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MASTER OF ARTS
CREATIVE WRITING
By dissertation

The Projectionist

A novel

Susan Warring

Student Number 8317847

Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Creative Writing.

Declaration

I, Susan Warring (student number 8317847), am a student registered for the degree of Master of Arts, Creative Writing, in the years 2010-2011. I hereby declare the following:

I am aware that plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their knowledge and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.

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Signature Date

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1

Mornings

The mornings were all the horse. Winter mornings even more so. Just the horse and him. Sliding his hands under the blanket and stealing a moment's warmth. Then unhooking it from the sides and unbelting it from the chest, lifting it off and hanging it like a hide over the stable door. Tacking him up, the pain of tightening the girth with numb fingers only ebbing through later, as he led him out, breath smoking, onto the cobbles.

When he started it felt like midnight, but already there was a dull red glow lapping around the horizon. No lift to it yet, and no colour in the frost bleached grass.

Jogging along the path to the track, waking the kiewietjies to outraged screeching, like he'd done every day since he could remember. The horse alert, interested, ears pricked like horns against the red-rimmed sky that was slowly stoking and stirring.

Onto the track, and holding him back to let him warm up first, smiling at the snatch at the bit to check whether today he'd be allowed to run and run like he was always longing to. Murmuring to him to wait, "shhh, come now, come now." Clucking, the soft kind behind the teeth that said "woah".

At the usual place, past the leaning scraggle of black wattle and dead khakibos, up a notch into a good strong canter. Now the mental checklist of how all the tendons and muscles and bones were meshing and working and warming into place. Gandhi felt good, balanced, but careful of that tendon. Something he would never have done when he was younger. Mindful of this, Rory aimed even more than usual for the lightest and smoothest ride, keeping it unfurling like a flag in a breeze. Aware of Carl just behind, sighing and heaving and charging, catching Trooper in the teeth, chopping up the turf.

Then the crucial moment, as the marker approached, at the top of the gentle slope in the dark. Ahead, the lifting sun and Charles with his binoculars aimed straight at where he would rise up from the dark, thumb on the stopwatch.

Rory tightened the reins and Gandhi collected up from behind, powerful quarters reaching deeper under his taut belly, ready to unleash the gallop. Rory asked for it slowly, lengthening the silk so the folds and wrinkles smoothed out, but not to full stretch, “Not now, not today. Save it for Saturday,” he told the horse.

It still felt good, but careful. It didn’t matter, he was sound, and Rory could carry this till the big race, and it would be okay, he would make sure. He would bandage the leg every day till race day and walk him out after movie club, before supper. It would be okay.

When Gandhi swerved Rory’s first thought was that he’d shied at something in the matted veld grass that lined the track. A plastic bag whitening in the dawn. A hare crouching, gritted-teeth. But then he felt the sting of Carl’s whip on his cheek as he galloped past.

“Get on with it Rory, I haven’t got all day!”

It took maybe two seconds for Rory to get his balance back.

Two seconds for Gandhi to shoot forward and out of control in response to Carl’s whip, just as the sun, narrow-eyed on the horizon, stared and they leapt into day.

Galloping down the barrel of the shotgun of light, Rory knew Charles saw him struggle to slow the horse. Knew he saw the horse run uneven.

He reached him in a limping trot and dismounted, looking quickly at Charles, pleading for his father’s eyes. Carl already tugging his horse’s head around to head for the stable at a canter, shouting to Charles about rugby practice.

Charles stood very still, the centre of a dancing circle as Gandhi, heedless of the limping, wove around him, trying to nudge him playfully, Rory struggling to slow him, calm him, shooting glances at Charles in between, hoping, fearing, hoping, hoping.

When they finally stood still, Charles spoke.

“You couldn’t hold him.”

“That’s not it! Dad –“

“Today of all days.” Charles shook his head in disgust. “If he’s too strong for you -”

“No!” The wind this morning was cold, how cold Rory was only just realizing. It was the kind of day that would never get warm. He walked the horse, to stop him stiffening up.

