his magic shone through – the jacket opened to a shirt with a horse print on it.

Junior rushed out, past Cat, who tried to claw him, to find Lily smoking at the window.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'Looks awesome,' she said.

It was as if she didn't even need to turn to see to know.

He left right away, arriving almost late at the restaurant in Parkhurst where the who's who of fashion and books came together.

Immediately he rushed in, he nearly crushed Dion Chang, who stood at the door greeting his guests. Junior took his place at the back of the room to listen to the speeches.

As the evening wore on, he seemed either to be getting larger himself, or the jacket smaller. Each new face he would greet would run its eyes over his jacket in approval, his confidence growing with each micro-interaction, which seemed to enrich and nourish him, and as he grew taller and larger still, he was forced to hold

the wine glass pincered between forefinger and thumb, and he had to lean down greatly to speak to those about him who seemed to peer up in admiration of his fashion choices, and the jacket got tighter and tighter, remaining its original size while he loomed in stature, almost in order to draw even more attention to the brilliance of his eye for garmentine selection, until, needing some gasps of fresh air to ease the constriction of the weight of the prestige pressing in on him, he stepped outside.

Thinking that Junior was leaving, Chang rushed out to thank him profusely, but by now, Junior's head had reached such an altitude that no amount of bending down to listen could allow him to discern what the small Asian man below was screaming, impelling the sound waves of his voice with not quite enough velocity to reach Junior's ears, and Junior heard it only as the not-unpleasant squeaking as of a mouse shouting praises happily, if a little jealously, up at its hero, but just there he caught it – that question shouted by Chang as if in song of approval, great enough to launch a thousand careers: 'Where did you get your jacket from?'

4

Heading south out of Johannesburg, towards the printing works in Heriotdale, I feel something lifting from me. I take the offramp and, across the road from an old mine dump, I turn towards the Printers. There is no High Street here. The Aston Martins have been replaced by nameless heavy movers.

After signing in at the boom gate, I park in the valet spot right outside the front door and go inside to announce my arrival. I've been here before and Receptionist – though I don't recognise her – knows my name and invites me to take a seat. I sit in

the same armchair in the foyer I sat in last time. It's almost as if I'm home in my living room.

Peopling the two-seater couch beside me are a pair of middle-aged men. I can tell from looking at them that one is a paper merchant, and the other sells industrial brooms and has two children – one a boy of ten, the other a poor little girl of twelve with learning difficulties. Unlike them, I don't need to pick up one of the newspapers from the coffee table because I'm comfortable in my own skin and, more so lately, in my station in life.

This is understandable, because our products reach thousands whereas a broom entwines itself only to the soul of the man who wields it – it sweeps clean the floor where only some few dozen may pass daily, whereas books, like Author's, sweep clean the souls of millions.

I've managed the production process expertly, with no hitch, from editing to solving queries and typesetting, and from proofreading to cover design. This room is like a decompression chamber as I ready myself to see the cover proofs, to sign off on them before they're run in on the great lithographic machines. I'm told that the text is already, as I sit here, rolling off the machine beds, in sections of sixteen pages at a time. The Printers' Saleswoman, a tall blonde I have met before, phoned me earlier with some panic in her voice: Could I come right away to check the cover? The use of cyan in the band bearing the book's title needed to be checked; there was a problem with the levels.

When Saleswoman arrives to greet me, she seems flustered, and in a mark of recognition, I think, of my to-the-point, workmanlike nature, she leads me to a boardroom without unnecessary fuss and leaves me at the head of the table with an empty glass and a jug of water, before rushing out to the printing floor. I catch a

redness in her eyes and on her cheeks as she gives me a parting look at the door, and this tells me that she's been crying, and now I know: she's called me here because the Printers are in some great trouble regarding the matter of the Author's book, and possibly I alone, quickly become renowned as one of the publishing house's, if not the industry's, leading production experts, can give them some shred of guidance.

This book has given me permission to realise that I can define my personal brand in the manner of my choosing. If I'm not good at networking with doorknobs, maybe I'm a genius at *making* them. After all, Director and Line Manager always turn to me in production-related matters, and does my voice not ring clearest and loudest there? I am from a family of workers, the product of a diamond-polishing father and a book-keeping mother.

And now, coming to this place is like a coming home of sorts to me, and being called here – being sent on this most important of quests by the Company – is much like, I imagine, a Russian prince visiting some remote palace somewhere peopled by imbeciles in need of his help. Yet, somehow, the prince really belongs. He's never been afraid to roll up his sleeves and shovel and barrow whatever whenever and wherever it is needed.

A small woman arrives to offer me coffee. I dismiss the offer with a smile and wave it off. I know this will be interpreted as: I'm here to work. I don't have time for coffee. And even if I wanted some I'd make it myself because I'm not the type to require servants to do things for me and I've well been in their place before and so I know the greatness of the mercy to be found in the benevolence in declining a service that would cause someone to stoop down to performing such an act of supplication. The woman exits without acknowledging my enacted reply, her silence paying homage to our contract.

I imagine, now, the blonde scurrying about the printing floor, readying her staff for my arrival, perhaps making the final arrangements for who will take up what position – certain ones at the packing station over there, looking as if they are hard at work but enjoying themselves, and others pushing trolleys past at precise secret signals from the blonde; and in the control room, the grave faces of Machine Minders, a troop of them poring over the book cover on a table lit by their special sunlight-mimicking lamps, talking in urgent, quiet tones about the level-of-cyan problem and the unsolvable riddle of the relative advantages and disadvantages of the coolness and warmth of magenta in terms of the – to them – unknowable final message of the Author.

The blonde returns, her cheeks now pale – possibly in anticipation of the nearness of the resolution of her dilemma – and hurriedly takes me through several high-clearance doors until we stand, at last, in the control room, before the great window overlooking the floor, where I can glimpse the long litho machines and say a secret prayer and a message whispered to Copy Machine.

Dear one, if only you could know the things I've seen …

There is only one Minder, a red-faced, gruff man with a hairy finish. He greets me warmly, almost in relief. Outside, the workers are working convincingly. Minder leads me to a table with a sloping top, on which are two proofs of the cover, side by side.

Minder tells me about the two options. The one on the right was supplied by me, he says, in which the cyan is a bit overpowering in relation to the title in black, and in which the level of magenta is low, so that there's a coolness to the picture of Author cuddling his ginger cat on the front cover. Then, in the one on the left, he explains, he's managed to temper the cyan – through a process too complicated to

treat in any sufficient manner here – and to increase the magenta, to impart a warmth and trusting comfort to Author and Cat.

The dilemma, it seems to me, is more complicated than at first meets the eye. Only a finely trained production eye such as I have – the left one – can discern the difference and unravel the intricacies of the subtlety of suggestion in the various interpretations to be gleaned from each option in relation to the baring of the Author's naked soul on the sulphate board.

I tower over the proofs and look, but the problem is almost too easily solved: he has made a mess of the cover supplied, and the idiot clearly doesn't have any familiarity with cyan and its particular relationship with gold or indeed black; furthermore, the buffoon is not, like me, personal friends with Author. It is clear it was he who stained his poor colleague's cheeks with rivulets of misery sourced by confusion – the very same rivulets that are just now mixing with her mascara, which all, combined with her indelicately chosen shade of scarlet lipstick, slightly smudged, cause her to look like a shaggy dog that has tried on his master's makeup.

'It's the one I supplied that must go to press,' I say with finality to Minder, who seems to breathe deeply and more easily now that I have resolved the matter without embarrassing him any further. 'It should be whichever one of these is the one I supplied,' I say.

In showers of appreciation, I am ushered out to my car, and before I know it, I am on the road back into Johannesburg.

I know this: I am newly born, coated in a film of printer's ink, elbowing my way out of the sticky cocoon. My paper wings are light, but not brittle, and my talons are just now starting to curl from their buds. This is how the greats are born. This age needs an Aldus Manutius, great Renaissance publisher, printer and entrepreneur, who

gave to Italian publishing and the sixteenth-century book world one of its greatest inventions: the octavo-format book, precursor of the modern paperback. Great scholar, he also gave new life to the Hellenic classics – Aristotle and Plato's works among them – by publishing the Greek masterpieces in unparalleled beauty and form.

I, too, can be a great inventor. I just need to find something to invent. The ebook has already been taken. Then, like Manutius, who spent years studying Greek, I too can find a cause to champion. I can then also put up a poster at my desk that reads like the one Manutius pinned outside his printing shop in Venezia to ward away evil bastards who would disturb him at his important work of inventing things: 'Whoever you are, Aldus asks you again and again what it is you want from him. State your business briefly and then immediately go away.'

I'll never have to polish another knob in my life. Director will never be able to tell me what to do again or ask me about production things without looking like an idiot.

5

Earlier today, a Friday in August of the longest year, the book arrived: delivered on time by Printers as per the publishing schedule.

I haven't seen it yet. The box of advance copies arrived just before lunch, and Receptionist called me to the front to collect it to bring copies to everyone. Instead, I packed my bag, went to the foyer, carefully opened the box, and took a copy out without looking at it. I slipped it into my bag, told Receptionist I was leaving for the rest of the day for an important meeting, and then drove home to my flat in Kelvin, where I'm sitting now at the desk closest to Landlord's front door – where I can

borrow his Wi-Fi – with my laptop open and Cat, mercifully placid today, sleeping on my jersey beside it.

This is the spot where Lily would often catch me watching gardening videos – surprising me with her exits from the bathroom with the shower still running to conceal her movements – and now I miss the thrill of watching as if about to be caught. But today I am too tired. I just sit and stare at the browser window with my eyes glazed over.

The office will be filled with noise about the book's coming. Author will arrive, called to the office by Director, to collect his fifteen free copies per contract, and Director will beam him welcome with great hugs, and kiss his cheeks, mwah mwah. She will lead him to the boardroom, bidding the staff gather around. Someone will order pizza, and if Director has a bottle of wine, she will send someone from Marketing to go fetch.

Seated now, with pizza and wine before them, and ready for the unveiling that Director will do while making a great fuss about handing the book over to Author, someone will say, 'But where is he? Where's Junior? Where's the one who made all of this come true?'

And Receptionist will say, 'No, no, he's left for a meeting.'

'A meeting?' Director will ask. 'With who?' And she will send someone to find me.

The group will now have to reshuffle in their seats to make place for me at Author's right hand. They will wait for me, in vain. I do not wish to hear the words 'Thank you' or worse 'Good job' being uttered by the hole that is the mouth of the person who is the chief executive orifice of this Company.

With the searcher returning empty-handed, Director will open the box that I have already plundered, and out of it will come the most beautiful thing, which she will hand out first to Author and then to everyone, like treats for good work. Publicity and Marketing will make cooing noises. Someone will comment excitedly on the use of metallic ink. Another will compliment the genius balance of cyan and black. Someone else will sniff the spine. Then will come an almost collective cry: 'But where is he? Where is the one unjustly known as Junior?' And a silence will descend, and they will wait some more – the pizza growing cold and hard on the table before them – like dogs waiting for their dinner. Then Operations Director will say, 'But I shall keep his pizza for him. Shame, he's probably somewhere working too bloody hard again on his next important book.'

I have been working on four, actually, in the long weeks we've been waiting for the copies of Author's book to arrive – children's titles, all, in a series: *Bumping Buffalo*, *Enormous Elephant*, *Handsome Hog*, and *Randy Rhino*.

Cat, on the desk, is dreaming. Of what? He twitches. Will not money come to curl up in Author's lap without him having to raise a philosophical eyebrow? His name is gilded now.

I close my eyes and feel for the bag on the floor beside my chair, reach into it and make out the book's shape with my fingers. Out it comes, and, eyes still closed, I hold it in both hands above my lap and allow the flicked pages to brush my thumb. I raise it to suck up greedily into my nostrils the smell of ink and paper already decomposing; a wonderful bouquet of creamy bond – a heady mix of rag fibre and wood pulp – and carbon black, a Group 2B carcinogen.

I open my eyes slowly, and there it is. It makes a good first impression. It is handsome, and smart, almost on a subliminal plane. But the cyan band bearing the

book's title in black is immediately noticeable, because it is as if the title has retreated amidst the cyan, which is too little its background and too much its all. I hold it at arm's length, and already the title fades. On bookstore shelves, the title will easily be missed, but fortunately, the picture of Author and Cat rescues it. The Printers have clearly made an error in running the actual covers through. Did I not correct their initial mistake and sign the proof off myself? How could this have happened?

I type a brief note to Saleswoman, demanding that the blonde make an unreserved and immediate apology and offer a discount on future printings. But, I think, is this not, in a way, better for the book, more suitable for the Author's message, that browsers, attracted to the picture of Author and Cat, will have to walk right up to the shelf, and perhaps put their reading glasses on, to make out the title of the book which, already having established an intimate, tactile relationship with browsers, will announce itself and cause them to, almost automatically, rush to the counter, perhaps even shoving others out of their way, to purchase a copy at once?

I riffle through the handsomely laid-out pages, admiring the precision of the Polyurethane Resin (PUR) binding, turning it in my hands to admire the matte-overcoat which has imparted to the gold metallic ink a velvety look and feel.

I stop on a random page and read to confirm the quality of the fine editing job that has been performed on the work, and my eyes stop on the name 'Hammarskjöld'. In particular, it is the ö with umlaut that seems almost to be crying out for my attention. I don't recall putting that special character in. More: the person's full name has the faintest underline that, it seems, has only come out in the final printing.

I decide, as a precaution, to check the spelling of the name. I access the press-ready PDF on my laptop, locate the passage, and copy the sentence containing the name into the browser window. I hit Enter by mistake without first isolating the name,

and the search returns, as the top result, an article which seems to bear the phrase almost verbatim. I open the article to read, and there, towards the bottom, is the Author's phrase. The writer of the article has surely, somehow, plagiarised the Author's work! There is no citation. Perhaps Author knows the article writer and has given his permission to the writer to use his text in a personal capacity. That will be fine. I will check with Author when I next see him, perhaps when we get together as friends for a jog or a game of basketball, or if I am to accompany him to radio or television interviews.

I flick a few pages on, and there, I find that in another paragraph, all of the concepts are faintly underlined. I copy the text and search it in the browser. It points to another article, on personal branding, and the writer of this article has copied from our script, too!

But how? Surely, someone got wind of the Author's book and hacked our systems to gain access to Author's script to sell it to the highest bidder, and it has since been syndicated shamelessly in a ruthless, savage attack of piracy?

I go on, and find, over and again, that people have been helping themselves to Author's text as if it were merely breadcrumbs scattered on a lawn for vultures to swoop down upon and gobble up with relish.

I should alert Author, right away. I reach for my phone to start the process of acquiring from my cellular-service provider, with the kind assistance of my bank, some airtime to load onto my phone to use to call Author immediately. But something stops my hand in mid-air. It's his question. The one he asked at the meeting Director chaperoned me to.

How long do you think you'll last in books?

It's as if Author knew that I was struggling to keep going in my job; that some days I escaped to the bathroom at work to ask myself what I was doing there, at the prestigious publishing house. I was not deserving of this title, Junior Publisher.

Am I not an impostor, coming so late to books as I did, reading my first full novel, Enid Blyton's *Famous Five on a Treasure Island*, at the relatively advanced age of nineteen? Even though I progressed rapidly through university, my book immaturity still shows in so many ways, and I try desperately to conceal these great flaws.

But how had Author known? Had he spotted something off in my body language? But in his knowing me as a fraud, something connects us. The difference between us is that Author knows how to conceal his flaws, to hide them behind something called a personal brand, which he uses almost as a Band-Aid.

Now I know: we are the same. Author is a fraud. A plagiarist. And it has happened on my editorial watch.

I am tired.

Sweet machine, let me lie for a moment inside your softly thrumming heart, to crawl into the comfort of your black-and-white electrostatic charge, safe from the harsh CMYK of day, and the misery of cyan in particular, and delay deciding on whether I will keep Author's secret in order to preserve the gains I've had from producing his book, or to expose this man – in whom I can now truly see the humanity for the first time, and pity – because I'm too exhausted now to be faced with such a thing, too broken, and so I will rest.

Introvert's Response

In a world celebrating introversion I'd be king.

I'd reign over no one from the comfort and seclusion of home.

I'd be the most unpopular king ever but that would be the point.

Everything would be done by email.

There would be no phone calls and only antisocial[†] media.

Someone's job would be to ensure my royal seclusion; this employee would preferably be an invisible person or someone practised in the art of disappearing.

Having friends[‡] to count on one hand I'd be esteemed as a noble antisociocrat, well versed in the gentle art of unconversation.

Cats would be held in higher regard than dogs and most[§] humans.

My throne would be a capsule in which I could hide.

But it would be considered normal – nay, preferable – to carry this protective capsule around with me on my back wherever I went so that at the slightest movement I could retreat into it with just my eyes sticking out.

If the danger of interaction were great my whole body could retract into the carapace.

But where to purchase such a device?

Mr Price Home?

It might be better to cobble one together from scavenged bits.

[†] 'personal'

[‡] 'acquaintances'

[§] 'all'

I might move my kingdom underwater where it would be difficult to speak and not drown at the same time.

This would limit meaningless conversations about, say, celebrity murder trials or babies.

However, meaningful themes would be engaged in telepathically or in writing.

I would choose the sea bottom for its darkness so that only light signals would be practicable for communication.

Here, in fact, there might be no need for capsules, so that the citizenry could pass freely amongst each other in the citadels and aside from the odd, inevitable and awkward brush, followed by an exchange of gurgled apologies, they would never have to make conversation.

The darkness would also eliminate competition amongst the fellows of the realm over who would have the most eye-catching or garish or fashionable capsule, which would stem bloodshed, but more importantly, vocalisation.**

There would be no need for a sheriff or a marshall, or even a king, of any kind.

We would all just carry our little torches and exchange polite but, more importantly, perfunctory signals.

There would in fact be no need for tongues, but all would have access to water-resistant quills (with glow-in-the-dark ink) and parchment funded by the state's coffers to express in writing – that most noble of communications – the wells of deep misery or elation or arousal within each creature.

There, at sea bottom, I'd live peaceably and with silence's integrity undisturbed, until time would come to find a mate.

** Especially during mating season

Aided by darkness, the baldness of my head would be of little consequence, and I would go about, as would be custom, feeling for that special brush of another – we all know the one – and I'd have my match.

In the spirit of fidelity, and in order to defend against unwanted brushes, me and my mate might decide to share a capsule.

Our mutual retreat would spawn contented silence, comforts, and the highest, or lowest, forms of placidity.

No social invitations would penetrate the shell of the capsule, such that there would be no need for signals or responses of any kind.

Domestic Love Boat

I came home from work one day to an empty flat.

The bedroom cupboard was bare of Lily's clothes. The laundry basket was upturned, with only my things lying in a heap near the bathroom door. Lily's cosmetics, usually around the basin, were gone.

In the lounge, I stood in front of the old TV and saw myself reflected on the curve of the glass with an elongated head and a pear-shaped middle. The beige leather couches were bald without their throws, the holes in the cushions visible with their cotton innards showing.

I found the note she'd left in a basket on a table near the front door. It was a few pages but it might have been:

We've outgrown each other in the last few years.

We're too different, too strong-willed, to go back to being those kids who'd kissed on a path in the rain and fallen in love.

I love you more than anyone, ever, but I don't know what to do with that, not anymore.

I know that this is the hardest thing I'll ever do.

Will you take care of Popo? (Cat.)

He's my baby but it's only fair that I leave him to you.

I'll miss you both, more than anything, but it's better if we don't communicate.

Maybe one day you'll understand.

My calls went straight to her voicemail, and my messages went unanswered. The silence was worse than death because it was wilful.

We had argued, but it had been no worse than usual. How could she leave like this, after ten years together and all we'd been through, with just a crumby note?

I walked a silver path into the lawn, pacing back and forth in a straight line, trying to control my breathing.

Inside, I found new little signs of her everywhere – the polka-dot pants she'd wear when we'd snuggle on the couch, the puppy teddy, with its long floppy ears, that she'd bought me, the penguin mug she used to drink hot chocolate out of.

Her stompies were still in an ashtray on the sill near the front door. Which one was her last smoke as she stood there staring at the night sky, dreaming the way she did, planning a future without me? If I could find that stompie, what would it mean? That I might ride it like a magic pony back in time to when Lily's things still lined the shelves and the flat was filled with the stink of her smoke?

At work, I carried my abandonment with me like some great secret shame. I forgot people's names and stared into space during meetings. I sat at my desk looking at my pinboard with its sad little pins with nothing pinned under them.

I told no one about it for a while. What would people think? That I'd done something to chase Lily away? Had I?

I imagined my future as a twenty-something widower who would live alone with his cat and his sorrow. I'd go to the bioscope alone. I'd complain about the price of cat food to strangers. The flat would be too big, the rooms cavernous so that I would hear the echo of my breathing at night. The chairs would smell of farts and chlorine. I'd adopt an army of cats. I'd have to get one of those rollers to remove cat fur from my coats. I'd have hours-long battles with telemarketers, but I'd have Verimark on speed dial.

I'd be prone to exaggeration when telling people stories, especially the one about the day Lily left, focusing on meaningless details like couches, cupboards, pins, lawns, stompies and …

I needed to get out.

I found a bachelor's flat for rent in Houghton and moved in with Popo as soon as I could.

The main house was a Sir Herbert Baker mansion built on Houghton Ridge. Inside, there were building materials and tools and tins of paint everywhere. Dust coated everything. The wooden floors were bare and scuffed, and there were broken antiques all over. There was an empty pool where, beyond the balustrade, a view of Joburg's northern parts stretched out behind a white haze.

Our new home was a little flat set into the Ridge, facing south towards Hillbrow, with Ponte towering overhead. There was something about the place, with its big windows and the old bathtub that had little feet, and the giant oak leaves that would float down through the windows and collect in the tub and swirl around when there was a breeze. There was the acreage in front, untidy lawns fringed by tall pines, and stone steps that led up to my hideaway, a guardhouse to a hilltop castle.

I could hide here with my thoughts and memories, and with the lights off I would stare out the window, and remember slipping out of the school hostel to rake through the moonlit streets to get to our sister school, where I'd jump the fence and move across the grounds quickly, not making a sound, until I stood at the foot of a flight of stairs. I'd go up and hide in the darkness, knock once on the door, and wait. Lily would open the door just wide enough for me to slip in, then we'd go through the passage to her room, laughing but trying to be quiet. Inside, we'd kiss, then smoke at

her window and sit and talk until it started to get light, and then I'd run down the stairs and across the grounds, trying to beat the sun.

I'd be back later, Sunday, to visit her, and we'd sit on the step behind the chapel, hidden from view by tall conifers, and I'd watch her pick some leaves and delicately twirl them around in her fingers, and I'd pick one and squash it and there'd be a sharp sweet smell and a sticky green resin would paint my fingers. I'd run back to the hostel, late for dinner, not caring that I'd be in trouble.

I'd call Lily from the junior-school phone, where the 2-cent coins I had worked like R2 coins, and I'd promise to write her, and that I'd walk her to the school gates after class.

These memories would be like sweet things, hearkening to a time when 2 cents was worth more than its weight in copper-plated steel.

The property in Houghton was bordered by the reserve area of The Wilds. There was a lot of space for Popo to roam. He would come home happy, depositing gift carcasses on the carpet, but I wondered if he missed his human as I missed her. This new place, though it was growing on us, didn't feel like home.

I remembered happy times of the first flat I'd shared with Lily and Popo, in Northcliff. Money had been tight, but we'd made the most of things. I remembered nights spent in on the futon watching movies beamed onto a wall with a projector I borrowed from work, and eating homemade pizza and chocolate mousse, walks in the acacia-lined streets, and the domestic bliss we began to know after the tabby kitten, Popo, with streaks of caramel running through his dark-fudge fur, came into our lives.

But Lily had been unemployed for a long time. She would sit in the flat, day after day, months on end, in her pyjamas, smoking cigarettes and searching for jobs

online. We would drive to failed job interviews until they became fewer and hope went out of her search.

Then, she'd found a job teaching English at a language school in Braamfontein. Then another, teaching English at a college in Rivonia. And finally, she'd been promoted and had gone on a work trip to China, and had returned a different person.

Maybe domestic bliss had smothered us. We'd used each other up and we'd used each other out, over ten years, until there was nothing left to discover, only sweetheart memories that no longer exploded with scent but flaked and swirled about in your palm.

There was an envelope for me at reception at work. My name was written on the front in black koki. It had no address and no stamp, and it looked like it was personal. I wondered – could Lily have sent it? Was this the apology she owed me?

At my desk, I tore it open. A letter was meant to come tumbling out, I thought, but in its place was a photo and a CD. The photo was of a tuxedo cat with its chin upturned, lying in a nest of toilet paper. One eye was visible, half open, and the cat looked groggy, like it had a hangover from its destroy-toilet-paper party.

Who had sent me this? Was it from a secret admirer at the office, or was it from a psychopath at the office?

I put the CD into the player on my computer and listened with my headphones on. There were five songs, all by bands I didn't know.

Over the next few days, everyone at work became a suspect. There was enough handwriting to fill the world with mystery, each letter a new clue. The style of the handwriting on the envelope was hiding somewhere, maybe in a pile of papers on someone's desk, or on a Post-it stuck to a board.

A few days later, I got an email from Demi, an editor who worked for the same company as me, on the other side of the building. Demi had short brown hair and was slim, quiet and shy.

The email was filled with pictures of tigers, celebrating their majesty and cuteness. I guessed Demi might have sent me the mystery envelope.

I friended her on Facebook, looked through her pictures, and found the Destroyer of Toilet Paper, the drunkard tuxedo, and I knew I had my psycho.

I decided to have a housewarming party and invite Demi.

She accepted, and we spent most of the night talking. After everyone left, she stayed over, and in the morning, I dropped her off at her flat in Norwood and drove home thinking how natural it felt, as if we were strays who'd crossed paths thinking we were strangers, only to find after rubbing noses that we were companions separated by years.

Her one eye was half brown and half grey-blue.

When she spoke you got the feeling that she didn't care who was listening.

She was born in Austria but her family was from Slovakia.

Her mother was a recovering Jehovah's Witness.

She liked animals more than humans.

Her cat had no name.

She liked bands like Die Antwoord and MGMT.

She was bohemian and fine.

She could fall asleep anywhere.

We fell into a rhythm. I would fetch her to spend nights and weekends at my flat. We'd go out dancing in Newtown, where we'd have shots of vodka chased with beer, and we'd come home in the early hours, after the places closed, swept out along with the broken glass and the stompies and the druggies.

At work, we'd climb up to the rooftops of the Melrose Arch precinct and eat lunch while looking south towards the Ridge, wondering what Popo was up to, imagining him hunting in The Wilds, blending in with the tall grass, stopping to drink droplets collected on fat aloe leaves, or eating hallucinogenic mushrooms and dancing with maidens.

Demi would send emails to the whole company to ask colleagues to sign petitions for animal rights. We volunteered at protest events, like the one in Randburg where, at a house, we stripped down in a group and painted each other red before marching to an intersection on Jan Smuts Avenue to take turns being shut into cages, to draw attention to animal cruelty.

She converted me to vegetarianism. I was a willing disciple in exchange for the promise of peace and a sense of belonging, something I could call home.

For a time, I almost forgot Lily.

Popo didn't come home one evening, and at dusk Demi and I wandered the grounds of the Houghton property, clanging his metal plate and calling out for him, hoping he'd hear us and come running, but he didn't, and we walked the length of the surrounding streets, day after day, with no sign of him.

Had he gone looking for his missing human?

In the heat of one day, we were walking on a path in The Wilds, calling for Popo, clanging his plate, when we caught the faint sound of something, like a cry, up ahead. As we went forward, the sound became a meowing, and we went faster until we found him, stuck on a branch in a tree, trying to meow as loudly as he could, though his voice was nearly gone.

I climbed up, got him, put him under my shirt, and climbed down. We took him home and fed him with as many treats as he wanted, even though we knew it was a bad idea because his stomach had probably shrunk.

We cleaned him and checked his body for wounds. His claws were shortened to stumps, as if he'd been driven by something into the treetops.

Demi and I danced and laughed a lot and found some makeshift shelter in each other. But a secret yearning grew in me for quiet, for a life of comforts, and something more malignant, a feeling that Demi too might leave one day.

I began to feel old again, as if I didn't belong in the nightclubs we went to, as if I was some kind of impostor, grandmaster funk out with his hot Eastern European thing. I had been eighteen yesterday. What hole had all these young fuckers crawled out of?

One night out, I wore a beanie my mother had knitted for me. It was long and thick, and if I wore it full out, not rolled up on my head, it looked like a blue traffic cone.

As we walked past a queue of people waiting to go into a club, I heard someone say to his friend, 'Look, it's Kabouter!' He pointed at me. They laughed but looked away when they saw that I had heard them.

I only figured out what or who Kabouter was the next day when I googled it.

Kabouter is Dutch for ‘gnome’. Gnomes are a tiny misunderstood people who live underground. They wear pointy cone-like hats, and some say they are secretive little bastards who run fast through forests, masturbate in their underground hideaways, and keep beetles as sex slaves. But this is a misconception. Gnomes are an underappreciated and sensitive species, and their rights deserve to be championed by the just.

I decided to tell Demi about my insecurities – that she might leave one day like Lily had, that maybe she’d run off with some cool kid, and that after Lily I was broken and not ready for a long-term relationship.

Demi explained her philosophy to me:

We don’t belong to anyone.

Humans are wired to be serial monogamists.

We go through life collecting experiences, learning and borrowing from each other.

There’s no such thing as a soul mate.

That soothed and troubled me deeply at the same time.

My lease was up and I had to move out of the Houghton flat.

Demi suggested I move into a place she’d stayed at in Birdhaven. I went to see it. It was cramped and dank, sealed into the ground floor of a two-storey home, a bit like a basement, with windows only on the south-facing side, but it was close enough so that I could walk to work, and I liked the garden and the quietness.

I moved in with Popo, keeping him inside for a week so that he'd know this new place was home.

Demi would come over and spend weekends at my flat, and I would cook and download series for us to watch, and for a time I had glimpses of the life I wanted.

One day, I dropped Demi off at her flat and went in with her to look for her cat. He was out, so we searched the grounds of the complex for him.

While we were walking in the parking lot, Demi saw, through the back gate to the complex, something lying on the pavement next to the road.

She ran out. I watched her get onto her knees and begin to sob. I came closer and saw that it was her cat. He'd been run over, and there were dark marks on his white fur made by a car tyre.

I took my jacket off and leaned down and gave it to Demi to wrap her cat into, and she took him up and rocked him in her arms.

We went inside and Demi wrapped him in his blue blanket, and with the lights off she lay cradling his body on the bed.

I stayed with her but slept on the floor beside her bed, listening to her soft sobbing until she fell asleep.

In the morning, we put him, still wrapped in his blanket, into a box, and found a spot under the trees in the garden where he used to play, and there we buried the cat with no name.

I was growing jealous of some phantom.

Demi worked late at the office, and at home I entertained scenarios in which she was sending other people mystery envelopes, and it began to eat at me so that I had to say something.

I told Demi about an old Buddhist lesson that had once helped me during a difficult time. If you were to hold a coin in your hand, you might grasp it tightly with your fingers closed into a fist, but all you had to do was turn your hand around and open your palm so that the coin could be held in place by its own weight.

Though I could understand the lesson, I couldn't learn it, and the tighter I clutched, the heavier my attachment to Demi became, so that, finally, I couldn't hold on anymore, and I needed to be alone, to sift through these things so that I could come back to her a fuller person.

We split up, but we remained friends, and continued to go out together and to spend time at each other's flats, and to share lunches at work.

She promised, some day, to fix me, but for the time being I felt better floating, though I didn't sleep well and had knots in my stomach.

Demi received an email from Kitty and Puppy Haven saying that they had a naughty tuxedo kitten called Penguin that would be perfect for her.

Demi asked me to go with her to the shelter to collect Penguin, and one Saturday we drove there to fetch the cute kitten with a cheeky face and gleaming eyes, with white fur on her neck that crept half way over her mouth, and we beamed with pride like happy idiots.

Penguin had a shuffle because there was something wrong with her hips. We took her to the vet, who told us that she was fine. Demi called her Pipi, Slovak for 'chicken'.

She brought Penguin over for play dates with Popo, and the two cats chased each other around in the garden and then snuggled up together inside. Popo would lick his new kitten and take care of her as if she were his own.

One Saturday, Demi asked me to give her a lift to a club in Newtown, where she wanted to meet up with a friend. She invited me along for the evening, and I agreed to go, not wanting to be lonely.

We couldn't find Penguin, so we searched the garden in Birdhaven, and found her stuck high up in a tree. I climbed up, and brought her down, and as we rode to Demi's flat, I gathered, from the way she spoke about the friend she planned to meet, that he was a hook-up.

I grew quiet with anger, and we drove the rest of the way in silence. When we arrived at Demi's flat, I refused to answer her, hoping that she would interpret my disquiet to mean that I wouldn't be used as a lift to getting laid. She took Penguin and got out, and I drove off.

For the rest of that night, I sat at a small round table in my flat, working on a novel I had been writing, a fast-paced spy fiction thriller armed to the teeth with neo-Nazis, secret military bases, occult mysteries and nuclear clichés.

I tried to slip away into this world, using it as a buffer against the one out there where Demi and her fling were partying, trying to shield myself from the images that bombarded me of them together afterwards.

But I could see through my anger. Demi didn't owe me anything. I had pushed her off. I had been wrong to think after we had first been together that we were long-

lost companions. Really, we were strangers, strays in search of something, just as Lily and I had been after ten years together.

Popo and I lived alone for a while, trying to make a home out of the scraps of life, but gradually I opened to the idea that there was an animalistic truth to Demi's theory that we didn't belong to anyone, and that there was no such thing as a soul mate.

But I thought of Lily twirling conifer leaves in her fingers, of how the moon washed everything in a light neither silver nor grey nor white but a new colour altogether when I roamed to see her, and how one day we'd sat on the stairs in the school quad and I'd asked her about the painting hanging on the wall, and she'd said that it was abstract. I'd asked her what that was, and she'd said it was sort of like when disconnected things came together, on purpose or by mistake, and they made some kind of weird sense.

I forgave Demi.

I had called her Kitten, but her name changed to Cat.

She was playful and brutal and true to her pleasure.

It was winter, and the flat was cold, and one day, Demi and Penguin came over, and with Popo the four of us were warm and comfortable on the futon, with a heater blazing nearby.

If I could've knitted Popo a jersey, I would have, and I'd have knitted one for Demi and Penguin too, so they'd be a matching trio, all snuggled and warm together on the futon with me, captain and cruise director of our domestic love boat.

The Furball Trinity

1

Sometimes I would wonder: how did I get here, in life – living at home in my early thirties, having quit my job, broken up with my girlfriend, and moved out of the city, preferring the company of my three cats to people?

I would remember the night it all started.

I was sitting at the table on the verandah outside the flat I shared with Demi, staring at the stars through the creepers growing over the portico, when Popo, a large, grumpy male tabby, jumped onto the table and stared at me.

He produced a tiny packet of cigarettes, shook one out, lit it, and said, blowing smoke in my face, 'We need to talk.'

He took a drag, the coal glowing in his eyes, tapped ash off his cigarette, and continued, 'Look at yourself. You're pathetic. You've been a vegetarian for what, two years now? What, for *her*?'

I understood he meant Demi.

'I hope she's worth it. It's like you've lost your mind, devoting yourself to her, but she's always out with her friends and she's grown tired of you. She hardly even notices you around the house anymore, and your attempts to get her attention are obvious and pathetic. But you're neglecting us, buddy. You're neglecting yourself. Look how scrawny you are. And those dark rings under your eyes? Iron deficiency. Let me put it directly: You. Need. Meat – physically, mentally, spiritually. I've discussed it directly with the other two cats, Peeg and Penguin – you are to quit your

job, leave the stingy vegetarian bitch behind, and move us to the country, where we can all sniff some fucking fresh air for a change. This place,' he waved his paw, with dangling cigarette, around, 'is a shithole.'

'But what about my job?' I asked. 'What will I do to make money?'

He shrugged. 'Figure it out, asshole.'

He flicked his stompie and I watched it arc like a firefly over the wall into the neighbour's yard.

He stood up on all fours and jumped off the table.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'Granny snacks,' he said, 'two units down. Oh, and one more thing.' He looked at me. 'You need a Big Mac, right now. Two, actually. The first one's for your stomach. The second one's for your soul. Bring us each one, too.'

He swaggered away.

I drove to McDonald's, brought home the goods, and cheated on Demi and the whole non-carnivorous Animal Kingdom with the most delicious burger I'd sunk my canines into.

2

Demi invited me to a 'braai' with her friends one day, and I was so excited to go that I packed my car full of my things and left the city.

I took Popo with me, exiting Johannesburg through Houghton, past the house on the Ridge where we'd once lived, past Hillbrow Tower, which had once lit my night views, through the industrial south, with its purple skies of dusk, and on to the highway that flattened out into veld, the city's gappy smile in my rearview mirror.

I was happy to be home with my parents in Henley on Klip, and soon Demi, who moved out of the flat and couldn't keep Peeg and Pipi, gave me the tuxedos to look after.

3

Sometimes when I was working on freelance projects at my desk in the office at home, Peeg – with her stumpy legs, white-mitten paws, and a white stripe under her chin; most skittish of the three – would jump up and sit and stare at me with her huge, owl-like eyes until I stopped what I was doing and looked at her.

Then alarms would ring in my head.

I'd run to the bedroom and discover that their food bowl was only three-quarters full. I'd quickly top it up before the others could discover my mistake, saving them – thank God – from certain starvation, just in time.

For the rest of that day, I would feel guilty for my negligence and general idiocy.

The least I could do to make up for these kinds of imbecilities was to give them all of the meat off my plate, reserving a morsel for myself to enjoy in a token show of feasting with them.

I threw myself into my toil, editing or proofreading books from the edge of my chair, while Penguin – with her fox ears, and neck of soft, white down; most demanding of the three – would lie behind me, supervising, generously allowing me the centimetres I required to remain seated while working.

I laboured joyously, to afford the science-plan veterinary food they loved, which cost a small fortune, but not nearly enough.

I bought them toys I hoped they would play with – sticks with balls or strings or feathers dangling from them – but their amusement at such things quickly waned, and I would have to stage plays and performances to keep them entertained, designing and building the sets, hand-sewing the costumes, and performing all roles myself, while they looked on or slept in contented approval from the bed.

Holidays I gladly forfeited, as well as my clothes, which became their beds wherever they would lie around the house.

I would hunker down for whole nights on which I'd be prostrate in pleasurable discomfort, not wanting to make a single movement or even blink, lest I should disturb even a second of the sixteen hours of slumber they required daily.

I was grateful for the corner of blanket they allowed me to clutch, mid-winter, while they curled up in the luxurious folds of the duvet.

I would cancel all social appointments so that three years would pass quickly and I'd find myself thankfully single and friendless, better to tend to their needs.

Yet, how could I ever repay my debt to the Furball Trinity? For they had absolved all that was human and moronic within me.

4

Sometimes I had a suspicion they were controlling my brain, and I had to get out of the house to think, while they thought I was out buying them more delicious snacks.

I'd have to move fast to escape their hypnotic purr-song, as they lay on the soft bed of lawn outside the lounge, or on the bench under the apricot tree, comfort radiating from their curves, their dazzling eyes multiplying like charms.

Sometimes I'd leave shopping lists, strategically positioned in places I knew they would find them, detailing the ingredients of great feasts, so that they could read for themselves where I was going.

If one of them – Peeg, say – rolled onto her back, paws to the sky, fluffy tummy softening my gaze, I'd weep tears of joy for being allowed the privilege to be among them.

I read that half of the world's human population is infected by *T. gondii*, a parasite that reproduces only in cats and that causes mice to forget their fear of Cat, even to idolise Him, and to be attracted to His urine as if it were some fragrant nectar.

There are mostly no symptoms of Toxoplasmosis in humans, but an extreme portrayal of its effects is in *The Simpsons* character, Eleanor Abernathy, also known as Crazy Cat Lady.

Abernathy has cats crawling all over her. She is aged beyond her years, throws cats at people, and shouts gibberish instead of speaking.

By 24, she had qualified as a lawyer and a doctor, but by 32, had suffered burnout, turning to booze and cats for comfort.

But who are we to call Abernathy crazy, and to say that she suffered a great loss in giving up her life to be among cats?

Couldn't we equally say she gained a new, better life, among creatures who truly understood her?

As I watched *The Simpsons*, I thought I could make sense of Abernathy's gibberish.

If you took the time to sympathise with her, you'd discover that her language was actually a form of oral hieroglyphics that could easily be decoded.

Couldn't it be said that her language made just as much, if not more sense, than this brgabajigabiga, random assignment of mgrhhrms and jblshrrrts – sounds and letters that have no inherent meaning of their own – that we all whisper so dignifiedly to each other? And after all, isn't whispering really like the shouting of shouting?

5

Sometimes when I went out I'd shout things at the sky or passing strangers to let them both know how happy I was, and I would weep openly at how unlonely I'd become, and although I knew it was not possible to be more content, I understood that it was all too much to keep greedily to myself, and if I could find someone, a partner, to share it with – strictly for this reason alone – then the universe would be a more natural place to live in, with the three heavenly furbodies orbiting in an ellipsis from food bowl to bench to chair to lawn to food bowl.

I submitted my request to find a human female partner to the Furball Trinity, and while I waited for their reply, I sometimes escaped to the bench in the park across the road, where I would sit facing the house, out of range of their wireless fidelity, keeping an eye on the driveway in case one of them slipped through the fence – as they often did – to sit there awaiting my return with snacks.

I kept a shawl ready to throw over my head and dark glasses to put on as my disguise in case they identified me.

Sitting thusly, I made some realisations that were like treason itself to think:

Starting with Demi, and now fully realised in the Furball Trinity, I'd finally achieved my highest spiritual ambition – to worship a deity in exchange for being perfectly ignored.

My supplications went unacknowledged the more to encourage me even as I began to vanish within them.

The more invisible I became, the less of me there was to detest.

As a young child, I gave God an ultimatum: either He reveal Himself to me, through some sign or proof of His existence – in some flash of His most sacred parts – within ten days, or I stop believing in Him. But I lost count after three days and only remembered it decades later.

These three years with the Trinity had passed in a similar way.

Also:

If you were an overlord from another dimension dressed in a tiny furry costume and you wanted to control someone, the last thing you'd want is for the subject to be crazy.

You'd want the mouse to come dancing happily into your jaws.

You'd want the human to be sane in order to make the money to afford to keep you in the manner you'd grown accustomed to.

You'd want to sustain the illusion that in order for humans to be controlled by cats they would have to be crazy.

A cat of particular genius had been sitting directly behind Matt Groening when he'd created Eleanor Abernathy.

Chain Reaction

When, after being single for three years, I met Giulia (my own hot-blooded, short, cute Italian girl with auburn hair!) I decided to learn to speak the beautiful language of Italian with my mouth.

'Mi parlare solo un piccolino Italiano' – 'I speak only a tiny Italian'.

I thought that the best way to learn would be to have fun, so I got Giulz to teach me some interesting words: palle (balls), pene (penis), merda (shit), ano (anus), and scoreggia (fart).

My first sentence was, 'La faccia di questa persona guarda come un ano' – 'This person's face looks like an anus'.

Then, 'Il odore di questa persona é come la mia nonna, chi ha morto tre anni fa' – 'This person smells like my grandmother, who died three years ago'.

It took Giulz three months to introduce me to her family, and she warned me to expect 'a house of crazy Italians'.

I was so nervous: what would they think of me?

'Here he is. He is not the Italian son you were expecting: blonde, tall, and beautiful, a thoroughbred of the north, or tall, dark, and mysterious, a Neapolitan son of the soil. He is average height, bald, and from Vanderbijlpark. He no speak football. He quiet, like a, how you say, topolino, a small mouse, so tight he squeaks when he walks.'

I tried to get more of a feel for Italian by watching the gameshow, 'Reazione a Catena' – 'Chain Reaction'.

I dreamed of being a contestant.

Our team of three would be me, Giulz, and Zio Paperino (Uncle Donald Duck), my cat.

Our team's name would be 'Non Ce L'abbiamo' – 'We Don't Have It'.

When the host, Amedeo Sebastiani, would ask me to introduce myself and say what I did for a living, I'd reply, 'Ciao, io fato di libro' – 'Hello, I make book'.

Before meeting the family, I was very careful not to believe in stereotypes of Italians.

They wouldn't eat only lasagne or pizza – I had seen on Rai that the cuisine was quite varied according to the different climates and regions of Italy.

They wouldn't just be three cats who watched football or sat outside in the sun all day in designer suits eating gelato and sipping caffè, erupting into impassioned exchanges that culminated, always, in the throwing of tomatoes.

They would be quite a normal family.

The kitchen wouldn't be the most lived-in room of the house, and they would wear pants and socks, and sometimes be seen to be reading Shakespeare in the garden.

I met Mamina first.

She was shorter than a small boy. She wore an apron and she smiled as she kissed me hello on the cheeks.

She had short black curly hair and worked from home, though I soon learned that her real job was feeding people in the suburb and beyond, from garbage collectors to lawyers, accountants, security guards, doctors, and anyone with a mouth.

I met Papa, who was shorter than me and always wore a hat, which I was told he stomped on when he got angry.

He was a retired builder who spent his time defending the tomato crop in the backyard from the attack of what he called, ‘the mouthbirds’.

There was Sorella, always smiling and laughing, who still lived at home in her forties.

They were jovial and welcoming, and I liked them already, though I still felt nervous.

We ate lasagne and pizza.

Everyone spoke over each other, but I thought that they might be contributing to a grand narrative with their individual stories: Papa with his mouthbirds and gardening tips; Mamina with her Prince Harry theories; and Sorella with her football-player signings.

As the months passed, I thought I could make more sense of the grand Italian narrative.

‘The potatoes must breathe,’ Papa would say.

At the same time, Mamina: ‘Why did they invite so many blonde sluts to the royal wedding?’

Sorella: ‘Mandžukić has been tamed under Allegri at Juve.’

Mamina: ‘But Ronaldo’s not arrogant. He’s just a model.’

So: Harry is a potato-eating mouth-breather, a ginger slut who models stripy underwear for Prince Ronald, and chicken fence is the only thing that keeps the bastardos out.

Sometimes it felt like I was on a gameshow.

You had to know how to listen to three people at once.

There were so many courses of food that it felt like each one was a round of the show.

I learned that, in order to sit at the table of the Italians, one had to grow four more mouths.

I would keep each mouth in reserve – three for acknowledging the conversation of Papa, Mamina, and Sorella; and two for eating.

Just when it felt like I'd won the round, Mamina would back a truck of succulently prepared turkeys into the kitchen and offload them onto my plate.

It felt like I could never get a word of my own in or press the buzzer on time.

You could not say 'I've had enough' or 'My stomach feels like it's bursting'.

The family would take this to mean you were just being too polite; you were but a poor hungry little bastard, an orphaned mouse who hadn't eaten in years.

I watched more Rai, trying to make sense of it all.

One day I saw a programme about how the horse-drawn carriages in Rome were being replaced with motorised carts.

They interviewed the drivers and the horses, and I understood nearly every word.

The horse has no engine, and it eats far too much.

The passengers sit directly behind, and sometimes they cannot escape the farts of the driver who has eaten too many carrots.

But the horse is blamed every time.

It is the driver who must be replaced with a machine.

At Christmas, I watched Mamina, who was here at my left, with my right eye, and Papa, who was to my right, with my left eye, holding my three talking mouths ready, while my eating mouths were engaged directly with ravioli and rosemary potatoes.

My stomach began to pain because I'd miscalculated the number of rounds again.

But although it was all making sense, I longed to get a word of my own in, even if it was just a small one.

At least, though my bodily passages were engorged, my ears were still open, and I could follow the conversation.

'Giulie, I'm sorry to say, and I didn't want to tell you over the phone, but your cactus passed away. And a man called for you, from the place of the blood.'

'They are green because it is still too early.'

'You must boil the sheets first.'

'The word "lunatic" comes from "luna", the moon.'

'He cheated on the bitch with a stripper, but still, it must be nice to be a WAG.'

'How can there ever be peace in the world if there can't even be peace between two cats?'

'In any case, I'll be the last man standing.'

Just as a sharp pain went through my torso, Mamina forklifted a tray of lasagne into the loading zone.

I thought we'd reached the last round, 'L'ultima Parola' – 'The Last Word' – but then Mamina put a plate of chocolates on my head, because there was no more space on the table.

I'd had enough.

Enough-*enough*.

Enough!

I slammed my fist down between the plates as if I was pressing the buzzer.

The room went quiet.

I didn't know what language was coming out of which mouth, but I knew that the Italians were – individually, but together at the same time – finally hearing me in Italian, because now I was speaking with my body:

'Balls! Non mi frega un cazzo! (I do not give a fuck!) I'm going to win. It's not as if this is a room with five cats just staring at each other. My penis is itchy now.'

The Haze

1

First, there was a line painted in white, with chalky pebbles crumbling off its edges.

Then there was a lane that belonged to you, so long you could hardly see its end, bordered by white lines, and laid on grass that was hard and dry and spiky and that stabbed the skin on the insides of your feet so that sometimes you had to walk on your toes.

There was a grandstand filled with boys and girls in their colours – blue, green, red, and yellow.

And then there was the pop of a gun and the noise of a great rushing, while my mind reached forward into the space between me and the finish line filled with the vibration of the world being pieced together, molecule by shaking molecule, while my feet stayed behind, and there was a blur in the corner of my eye: the brown-haired boy, teacher's pet, who I would never, as if in a nightmare, be able to catch, caught in a wheel of air with my legs and arms whirling.

Then came the day when, close to the finish line, I dived, rolled on the grass, and a teacher came to me and said, 'First.' She helped me to my feet and took me to a table where another teacher wrote my name and time in the first white lane bordered by black lines. When my breath came back, warmth flooded me, and I realised I'd forgotten my feet and that they were tingling, as if tickled with feathers, but sore, but it didn't matter because I had won.

Next came the roundness of that lane, so round it could almost topple you over, send you rolling out into nowhere; so round and long my memory of it curves nearly out of sight but for the sweetness of oranges quartered, the lungsful of cold Highveld air scented with the smoke of firebreaks pluming grey from afar, and the feeling of being alone on the side of the track furthest from the grandstand, where there was no brown-haired boy and you might find a part of yourself slipping into the space in front of you, your molecules dancing with its molecules, but as soon as you noticed this, you would snap back from the dream and there would only be the sound of breathing and the rumbling trample of those who followed, and the joy of being the one to break the newness of things, the veld blazing with the fire of your feet.

Then came the footpath up the ridge filled with aloes and rocks, dust, stones of quartz blinking in the sun, and dongas lined with eucalyptus trees whose leaves I'd crush in my hands to breathe like burning smoothness into my lungs. The red-and-white tape marking the way fluttered in the wind with the sound of small propellers, and beside the path the grass was golden, flat back and humming.

We followed the rippling tape to students who stood like beacons on the ridge, showing us the way and shouting our names and things to make us go faster, and here you could blink tears of sweat, crave the coolness of water, and hear the cries of others bouncing off the rocks as if from another country.

There was the day when I came down from the ridge, through the school gate, and onto the track, and I felt pinpricks shooting through me, knowing that the brown-haired boy couldn't touch me, and that my parents were in the stands, watching me do something well for a change. I raised my hands to the crowd and laughed, took the bend into the final stretch, and claimed the finish line so that it belonged to me now,

as did the chalky pebbles, the ink, and the page my name would be written on, framed with golden leaves.

It was called cross-country, and I had found it, or it had found me, and now the naughty child had something to give other than disappointment, margin notes red with anger, parents' days cut short with early trips to school to fetch the boy from the headmaster's office, and choices that ended with one more: the thin leather strap or the thick one with metal studs on it? Always take the thick one with studs, never make a sound, and walk out of there as if nothing has happened, while keeping back the drops trying to force their way out of the corners of your eyes.

2

Then there was my dad, who bristled like grass at the touch of my potential.

A coach's stopwatch now hung by a string around his neck, a big digital one with two buttons on the top: Start/Stop and Lap/Reset. He would stand in front of our house and wait for me to run past, shouting splits at me, or handing me water. He would drive around the streets, measuring routes for me to run, following me in his car when I ran longer distances. On nights before races, he would make pasta and dish heaps of it up for me with cheese and say, 'You need to carbo-load, China plate!'

There were early Saturday mornings, when my dad would open my bedroom door, the light from the passage a lemon wedge on the carpet, and call, 'Four bells!' with his voice full that I can still hear in song. I'd open the curtains, daylight not yet come, I'd dress in my running clothes, and we'd drive to road races in places like Germiston, Benoni, or Pretoria. I'd take my place at the start in the dimly lit street, shake the nerves out of my legs, and size up the competition, with the smell of Deep

Heat and body odour biting my nose. The gun would go, there'd be a forest of legs, and then there'd be the hum of feet on the road.

There were night races, bright stadiums, and streets with the shadows of tree trunks falling across the road and dappled leaf prints on the pavements. When it drizzled, the tar would be smooth and shiny, sparkling yellow.

Running became of minutes, seconds, and personal bests recorded on race numbers stored along with medals, trophies, and badges in a grey shoe box with 'Running stuff' written on the lid. It became of winning, of going up on stage to collect trophies, and of all the things family, teachers, and friends would say about me, and, most of all, it was of making my dad proud.

Then came the Saturday afternoons when we'd drive to cross-country league races all over the province, and I'd run on tracks around dams, and through blackened veld strewn with broken glass, old magazines, torn clothes, and plastic bags caught in a breeze against the grass.

There were weekday nights when my dad would sit at the kitchen table poring over printouts of my results, making notes in the margins, assigning points to me and my competitors, and creating enemies to whose backs he attached targets for me to chase: a lanky boy called Hendrik Strydom, and another kid, Zulu Solomon, who won nearly all of the races.

There was the day when my dad took me to The Sweat Shop, a place filled with shelves of running shoes, and asked the assistant to find me a pair of racers. The man watched me run in the corridor outside, said that I had a natural running style, disappeared, and returned with a box, out of which came a pair of Asics: grey suede, with the logo criss-crossing the sides in bright orange; the most beautiful shoes I'd ever seen.

There was the day when, towards the end of the season, I found out that I'd been selected to run for Southern Transvaal. My dad took me back to The Sweat Shop, and this time out of the box came a pair of Nike Zoom Waffles: special cross-country shoes, even more beautiful than the Asics, with red toecaps, a big Nike swoosh on the sides, and bright red-and-yellow soles with rubber studs.

Then there were clouds of dust that stung my eyes as we, running for our provinces, swarmed off from the start to shove our way through bottlenecks at tight corners, and I beat my dad's enemy, the bastard Strydom, but only came twenty-third, while Solomon won again.

There was the time my teacher, Mrs Da Costa, told me, 'One day, when I'm old and sitting in my rocking chair, watching TV, I want to see you win the Comrades Marathon. That's if you don't end up in jail.' I didn't think I'd ever end up in jail, or run the Comrades, equally bad things. The Comrades was for aliens, middle-aged creatures with sagging bellies who ran too far for no reason, without any hope of winning anything. If I ran well, I didn't need good marks, and I disrupted class and fooled around in tests. I didn't care about poetry, but I knew there was rhythm in how your body moved.

3

Then came that long road filled with the brown of veld that ended, everywhere, with the blue of sky, land sometimes half covered in shadow caught up by advancing curtains of light, and on the horizon, a new home: boarding school in Bloemfontein.

At the end of that road, I found a metal-frame bed with squeaky springs, a yellow foam mattress with holes in it, and school grounds to explore on weekend nights when everyone was watching movies in the common room.

Hidden behind yellow light, casting long palls of shadow onto the fields, were places with doors opening to new worlds, and here you could become, with your new friends, a fugitive of the darkness, and you could go into those lonely places and find a way to climb almost anything.

There was the long, low roof over the passage to the dining hall, at the end of which, over another roof, we found the ladder to the water tower and, climbing it, our knuckles white with fear, we stretched out on the flimsy metal on top of the tank, staring at the stars, feeling the magnetic dizziness of the edge, looking out over the fields, whispering.

There was the swimming pool, forbidden to us, where we would take secret swims at night, gliding through silence. There was the compound, where it was rumoured horses' heads could be found in the rubble. There was the library, where it was said you could see a bloodied hand carrying a candle at night.

We claimed these places, one after another, as prizes for our souls, dark and jealous with the sickness of exploration, until the bounds of the school were too tight for our hearts, and we spilled over the walls, one after another, tumbling onto the pavements, to range into the streets, using the moonlight caught as lamps in our hands.

Running was simplified into flight, and although there were athletics days on which I'd still win races, it mattered less, because there were better things to do.

4

There was a new world waiting at the end of the year: high school, a new hostel with a room at the bottom of the rung, and something called initiation that was only whispered about.

There was the shrill bell at three in the morning on weekend days, scrambling into shorts, shirts, and shoes, lines of us in the parking lot with long white tails of fog curling from our mouths, and shouting prefects carrying out something called hard labour.

There were laps around the field, push ups, sit ups, jumping jacks, bouncing red-and-white jowls, nervous farts, sprints, moans, tears, arguments, and fist fights.

And in all of this, there was running, rediscovered, and there came the day when I followed a matric student to a training group run by a former Olympian walker, Oom Thys.

At the university, there was a track through some veld, at the start of which stood a tall man, Oom Thys, who wore slippers and big glasses, whose coughs were of gunships exchanging fire, and who paced up and down with his hands behind his back, watching me run through the veld, saying afterwards, ‘I’d like to train you.’

Now there were early evenings spent chasing athletes from Grey, Sentraal, Fichardtpark, and Louis Botha HTS around the track at the stadium, or over the undulating grass course at the technikon, or on the roads around Tempe military base. On Saturdays, for those not racing, there was speed work at the track or hill work in the suburbs.

When I did it in my own time, running became about being alone. I would wake early to run on the frost-laced fields. After training at the track, I would practise hurdling steeples or jumping over the water pit. I would flood the streets with my footfalls when I ran to Signal Hill where, sitting on a concrete pylon, I could look over the small city and dream about Lily, the girl I was in love with but who I was too scared to talk to. Then, after Lily became my girlfriend, I would cut through the streets like a midnight blade to see her. The days were filled with strange light, the nights cloaked me, while ahead, always just out of reach, there was a frontier where molecules waged war over how the world should be configured.

There was poetry in movement, and my city became larger with wonder. I could turn the city upside down, shake loose the buildings with my gargantuan hand, search among rusty leaves in the gutters, and ask, 'Have you seen me?' only to find no trace, for I left no footprints, though the city was my own, and I was in love, running through it.

But running, for my coach and for my peers, was about winning, and if you wanted to be fast, the work was hard.

There came the time when, after weeks of training hard, I got it right. I ran fast times in the cross-country league or on the track, and I won the Southern Free State cross-country championships, and then travelled to Stellenbosch in the spring to compete in the national championships, coming tenth. On the track, I came third in the 3000-metre Free State championships. In those races, space singed with the heat of my effort, as if the speed was unnatural and intrusive.

But there came the time, too, when I got it wrong on purpose, because although I still enjoyed winning and running fast, I sent signals to the ground through the

emissaries of my feet, and the message that vibrated back to me through my body was filled with mischief, and trouble answered my call.

Then, I wouldn't be in the spot in front of the school where I would catch a lift to training. I'd be in my room, my face covered with a duvet to block out the light, trying to steal an hour or two to close my eyes.

There were nights of drinking and smoking, and Mondays when I would run well at time trials, but I would disappear for days and even weeks, until, one day, I was caught shoplifting with my friend and suspended from the hostel.

Oom Thys suggested I talk to a sports psychologist, and in the psychologist's office at the university, the man asked me, 'What motivates you to succeed?'

'I want to prove all those who doubt me wrong,' I said.

He said that it was a powerful motivator, but I knew that it was the wrong answer. I just didn't have the stomach for competition. When I ran, I just wanted to let loose my feet for no reason other than to feel my legs and chest burn, and to become invisible, with a fugitive's intent hidden in my breath, my passage cloaked by my footfalls.

5

Then came that long road north, filled with the brown of things used up and the black and grey of things to come, ending at home, in Henley on Klip, with university at Wits to begin.

There were cold benches on early mornings where I'd sit alone, before campus awoke, as if on the edge of the world, looking down on a razed landscape.

I studied English Literature, and found a little warmth in the pages. There was the poor old woman, munching a plum on the street, a paper bag of them in her hand. But my plums were memories, and they tasted bitter to me, to me, they tasted bitter. I knew it by the way I hid myself from everything, how I could twitch, feel nervous, and know that there was a swarm of eyes, and think: if only I could swallow, maybe that would help a little, to give me some comfort, but my throat was caught with the decomposing things that seemed to fill the air.

I had my rotting places on campus. There was the Cullen Library, with its high, muralled ceiling. The Wartenweiler, where, on the third floor, you could find cubicles near the windows looking out over the library lawns. There were lecture halls, emptied of students but filled with the din of passing mobs. On West Campus, there was the Economics Library, where I was assured not to run into anyone I knew. And then, my favourite, the Geosciences Library, which seemed tucked underground.

I devised routes to connect these dens – a network of pathways hidden between the grey buildings and tunnels sidled by foliage – walking fast with nowhere to go, passing strangers who walked alone, with my eyes to the ground but boring deeper.

Running was never forgotten, but it became about everything I'd lost, and about failure. There was speed in me yet, I thought, but there was also a student loan to pay off, working part-time, and this became my excuse. There were times when, seeing professional athletes run on TV, my stomach would knot with nerves, and I'd want, desperately, to run again. Slowly, slowly, I came back to it, deciding that I'd enter the cross-country league in the autumn. I started training again, basing my programme on the ones I'd been on under Oom Thys, and I ran hard and fast on the streets around home.

There were trips on Saturdays to Boksburg, Delta Park, and Soweto, in my old Toyota Corolla that would overheat and force me to pull over to top the radiator up.

There was the time when, in Soweto, amidst the broken glass, torn tins, sharp rocks, used condoms, and black grass, I made the mistake of running barefoot, and after two kilometres, my feet started to burn, and after the first lap, at four kilometres, with two laps to go, they were cut up and bloody, and a group of young people gathered, following me around, standing at points on the route to laugh at me and offer me their shoes.

I ran some fast times, finishing not far behind Zulu Solomon, but the harder I trained, the slower I ran, as the season wore on.

And there was always my dad, who still came with me to races, but who stood off to the side, watching quietly, while I could see behind his flitting eyes the old hunger for me to succeed. There was the Saturday when my dad came with me to a race, and as I warmed up in a field with him standing nearby, I asked, 'Why do you have to watch me like that? Don't you have a life, something better to do?'

He didn't say anything. He shook his head, looked at the ground, walked off to a grandstand and sat down, his hands in his pockets. I knew I'd said something terrible, and that I'd broken a contract between us, the oldest one we knew. More than that, I knew that I'd disturbed something deeper in him, and in me, and that running would never be the same. When I ran the race, every time I passed the spot where my dad stood, watching, my knees would feel weak, and the strength would drain out of my legs.

Finally, there came the day of my last exam, after which, treading air, running, studying, and working too hard, I had a nervous breakdown that a psychologist told me was caused by burnout. When I went running, there was a pain in my chest, and

the molecules in the space around me, no longer shaking, smouldered in their husks. Who was I, beyond the degrees and the decomposing memories, and where did I belong?

There were days of recovery when I discovered the simplicity and power of breathing and Sogyal Rinpoche's wisdom in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

There was the dream in which I was in a house, high up in the mountains, when Rinpoche walked in and said, smiling warmly and brightly, with intelligence behind his eyes, 'I'm here to help you.'

Then, there was the decision to travel east, to live and work in Taiwan.

6

Then came cities so big that, if you stood in the garden at home, looking east, you could nearly see their fingertips above the ridges of Suikerbosrand, twelve thousand kilometres over the Indian Ocean. You could almost hear the roar of the throngs of scooters, piloted by masked riders through self-replicating streets of department stores, electronics shops, 7-Elevens, cafés, and temples with pagoda roofs, golden Buddhas, swastikas, candles, and incense. But in Taipei, facing west, you couldn't quite see the veld fires of home, or smell the coming winter in the dust, or see the leaves swirling in the streets. Taiwanese streets were not made for running. They were made for spitting on, for trampling in a blind rush towards money, for hungry ghosts fed with burning notes, children with fingertips blunted by violins, B-boys in their gangster gear at McDonald's who would say, 'Hey, man', or 'Yo, dude', and the workers who would catcall at your girlfriend and pump the air with their loins.

There were long days of teaching English, and late nights devising lesson plans.

There were drunken weekends, trips on the scooter out into the night simply to get lost, braais on the balcony, and bathroom breaks in the cubicle outside the building at work during which I'd pray for an end to it all.

There was the day when, missing home, I decided to put my running shoes on and take to the streets, and I ran until I came to a ghost town, and picked my way through the rubble of abandoned houses.

Then I discovered, at the high school across the road from work, a grass athletics track lit at night only by the high-rise apartment buildings crowding it over. I kicked off my shoes and felt the blades brush my feet, watched by men and women come to pray in this darkness and to find peace from the burning lights, their thoughts turned oval, their eyes glowing like chips of pearl.

Then, a miserable year passed, came the day the classroom bobbed and weaved, as if on springs, the terrible rumbling of the earth eating itself, the desks and chairs rattling with the children in them, the quick escape into the street, the lurching of the place as if everything was on a continuous wave, and the sleepless week before we climbed nine kilometres into the air, home-bound, and called for wine and to keep it coming.

7

There was a return to an imagined home, and seven years to come in Johannesburg, with its high walls, soul-sucked streets, fleshless closed-circuit eyes, and the many ways of feeling as if you never belonged.

But there was always that one thing I knew how to do right, the truest sentence I knew, neglected but never forgotten, of how my feet fell from a height but landed to

pin drops, and how my breaths attached themselves to the air. I felt I never knew a place until I explored it with my feet, and then at night, when I closed my eyes, if I listened carefully enough or saw with the sight of all red blood, I would know that there was a place I was visiting in my mind, always made up of places run and places imagined, and I'd ask: what is my soul doing there?

There was Northcliff, with its acacia-lined streets and jacarandas blooming in months when the sky grew dark purple with clouds and burst into the rains into which I'd sometimes run, while feeling lightning at my back, and in fearful exuberance I would slip between the rivers rising and falling from the gutters.

At work, there was a grass track behind our building, and there I met an athlete who was sponsored by a famous shoe brand, and who encouraged me to try to make something of the energy in me, to give it one last try. But my motivation came in waves, and if I ran for weeks long enough on end, I'd run some fast times, but life would always fuse this out and I'd be caught again on Saturdays working overtime or writing on the side to make money, and there was always a girlfriend at home to disappoint and friends around to fail to connect to, and I'd be left again with that dulled ambition, a symptom of the most pathetic condition in the world: failed-athlete syndrome.

Running became about burning off stress, but it also filled my imagined city with colour, as if when I passed through an area on foot it blushed with reds and greens and became known to me. Slower, slower now, I could communicate better with the space around me, making more sense, only by fractions, of its mystery.

In Kelvin, under blackened skies, there was the constant sound of cars passing on the highway, and my feet chose courses through the streets and beyond – over the

highway, on a footbridge, down into Sunninghill, and east, up a hill past Alex, past fields where kids played football.

In Birdhaven, there were parks and yellow-brick paths, and shortcuts with graffiti-covered walls and the most foul of human scents, each passage a portal connecting places on my mental map of the city.

There was Houghton, with its old bones, its broad, tree-lined streets, and the steep, winding spine up the ridge.

Then Norwood, with its chain-linked parks, and the paths that ran through them, beside the river, where the huts of the homeless were cut into steep banks, and drying clothes hung from branches.

There was the path that led me, one day, past the back of a Buddhist temple I'd had no idea existed, from which, carried by a windhorse and a prayer, memories came bending out of the east.

I ran further and further, breaking through clouds of static, pulling matter, thoughts, and energy with me, driven by an unknown force into new worlds in which I thought I could hear the crackle of something, and wondered, for the first time, what was beyond. I ran west, lost my sense of direction, and ran through unfamiliar streets, guessing I was somewhere in Randburg, until I finally found a street I recognised and followed it home.

But if I closed my eyes, and followed the memory stored in my muscles, I would know that I was looking south, and that the place I was visiting in my mind was home.

8

On the way back from the city, when you crossed the bridge over the Klip, heading east, you would notice the houses and people and roads begin to be touched with translucence, and seeing through the glass of the skin of all the people, you would make out their veins, blue of sky and red of the sun, and you would see their beating hearts, and if you continued to bend your way into the east, you'd find a sand road that would take you almost into the hills of Suikerbosrand where, amidst cabbage trees, you could dwell in the stones of the ruins, and as you came closer and closer to these foothills, the houses, the cars, the marks scarring the land, would fall away, and with them, the further you went, the more would your life be dismantled, as if, piece by piece, the armour of ego, of career, worries, and relationships, would be removed, so that, bare with your legs, breath, and the sound of your footfalls on a sand road become burning with golden ridges, your eyes could be opened with a new broadness of vision, and you could be receptive to simple joys, like noticing how butterflies took off from the sides of the path through the veld before you, how the buck roaming the farms might be spooked after a length of time staring at you, how windmills caught the light and sent it spiralling on the veld, and how the lowing of a herd of cows, their breath steaming, could set your heart racing and, with their eyes prickling the back of your neck, you could run on with the light now fading and new fear at being alone in all of this, so far from home.

Nearing the village, there would be abandoned buildings ready to crumble back into life, men with hard faces in blue overalls and gumboots, cigarette puffs trailing them with the smell of hand-rolled gwaais laced with something for control,

eucalyptus trees, the rubbish dump in the distance, and the black smoke of burning tyres.

There would be young men in shorts and loose-fitting collared shirts pushing wheelbarrows filled with crates of quarts and, on the corner before the tar road, the sound of music and the voices of men from the shebeen.

The houses, translucent in the dim light of dusk, would come next, with their immaculate lawns and spiky fences, and there would be those arriving home to their singing dogs from a day's work in the city. Travelling in the opposite direction, at a speed no faster than a leaping grasshopper, there would come ancient men, creaking home on their bicycles.

There were brighter days, on which I'd head west over the river and on to a road that wound alongside it, with sleepy stone-and-thatch cottages on its banks, and I would run in the village, and absorb, often, the shouts of people passing in their cars.

I took these pleasures out of my work day, having quit my job and begun freelancing, and I found in them new ways to use my body, a temple, for worship.

I ran further and further, always taking new roads where turns presented themselves, finding shortcuts through the veld and, one day, the entrance to what I thought was private property but turned out to be a conservancy, with its white-sand dongas, a steep, rocky track up onto a ridge, and plains of veld beyond. I turned back, driven by the joyful fear of trespassing and the more immediate and alarming one of snakes.

The dryness of the place and the eucalyptus brought me back to the velds of youth, that ridge bristling with grass and aloes, and my dad, who stood beside the track shouting me on.

9

Then came the day when my dad returned from the hospital, and the words he spoke rolled out of his mouth and collected on the floor, where they blinked at us, while the birds sang in the trees outside and I forced back my tears.

There was his operation, when I waited hours to see him wheeled out of theatre into a recovery room and I went in to see plastic tubes coming out of my dad like porcupine quills, and then I saw stars amidst blackness and I had to clutch the bed railing not to fall.

There were trips to and from that hospital for weeks on end, and there was the secret garden I found in a corner of the grounds, where I felt life stir in the hum of the bees and the rustle of the wind through the leaves.

There were the long weeks of his recovery, when he lay bed-ridden, sent home to die with a letter recommending palliative care, and there was the surprise in his doctors' eyes as he came back to health, slowly at first and then faster, so that he could begin treatment.

There were the runs I took between these things, which helped to clear my mind, and sometimes, thinking he might not make it, I began to realise that each stride had something of him in it, and it had always been this way.

There was his question, as there had always been: 'How was your run?' Stronger, he began to walk to improve his health, and there came the day when I took him to a shop to buy him a new pair of shoes, and as he stood talking to the owner about running, I recalled the day we had first gone to The Sweat Shop, and the look on his face when the attendant had told him that I had a natural running style.

There were the drives we took to measure routes, and our conversations about my training programme, and early mornings when I'd wake him so that he could come with me to races, where he'd wait for me to finish and then help drive me home.

There was my first marathon, when my dad came with me to the Drakensberg. I ran up the escarpment on a path that cut back on itself a hundred times, stopping to scoop up handfuls of water to drink from the mountain streams, and came back down into unknown territory, the furthest I'd ever run. We stayed on for a week, riding horses on the grassy hills and eating trout caught on the lake, where we rowed a boat with the reflection of the mountains on its surface.

Coming home, there was the day I went onto the Comrades website and registered to do the down run from Pietermaritzburg to Durban, telling no one except for my dad. I was secretly running Comrades for him, and although I never told him so, I suspect he knew. I'd become the imagined alien of my youth: a Comrades Marathon hopeful.

10

There were two sleepless nights, one last early morning, and the start of Comrades in the dark street outside the town hall in Pietermaritzburg, filled with thousands of runners in their seeding pens, hopeful people who sang, shook, and spoke nervously.

There was all this noise, energy, and movement, but there was also this great silence in me as I sat on the kerb, looking up at the clock tower that was cast in red and blue light. I felt something descend from the sky, while my stomach turned over, and already I could feel myself being dismantled. Parts of me fell away, collecting as debris around me: all of the things that made me who I was but none of them that

really mattered. Standing among the runners, I was not much more than skin, flesh, and bone; I had been whittled away to a core that I would discover more of on the road to Durban.

There was singing, ‘Shosholoza’, and then ‘Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika’, and then ‘Chariots of Fire’ played, and I started to cry, though I didn’t know what caused me to, feeling pathetic and immensely grateful for life, all at once.

There was the gun, the slow movement forward, and streets lined with people whose voices were like petals cast at the feet of legions moving through the dark streets.

There was a levelling out, a settling of nerves, and the familiar sound of breathing and footfalls, and the sun, which we discovered hovering just above the horizon as we crested Polly Shortts. There, no more than a few kilometres in, we went down into the darkness of a valley, and I could feel myself tipping headlong into the place vibrating with newness, which rushed to meet me, and which, for the first time, welcomed my presence.

There was Camperdown, after twenty-five kilometres, where I took my long-sleeve shirt off and gave it to one of the children beside the road, and there were fresh tears at the thought of all my parents had done for me, and at how fortunate I was.

Kilometre by kilometre, layers of my being were stripped away, so that, finally, my wish of becoming invisible was being granted, and I ran all the way to the foot of the mountain, Inchanga, and there began to climb the path, while everything fell by the wayside and, very ill, my body purging itself of all of the liquids and the nutrition I carried with me, the road began, like me, to dissolve, until every step from there on would be one of the mind.

There was Drummond, at half way, where people in bizarre costumes walked on stilts and made running gestures and danced stiffly to the deep, blasting music, where hundreds of spectators lined the road, drinking beer, braaing, hosing runners down with water, and shouting out our names, which were printed on our race numbers. I would wince every time my name was called, and ask, who is the person attached to that name? Have you seen him? Now he is floating by, nothing more than a product of love.

And then there was Botha's Hill, the end of everything. I was forced by the pain in my stomach and chest to stop. I sat on a kerb, between two water tables, hiding. My race was over.

There I was: the failure; the boy who'd never honoured anything but himself with running; the man who'd broken the contract with his father; the ungrateful person who'd never known any true thing, while his father, who had always believed in him, waited further along the road, only to be disappointed one last time before he would die from his illness. I had set out to run this race for him. Why? To conquer the space, to trample it, to show it that we still had some control over the way it was configured in his body; that the way his cells had mutated was nothing more to us than something to be overcome with strength. But all I'd found on the road between Pietermaritzburg and this hill was how frail my body was.

A marshall came over, and asked, 'Why aren't you moving?'

I said, 'Something is wrong with me. Can you wave an ambulance down?'

'You want the Bailer's Bus?'

I looked into his eyes and knew that he'd been here: he'd sat at this spot; maybe he, too, had felt a failure; and he'd phrased his question deliberately.

I said that I wanted to quit, and after he left me, promising to let me know when the bus came, I sat there for what felt like hours until I stood up, and a new race began. I started walking.

'Where are you going?' the marshall asked.

'To look for my dad,' I said.

I knew that there was something in me that would never allow me to break, something that came from outside of me, that I could never claim as my own, but that would always pull me forward.

Next, there was Pinetown, with more than twenty kilometres to go, and I stopped, vomiting up a black substance, sitting on the kerb, while a couple of spectators walked past, and I heard one say, 'This kid should have stayed at home where it's nice and comfy,' and his partner said, 'Ja, but I guess he's still someone's son.'

There, my race ended, again.

But as I sat, I thought of how thin my dad's legs were, and I heard his voice in song, I heard his laughter, and when I stood up, another race began.

Then came Cowies Hill, and Westville, with fifteen kilometres to go, and I scanned the crowd for my dad, but every face belonged to a stranger.

There was the group of runners I joined, a runners' bus driven by a pacemaker who shook a tambourine to keep us in rhythm.

And there was the highway, with eight kilometres to go. As the city of Durban came into view, its buildings shrouded in white against the dark blue of the sea, my mind – couched down into itself, regarding all thought with suspicion, trying to preserve energy and to protect me from more pain – allowed for the simple calculation I did to know that I could still finish the race before the cut-off time of

twelve hours, but that I would have to move ahead of the bus of runners, and my heart swelled with gratitude at the nearness of the end of my journey.

11

Last, but neverending, there was a lane of brown grass that broadened and hardened into a road that climbed into the hills, crumbled into sand, and disappeared into the mists of places I'd never been.

Beside it, there was him, standing with his coach's stopwatch that hung from a string around his neck, with two buttons along the top: Start/Stop and Lap/Reset.

There was me, the boy, running past, trying to fathom the depth of the gift he gave me, the greatest one a parent can give their child: to believe in the boy, to bless him with opportunities, to give him the gentlest of nudges that would send him running into life, and then to retreat as if the sacrifices had cost nothing.

There was the golden mile through the streets of an imagined city lined with clamouring people, and that last round bend of the athletics track, so round it could almost topple you over and send you rolling out into nowhere, and then there was that line, painted white, with chalky pebbles crumbling off its edges, and beyond that, the haze that the boy would walk into, where he'd find his father, look into his eyes, hand him his medal, and hear the sound of his retreating laughter.

Reflective Essay

Even Poodles Can Fly

1

I wrote this collection of essays to practise writing memoir so that one day I can be a ghostwriter of other people's stories.

The idea was to use my own life and memories as material.

Six years ago, I started a small business that offered book-production services to publishers. I did ebook conversions, which formed a large part of my income. But I knew that software would soon make my ebook work obsolete. I needed a new source of income.

Ingeniously, I turned to writing.

But I was also in search of purpose.

I moved from Johannesburg to home at my parents' house in Henley on Klip, a sleepy village with quiet streets and riverside lots on the sluggish brown-green Klip.

I was single, with my three cats. I willed myself to be forgotten here, to fade from people's plans, to become a cipher walking beneath the giant oaks in the garden, listening to the birds, or dozing on weekends in a hammock with my cat, Penguin.

I started running more, going out on the sand roads on the outskirts of the village, with the ridges of Suikerbosrand larger in view with every breath.

But soon, my dad was diagnosed with cancer. I watched him grapple with the meaning of his life. He tried to mean more to the people around him. He took up crafts, making coasters with pictures of animals or mushrooms on them, and doing paintings for all of us, his family. For me, he did a picture of the Drakensberg, a

memory of the time we spent there on holiday together. He knew these things would be here long after he was gone.

One night, when we both couldn't sleep, I stood in the doorway of my parents' room, all dark, and we spoke.

I asked him if he was ready for it – for the end.

He said that he would've liked a few more years, but he was ready.

I asked him what his greatest achievement in life was.

He said that it was marrying my mother and having me and my brother.

I was with him the night he died. I stepped out of his hospital room to get some fresh air and returned to stand at the foot of his bed. He was already in a morphine haze. I listened to his hollow breathing punctuated by hiccups, and told him about the moonlight, the crisp air, and the stars.

I got into the recliner in the corner and closed my eyes.

When the nurses came in to wash him, they turned him on his side and he inhaled once, sharply, and then there was nothing.

I began to realise that I needed people. Or, at least, I needed *someone*, a companion to share life with. I couldn't hide forever. I also needed something to help me grow out of this stagnation.

I registered to study an honours in creative writing at Wits University. In the hall, while I stood explaining to the nice lady at the creative writing table that my plan was to be a ghostwriter and make money from this thing, and that this was all part of my doomsday preparation for the rise of the robots – which were the best modules to take for that? – a blankness came over the poor woman's face as she listened and nodded and then said I should take poetry.

That year, I wrote some of my grief out of me. Memory's leaves withered as scorched tears and fell on the hot graveside soil. My feelings bled onto the page, but the leaves were not deep enough, and my words caught only as dried ink on the surface.

But I found a voice characterised, I hoped, by simplicity, honesty, and humour.

And then I met someone – Giulia, my beautiful Italian.

I produced at least one worthy writing effort, a short story about a detective who rides around a village on a donkey letting investigations solve themselves, which won a small university prize.

By the end of that year, I knew I wanted to continue writing humour. I applied to do a master's in creative writing, and was accepted.

I would let this clown within me loose a little to ride around on his magic donkey, with all of my memories as a backdrop, and see what happened.

2

I quickly discovered how difficult writing memoir is.

In 'I, the Monster', I explored my lack of grief at my grandmother's passing, which made me feel like a monster.

I presented the essay to the master's group, and immediately felt bad for being honest with how I felt about my grandmother.

One reader said that my family sounded horrible for kicking my grandmother out of our home, and that I'd failed to give a balanced view of my grandmother, characterising her as a monster.

I considered editing the essay to bring more balance into it, but I kept returning to a kernel of anger, a strong dislike of my grandmother, so I decided to retain this feeling.

'The best memoirists stress the subjective nature of reportage,' Mary Karr writes. 'Doubt and wonder come to stand as part of the story.'[1]

It wasn't my job to present a balanced view. I wanted to explore my feelings, to express my version of what Lee Gutkind calls 'personal truth'.

'Truth is personal,' Gutkind writes, 'it is what we see, assume, and believe, filtered through our own lens and orientation. Although it may revolve around the same subject or issue, the truth as one person perceives it may not be the same truth another person sees.'[2]

I resisted the urge to edit the essay to make me and my family seem nicer. The price I paid for this was that I risked coming across as callous, and selfish for ignoring the feelings and needs of others, like my mother, who grieved, by failing to console them and refusing to participate in the rituals of death.

In the end I, the writer, felt like the monster, but at least I was an honest one.

I believe that I value honesty more than someone's opinion of me. It therefore felt like a small price to pay.

And here, to make myself look better – or worse? – is a joke I wrote in my journal: *At his step-mother's funeral a man puts his ear to the casket and asks, 'Is she coffin?'*

In 'The Dead Rat Under the Cap', I revisited old insecurities in writing about how I came to terms with premature baldness.

I thought I was comfortable with going bald, but in the days leading up to the class I presented my work at, I began to feel the familiar embarrassment and discomfort I felt in the early days when I started losing my hair.

Suddenly, I felt ugly everywhere I went, as if people just saw a bald head with legs and eyebrows walking towards them.

Giulz and I went to see a movie. After we sat down in a middle row of the cinema, a group of laughing kids came in and sat down behind us.

I pictured my shiny dome reflecting the screen, blinding them. (Such a device would come in handy on a desert island to signal passing ships?)

I could no longer rest my head on the chair. I sat forward awkwardly for the duration of the movie, bracing for popcorn attacks. This would just draw more attention to me, but I couldn't relax. I thanked God that Bruce Willis wasn't in the film, though he might have been sitting in the audience that day.

The class went well, and soon I went back to feeling normal, but I make sure we sit in the back row now, where all the insecure bald people go (please leave some seats open for us?).

Baldness started out with me trying to hide the fact that my hair was dwindling, but it progressed to me concealing that I was insecure about it, so it felt good to confess that for years it fucked me up. It felt good to joke about it, to admit to the weakness, which was transformed into something else through humour.

In 'Introvert's Response', I tried to imagine a world in which my introversion would be seen as admirable.

Writing about introversion allowed me to confess that I've always been a loner.

I'm great at parties, but only ones where people stand in pairs and every now and then there's some distraction to divert the awkwardness, like a fire or a drowning child.

I tried to subvert the extrovert's view as the norm by comically exaggerating my wish to retreat, to slip away to some kingdom of silence under the sea.

'Comedy is no innocent thing,' John Voorhaus warns, 'but a powerful, often subversive, force for change.'[3]

And there I was, at home, advocating for introvert rights.

Writing about introversion helped me to see it not as feebleness but as a gentle and powerful impulse or yearning for peace.

In 'Delinquency's Soundtrack', I discovered how faulty my memory was.

Was I wearing a black shirt with a picture of Halley's Comet on it or a grey one with a drawing of He-Man giving Skeletor a blowjob?

Was I even wearing shoes when I wrote that essay?

Do slops count?

I had to take some liberties with details to create scenes, which I tried to build around a core of real events and people.

'Don't create incidents and characters who never existed,' Gutkind writes.[4]

But I allowed myself to embellish minor incidents in order to reflect emotional accuracy. For example, I might not have been standing in front of a row of seated girls in the hall at a school dance when a song about small penises came on. But I remember feeling emasculated when that song played, which made it more difficult for me, even when the song ended, to go and ask one of the girls to dance. Writing it the way I did heightened the tension and portrayed the emotion of my emasculation.

‘Non-fiction is absolute,’ Gutkind says. ‘You can’t be half dead. And a story described as half true is false – and is therefore categorized as fiction.’[5]

But then, as John Peder Zane notes, ‘Exaggeration and embellishments are what allow humour to suggest larger truths.’[6]

The middle ground, perhaps, is in doing the reader the courtesy of letting them know that you have taken some liberties. ‘The best memoirs,’ Karr writes, ‘openly confess the nature of their corruption.’[7]

Before starting on this project, I knew it would be a challenge to make my essays entertaining. I didn’t have any wild stories to tell, like those confessional-memoir authors who used to land on Oprah’s couch: *I kept my penis a secret from my husband for years, until he caught me peeing standing up, and now he knows the truth*.

I tried to rely on style and voice to bring my stories to life, by inhabiting the view of a younger self and combining this with my feelings – the writer’s feelings – of what it was like to be alive at that time.

‘A great voice renders the dullest event remarkable,’ Karr writes. ‘Voice isn’t just a manner of talking. It’s an operative mindset and a way of perceiving that naturally stems from feeling oneself alive in the past.’[8]

I tried to focus on sensory details and to infuse these with emotional reflection, in an indulgence of nostalgia that sometimes allowed for ironic reflection of the more mature writer.

In ‘Strange Light’, I tried to capture the feeling and mystery of first love. I found that the quality of light was a useful metaphor to depict the bewilderment of youth.

I indulged my nostalgia and got seriously high, and in this I found some of the purpose I was looking for in writing, because, in one sense, the point of living is to make memories and to relive them, and life is made meaningful through these memories, even if nostalgia is a yearning for 'a mythical place called home' as Svetlana Boym says, 'that no longer exists'.[9]

This was my purpose, to reconstruct the mythical home, even though I knew that my feelings, my longings, my delusions, and my sorrows and joys, would be like the mortar that bound all together.

I wanted to recall the smells, tastes, sounds, feelings of touch, and visions of youth, so that 'carnal and interior experiences come back with clarity', as Karr writes, 'and the work gains an electrical charge'.[10]

Yet, in conceptualising the structure of the essays, I tried to figure out the broader meaning of the emotions that arose from nostalgia. I tried to do memory's work, as Patricia Hampl defines it, to 'learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us'.[11]

And these were memory's gifts to me, the treasures I unearthed with introspection: that it is dangerous to trust only your heart or only your head when deciding which paths to take in life; that love and belonging are temporary, mythical things that disappear the harder you grasp at them; that in worship we disappear into the objects of our praise; that ambition's posts are always shifting within and outside of us; and that understanding why something is mysterious or beautiful can be powerful and beautiful in and of itself.

But these were my particular lessons to learn, and I soon found that my stories were too personal, too self-absorbed, to be accepted for publication in the various magazines I submitted them to.

My confidence was high before the rejections came in. One night, I dreamed I was in the pilot's seat of a hybrid moon-rocket-jet parked at Wits, its nose pointed skyward, and behind me sat one of the master's supervisors, who warned me that the rocket was in no condition, rusty and broken as it was, to make it into orbit, but I said, 'Strap in! We're going into outer space, baby!'

I knew that, in order to be hired as a ghostwriter, I had to be published, and now I was back where I started.

I felt like I was a mangy poodle who'd thought he was top dog all along. In my imagination, the flaming hoops I'd been jumping through were a metre off the ground, but in reality they were a foot high and had never been licked by fire.

I learned one of writing's greatest lessons: no matter how great you feel writing something, don't get your hoops up.

3

By spring of the first year, I needed a break.

Giulz and I booked a week's holiday to Golden Gate National Park, where we stayed in a cosy thatched rondavel with a view of the pale-yellow and russet sandstone cliffs.

We arrived in the afternoon, the sky overcast, and I lit a fire in the metal braai pan on the verandah, but it grew darker and soon began to rain and thunder.

I shielded the fire with the lid of our food trunk, and braaied in the rain, with white flashes of light filling the verandah every time lightning struck, and drank whiskeys neat with fat drops of rainwater plopping into the glass.

It cleared a little, and there was a temperate light that faded and brightened as the sun came out and struggled against the clouds.

We went hiking. It was Giulz's first-ever hike. The wind picked up, storm clouds amassed above the ridge, and it started to rain as we reached the point to turn back, at Mushroom Rock. I fretted that we'd made a mistake, because the daylight was fading fast.

Giulz started hiking on all fours, worried that the wind would blow her off what she called 'the fucking mountain' (the path wound on a gentle slope beneath the cliffs, and we were on more of a hillside).

I heard her shouting behind me, 'I hate this fucking mountain!' (Foothill.)

'I don't want to die on this fucking mountain!' (Koppie, on a path designed for walking upright on all twos.)

I put a rain jacket on her and told her to just keep moving, in spite of the gusts and the rain the mountain was trying to murder us with.

When we reached the fork to turn back to camp, I gave Giulz a big hug and said, 'We're fine now.'

She just grunted and said something about the fucking asshole mountain.

I took a picture of her as she double-zapped me, backgrounded by the gloomy cliffs.

We spent the days sitting in the gentle sun, having slow conversations, or enjoying beers at the hotel while watching hikers go up the Brandwag Buttress like ants, measuring their ascent against the slow sips and the fast bubbles escaping from their golden depths.

I was glad to be away from the page for a while, and here the pressure to produce was stilled to a murmur, the highs of inspiration glowing only faintly as an afterthought.

We were on the verge of sleep in a hammock we rigged up inside the rondavel when a large male baboon pushed the door open and tried to move the chair we'd blocked the entrance with when I opened my eyes and saw him.

I scrambled out of the hammock and politely asked the fellow, my voice shrill with excitement at the suddenness of his arrival, if he wouldn't mind leaving us just now. We weren't decent, really, and hadn't prepared anything for his tea. We were terribly sorry, old chap, and sure he'd understand, and thanks for coming around and all that.

He left. I can't be sure he was altogether pleased, but who just pitches up like that without calling or texting ahead?

We spent Christmas with the Italians, at Giulz's parents' house. Giulz's dad called me Lesley the whole day while her mom tried to feed us to death.

My business was suffering with all of the time I spent writing, and I was struggling to cover monthly costs, so I did what everyone does in January: ~~I slept with a loan shark~~ I sold stuff – in particular, I flogged my stack of complimentary books, which I'd received from publishers over the years as thanks for my work, to a second-hand bookstore. On the way home, I used some of the money to take Giulz on a romantic date to Burger King.

I picked up a job to edit a self-published book about a woman who is widowed in her mid-forties and tries to move on with her life.

Some of these self-published books tell wonderfully human stories, but the text is usually in very bad shape. Editing them requires figuring out what the author is

trying to say, which is often nearly impossible without some guesswork, and then editing or over-writing to convey this while trying to retain the author's voice.

The widow's book was full of ~~orphans~~ sexual escapades, with lots of 'bum-tickling', 'bonking', and 'clumbersome' descriptions of, for example, the author's travels to Florida, USA, where a replica pirate ship took folks out on 'a day's execution', or her time spent in reflection at home in the living room, doing her 'croqueting'.

But it also contained some meaningful and poignant reflections, and helping to edit the work was a glad service.

I also edited a mystical, spiritual self-help title that warned that life was too short to be 'koi' with matters of the spirit, that we should not only pull the wool from our eyes but indeed 'sheer' it from our whole, furry bodies, so that we can 'sore and sore' so high, and focus on the third chakra, which is located in the 'naval area', while 'lip-sinking' our prayers.

I applied for copy-writing jobs, trying to get this writing thing going, responding to a call for a 'contemt writer', another from a person who needed 'a someone to write him a good English', and another who was looking for writers to create ads for 'high-quality Scandinavian escorts' to 'take tourists around' in their native countries. I didn't get any replies.

My writing faded into the background, where it lurked like a neglected thing. None of the remaining ideas for essays I'd devised in my master's proposal excited me. I felt like I'd used all the best material up, so I turned to essays I wrote in my honours year, and decided to try and adapt one, 'The Haze', which was about my love of running, and which explored my grief at losing my dad.

But then our cat Penguin died.

One day, I noticed that she had suddenly and dramatically lost weight, so we took her to the vet, who ran some tests but couldn't figure out what was wrong with her as she got weaker and weaker.

On her last morning at home, she brushed up against us and purred, even though she was so weak. I lay on the carpet, holding her white-tipped paws in my hand, kissing the soft fur on her head as she looked up at me with big eyes filled with love, my tears falling onto her.

We brought her home to bury her under the apricot tree. I dug a deep grave, took her limp body into my arms, and placed her, wrapped in our shirts and jerseys, which she loved to sleep on, in a cardboard box, which we lowered into the grave slowly using string, while it began to drizzle and a low light pierced the leaves, making them glow.

I came back to writing slowly as the darkness lifted from my view, rewriting 'The Haze', letting all this grief, which was mixed in with mournfulness for my dad, have expression through praise for life and the simple joy of running, which was like trying to explain why the sun feels good on your skin or how delicious water can sometimes taste when you are thirsty.

I was influenced by the following passage from Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, one of the most beautiful things I've read: 'Each event spoke in a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings. There was the wonder I felt when I first saw a brace of mountain-like, spotted, black-and-white horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay. There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon. There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came

on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning.'[12]

I was influenced by the cadence of nostalgic repetition in 'There was … There was … There was …' which seemed like a continually recoiling spring, energised and reset each time with new emotional charge by the writer, but retaining a thread of unchanging energy throughout, not unlike the repetition and rhythm of running.

I found great meaning in remembering my dad and expressing gratitude for him, and in exploring the mystery and purpose that is our physical, mental, and spiritual movement through different forms of space. There was great reward in trying to discover what was at the heart of motion and calm. And now I felt my words bled deeper than the surface to approach, humbly, my feelings of grief and appreciation.

I was fatigued by my writerly concerns, that my work should be relevant and activist and holy, deadly exact in its factual accuracy, and in writing 'The Misery of Cyan', I let the humour take the story wherever it would go.

Although it is based on a true story, I invented incidents and embellished characterisations in service of the story. I fabricated the meeting between Junior and Author at a café to discuss Author's book's picture section, as well as the scene in which Junior goes to the printers to sign off on the book's cover proofs. I also invented the problem with the levels of colour on the book's cover. Director is a composite in which all of the worst of people I've worked with in publishing came together. But the result of this fabrication and embellishment was not to lend more emotional accuracy to the story, because I didn't feel as if the 'I' that I wrote into the story, in the character of Junior, accurately represented the me of that time or even my reflections on him as a writer.

In real life, I bought much more into the desire to network, the schmooziness, that Junior criticises Director and Author for in the story. In real life, Director and Author were more than one-dimensional, glorified windbags to me. This presented me with an ethical dilemma. The liberties I took in writing the story affected more than just me. 'Don't write to do harm to innocent victims,' Gutkind writes.[13] I didn't feel comfortable calling the story non-fiction, because it was both factually inaccurate – not as a result of faulty memory but of wilful invention – and emotionally inaccurate.

But in 'The Misery of Cyan', I discovered that I could write from a greater distance from the 'me', the protagonist. I realised how constraining was the need I felt to write partially from within the perspective of the younger self.

In 'Let's Be Penguins Together', I wrote less from the point of view of the young child, and more from the perspective of the writer who was looking back, mocking the child by placing his childish wish to marry his sweetheart in the context of the reality of an adult's view.

This voice allowed me to make more direct and relevant cultural references – to Bill Cosby's sexual offences, for example, which only came to light recently – and this gave it more comedic potential.

In discovering this new voice, I realised that I wanted to study comedy. I read memoirs of comedians for inspiration, and guide books on how to write humour.

I landed a job to write a chapter in a book called *The Colour of Wine*, and with all of this extra time I spent at my desk, with hardly a moment to shower, I gave new meaning to the phrase 'mouldy whiffs and corky notes'.

I submitted building plans to the local council for a thatched rondavel with a loft and a separate garage/small dwelling that I wanted to build on the half-acre of vacant land I'd bought a few years before in Henley on Klip.

And I decided that, because Giulz had done such a wonderful job midwifing this collection of mine – listening to me talk about its various challenges for hours on end and coaching me through my doubts – that I had to take her as my bookwife, if she would have me.

I had a ring made, with a princess-cut black diamond set in rose gold, and prayed to the comedy gods for some guidance in the most difficult part of the proposal: timing.

Then something amazing and beautiful happened.

Six weeks after Penguin died, a stray male ginger kitten came to us. He was thin, and his fur was smudged with what looked like grease.

On the first night, we didn't let him in. We thought he'd go back to his home. But he stayed around, sleeping outside.

On the second night, it was cold, so we set him up in the spare room, but we told him, '*It's just for one night*.' We asked around the neighbourhood, but no one claimed him.

On the third night, Giulz and I let him sleep with us in our room, but we told him, '*It's just until you get back on your feet*.'

We took him to the vet, to have him checked and vaccinated. The vet told us he was about six weeks old. He must have been born around the same time Penguin died.

We named him Biscat and knew he belonged with us. The receptionist at the vet chuckled to herself when she read my spelling of the name I wrote on a piece of paper for her, and then corrected it to 'Biscuit' on their system. Thank God she caught the error. I'm definitely in the right line of work.

4

In spring of the second year, Giulz and I went back to Golden Gate.

Giulz walked upright on all the paths. We didn't get caught in any storms, but we did walk back from the hotel one night in the dark, after watching a Springboks game, with strong winds battering us, while Giulz saved our lives by shining a torch directly into the faces of oncoming drivers and I stomped on the road with every step to let any snakes who might be snuggling for warmth on the tar know that we were coming.

One morning, we blocked the toilet in our rondavel. The manager came to tell us that we needed to move to another unit because the whole rondavel was tilting to one side. Ashamed, we packed our things and moved.

We felt relieved when the manager came back later and explained that the rondavel we moved out of was tipping because it was built on a slope, causing a plumbing problem. Giulz and I stopped arguing about who had gone first and load-to-weight ratios and enjoyed the rest of the day as if we were reborn.

I only had a few essays, plus this reflective essay, to write. I enjoyed taking more comedic licence, learning as much as I could from comedy gurus who put down, once and for all, their theories about how humour works and how to write it.

I learned from Mark Shatz and Mel Helitzer that humour results from our being witness to tragedy, but only when the joke is on 'the other guy', not us.[14] This allows us to feel superior to the fool.

In 'Let's Be Penguins Together', I confessed that as a child I might have made a small tragedy in the bath and gone missing naked in the neighbourhood. This might

result in humour based on the reader feeling superior to me because I am the victim of tragedy. This arises, as it does in almost all of the essays, from my self-deprecation (self-defecation?).

It was uncomfortable to admit to those things and to write about them, but they are like my little gifts to the reader. I hope readers will treasure them but never think about or mention them if they happen to see me in person. That is all. I wish to move on now.

I felt naturally inclined to be self-deprecating. I think I am innately critical of myself. But I realised that this could be a defence mechanism in response to a deep fear of failure. I tend to deconstruct the self so that no one, especially me, can expect much of me. And if I insulted myself, I did it first, so that it took the sting out of anyone else's, or life's, insults.

I found, in writing 'Windbag', that it is possible to take self-deprecation too far. In that essay, it was too obvious that I was putting myself down for the sake of humour. I edited it to temper the self-deprecation, but only slightly, choosing to let it stand as an indulgence of the humourist's impulse.

It could be that self-deprecation disguises the humourist's deep need to bolster the ego by harvesting laughs. The price the humourist pays, in dents to ego, is less than the reward of approving laughter.

This is an addictive pursuit. I remember how great it felt when I made people laugh for the duration of a speech I made to a packed school hall. In my speech, I humorously insulted the nerds and the jocks of the school. Afterwards, I walked back to my seat but missed it as I gleefully accepted high fives and smiles and then found myself alone and bewildered, wandering around in the lobby. My prize was a slab of Cadbury chocolate, which I demolished in the dead of night sitting upright in my

hostel bed. But my brother practically wrote that speech for me, and I didn't save him any chocolate. I still feel like a scoundrel for that.

Self-deprecation also relies on the myth that we evolve through life, that the writer is superior to his subject, a past self. It might therefore be handled with care and more awareness of this problem.

I also learned from Shatz and Helitzer that humour arises out of surprise. Unexpected things threaten to unseat our assumption that we are always in control, that we understand the patterns of life and can navigate through it by being prepared for everything. Our response to surprise is nervous laughter.[15]

We laugh when unforeseen things happen, like when we wake up one day in our early twenties to find that some sprite has plucked our scalp clean of hair and now we are bald. Or when we find out that our high school sweetheart has been unfaithful. Or when we come home from work to find that Sweetheart has moved out and left us and Cat to an empty flat. These things are all hilarious.

I found that surprise is mostly useful on a textual level, for example in having the last in a set of three things be something the reader was not expecting, or in simply disrupting the reader's expectations.

I learned from Steve Kaplan that comedy 'is about an ordinary guy or gal struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required skills and tools with which to win yet never giving up'.[16]

This lends itself to self-deprecation. I suspect that most of the time we go through life constantly unaware of our shortcomings. I used to think I looked like a gazelle while running until one day I saw a race photo of an average-looking jogger with red cheeks who was me. When singing in the school choir, I was always in tune, in my head. The blind spots are almost necessary for us to persist.

I think the ordinary person who never gives up in spite of incompetence comes to stand for humanity. Anyone who disagrees is to be applauded for being an extremely well-rounded individual. Congratulations.

Kaplan's theory seems fitting, then, to use in trying but failing to write or finish a memoir that is supposed to be funny.

I learned from John Voorhaus that comedy relies on constructing 'the comic premise', which is 'the gap between comic reality and real reality.'[17]

This mostly plays out at the level of a character's point of view, in terms of how s/he sees the world versus how the audience sees it.

In 'The Misery of Cyan', Junior believes he will go for jogs or play basketball with Author, or accompany Author to television or radio interviews, but the reader knows this will never happen and might find the delusion – the gap between what Junior thinks and the reality of his situation – to be funny.

I discovered, nearing the end of the project, that my comic premise could lie in my introversion, in my timidity in the face of a hostile world, and in my cynicism and constant expectation of failure.

I learned, from Voorhaus, that comedy is 'truth and pain'.[18] Sometimes, you don't have to do much more than tell a true story of pain or loss for it to be warmly endearing, or familiarly funny.

The truth, I discovered in university, is that Daddy doesn't pay for your studies. The pain is that you have to sell beer at cricket stadiums with a jetpack of draught strapped to your back, or hand out flyers at intersections, or ingest experimental foodstuffs, for money to pay off your student loan. The humour arises, too, from how ill-prepared you are for all of this.

But, the most important thing I learned about writing humour is that you do it sitting down.

If our world were a different place, it wouldn't have to be this way, but that's how it is, Cookie.

You can use a pencil or a pen, and you write from the left side of the page to the right.

Also, you must keep your face well moisturised at all times, because it is impossible for people to laugh at you if you have a cracked-up face (it shows on the page).

And humour is often created with all of the various theories and tools of comedy overlapping and crashing into each other. Sometimes, it is difficult, and a little unnerving, to unpack exactly why something is funny.

I learned that humour is most effective when it arises naturally. This comes from life, and an untold accumulation of joyful and painful experiences, both shared and personal. Humour comes from examining what it is to be human.

This is why I think humour writing might be the domain that will be safest for longest against the threat of Japanese robots, like the one that, in 2016, achieved the distinction of being the first artificially intelligent co-author of a novel that made it through the first round of a writing competition.[19]

True, lived humour can't be produced by an algorithm, can it?

5

At last, I was done.

I prepared to submit the collection to my supervisor for comment.

I had set out, three years before, to find ~~untold wealth~~ meaning through writing, and now I was all written out, and the master's had bankrupted me. My business was barely breathing. I would have to go back to waiting tables or selling beer at the cricket.

'The project was immensely rewarding!' I would shout out loud when I needed some consolation, wondering if it was worth even putting the Christmas tree up this year. 'I have learned so much about myself and about writing memoir! Now I really know who I am!'

Life is truth and pain.

In writing the essays, I gave fuller expression to the grief I felt at losing the beings who meant the most to me, and I experienced many writing highs that hinted at purpose, leaving me dazed for weeks.

But otherwise, didn't memoir – this sticky, intimate mess – offer more or less the same nutritional value as a shit sandwich?

'Nobody I know who's written a great memoir described it as anything less than a major-league shit-eating contest,' writes Karr.[20]

I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to submit my stories for publication, or if the master's degree would help me to land writing jobs. Shouldn't I have written someone else's life story if I wanted to practise ghostwriting?

Bit late now.

I just wanted my thesis to go and rot in the university's thesis dungeon, where they no doubt keep such creatures. I would ask the dungeon keeper to report directly to me should anyone be sniffing around the collection for whatever perverted reason.

I found, in one sense, that there was a great pointlessness to writing memoir. Memory is like water, it just flows around your hands, and you can only scoop up a little at a time, and then you can't be certain about its quality or colour.

When I first learned to meditate, I closed my eyes and found at once that things were racing through my head. This is a necessary step towards clearing one's mind, which is simply becoming aware of its own thoughts. Writing memoir is like taking a snapshot of this swirl of things, even while outside of the mind and your memories, things are changing, as are you.

Shortly before I finished writing the essays, my building plans were approved by council. The man in Town Planning who helped us with the final corrections told Giulz and I this joke: *If you live in a round house, you must be careful because a ghost might try to push you into a corner*.

But that is just stupid and it's not even funny. Even ghosts know that circles don't have corners. He shouldn't even be working there if he thinks that circles have corners. Where did he buy his degree from? Someone needs to tell him to stop wasting ratepayers' money and give him a roundhouse kick to the head.

I promised Giulz that it would be a beautiful little writers' cottage, but warned her that by the time I could afford to build it, robots would be amassing all the Pulitzers, Nobels, and ~~Man~~ Machine Bookers, but we would be installed in the house anyway, like museum exhibits, having worked ourselves to the bone and turned into skeletons at our desks, pens in hand, paper before us, our ghosts chasing each other around the walls but stopping sometimes to have sex on all the counters. Then we could find out where the council man lived and go spook him in his square house.

I still had not asked Giulz if she would have me as her bookman, but I fixed on an idea for the proposal: I would take her back to Burger King, and we would have a

very satisfying meal, finished off with those Peppermint Crisp ice-creams she likes so much, and then, right then, when we'd be wearing our cardboard crowns and feeling quite regal and great about ourselves in general, I would ask her to be my wordwench, and she wouldn't be able to refuse.

For the time being, she would marry an editor, not a writer.

But maybe one day I'd dust off the old MS and send it around – why not? – or write something new.

Maybe one day I'd wake up and believe, once again, that even poodles can fly. All you have to do is put a cape on them and attach a rocket to their back and mini rockets to their feet and let them dream those blasters into ignition. Then they can fly over the surface of the earth on their lunch break, using their tail as a rudder, before going back to their alter ego as Bark Kent, respected editor.

Or they could enter the RedBull Air Race World Championship.

Or use their laser X-ray eyes to find the cookie that has been hiding under the couch for years.

---

[1] Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir* (Amazon Kindle Edition: HarperCollins).

[2] Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction from Memoir to Journalism and Everything in Between* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Da Capo Press).

[3] John Voorhaus, *The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You're Not* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Silman-James Press).

[4] Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Quoted in Jack Shafer, 'David Sedaris and Exaggeration', *Slate*, https://goo.gl/Ujc6hm (accessed 3 December 2018).

[7] Karr, *The Art of Memoir*.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', *Shifter* Magazine, https://goo.gl/fKJq5a (accessed 30 October 2018).

[10] Karr, *The Art of Memoir*.

[11] Patricia Hampl, 'Memory and Imagination', in *I Could Tell You Stories* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2000).

[12] Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Vintage).

[13] Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*.

[14] Mark Shatz and Mel Helitzer, *Comedy Writing Secrets: The Best-Selling Guide to Writing Funny and Getting Paid for It* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Writer's Digest Books).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Steve Kaplan, *The Hidden Tools of Comedy: The Serious Business of Being Funny* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Michael Wiese Productions).

[17] Voorhaus, *The Comic Toolbox*.

[18] Ibid.

[19] See David Nield, 'A Novel Written by AI Passes the First Round in a Japanese Literary Competition', *ScienceAlert*, https://goo.gl/61MjFj (accessed 3 December 2018).

[20] Karr, *The Art of Memoir*.

Works Cited

Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', *Shifter* Magazine, https://goo.gl/fKJq5a (accessed 30 October 2018)

Larry David, 'The N Word', *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Season 6, Episode 8 (HBO: 2007)

Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction from Memoir to Journalism and Everything in Between* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Da Capo Press)

Patricia Hampl, 'Memory and Imagination', in *I Could Tell You Stories* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2000)

Steve Kaplan, *The Hidden Tools of Comedy: The Serious Business of Being Funny* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Michael Wiese Productions)

Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir* (Amazon Kindle Edition: HarperCollins)

Homa Khaleeli, 'The Hair Trade's Dirty Secret', *The Guardian*, https://goo.gl/f7nXXF (accessed 18 May 2017)

Gersh Kuntzman, *Hair! Mankind's Historic Quest to End Baldness* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Random.com Books)

David Nield, 'A Novel Written by AI Passes the First Round in a Japanese Literary Competition', *ScienceAlert*, https://goo.gl/61MjFj (accessed 3 December 2018)

Jack Shafer, 'David Sedaris and Exaggeration', *Slate*, https://goo.gl/Ujc6hm (accessed 3 December 2018)

Mark Shatz and Mel Helitzer, *Comedy Writing Secrets: The Best-Selling Guide to Writing Funny and Getting Paid for It* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Writer's Digest Books)

Gwen Stefani, ‘Rich Girl’, *Love. Angel. Music. Baby*. (Encore Studios: 2004)

The Telegraph, ‘Women Prefer Men with a Full Head of Hair’, https://goo.gl/aNBHxs (accessed 18 May 2017)

John Voorhaus, *The Comic Toolbox: How to Be Funny Even if You’re Not* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Silman-James Press)

Paul Willis, ‘It’s Seriously Depressing to Lose Your Hair’, *Vice*, https://goo.gl/L3jPrm (accessed 18 May 2017)

Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (Amazon Kindle Edition: Vintage)