“I’ll get him right, dad.”

He knew he couldn’t do it. Nobody could. He’d felt the unknitting, he’d felt the fibres tear. They’d torn inside.

“He has to run.”

Rory looked at his father. The pale sun stared cold over Charles’s shoulder from the red. Flat as a coin. His father's thin, weathered face was set, his mouth an underlining.

“I’ll get him right!”

He led Gandhi along the path home. Two excited horses heading for their turn on the track pushed him off it, stumbling through a trackless maze of long grass. The day was alive now, even on a normal day by now it was no longer just him and the horse in the first light. By this time of day the rising sun flattened them into two small things easily lost in the crowd.

***

The stables were awake when they got back, buckets clanging, hosepipes running, voices calling. Paulus ran cold water down Gandhi’s leg and Gandhi, restless, protesting at the chill, picked it up and dotted it down over and over again.

“Haai man,” said Paulus and Gandhi stopped, sneezed, nuzzled him at the neck of his green overall. With his other hand, Paulus reached behind his neck and cupped Gandhi’s nose briefly. Gandhi sighed and mumbled into his hand, loose velvet chin and bristles. Paulus smiled a little, mostly with his eyes, and pushed the muzzle aside like a door.

Rory went to the feed room for the box. Paulus led the horse into his stable and closed the door. Waited. Letting Gandhi nibble the end of the halter rope, he leaned back against the wall, something he could do for an indeterminate amount of time. While he waited, he stared off into the kind of endless blank space that a stained whitewashed wall readily opens a door on. His long dry fingers twirled the fraying rope and Gandhi’s long teeth grabbed at it, shook it, dropped it, and grabbed it again.

Rory came in, put the box down slowly, then stood staring down into it. His curls were stuck to his head and he hadn’t yet run his fingers through them, to lift them. Tracks of sweat followed the tendons of his neck, no deep dug channels for them yet. Skin still with a touch of brown even in mid-winter. Blue eyes clouded. To Paulus he still looked like a little boy even though he was going to be taller than Carl. But without a boy’s lightness, the carefree skip in his step. Or the ground-covering purpose, the forceful pace of Carl as he strode away from his childhood without a backward glance. Rory looked down into the box as if he thought there might be a rinkhals coiled in there, dull with hibernation but liable to flex and rear in startled reflex if touched. Paulus had seen him watch a lot of things that way.

The box was stacked like a crate of empty beer bottles. Big old-fashioned brown bottles that looked like they belonged in an antiquated chemist’s shop. The kind of bottles you expected to have faded hand-scripted labels grimly listing fuming liquid, sulphur, antimony, bismuth and blue stone.

Not much had changed, really. In one corner, glycerine icthamol, liniment and DMSO. Things that gleamed like toffee, smelled like garlic, glugged like molasses when you poured them into a cupped handful of cotton wool. Darker things too, things that smoked and stank, black tarry stuff, sole hardeners for laminitis that sounded like mortician-supplies; phenol,

formalin and iodine, eye-stinging embalming fluid that, spilled on the skin, killed a patch like chlorine on kikuyu lawn.

In the other corner, bandages, gauze and cotton wool. Syringes and their needle partners. Vials and small, silver-tipped glass bottles. Prescription stuff. Vets relax the rules for horse-owners, because, like farmers, they do so much themselves. Scraping bulging proudflesh out of a wound. Peeling yesterday's flattened, stained cotton wool away and replacing it. Injecting under a fold of skin on the neck, or deep into the muscle below.

Some vets relax the rules further than others. Back in the house, a shelf in the fridge held more. Antibiotics. Vaccinations. And other bottles.

***

He walked back into the house, knocked his boots against the back door, pulled them off and left them on the mat. Curled his toes as the chill of the floor seeped through the hot damp of his socks. Shying away from the fridge, he headed to his room to change for school.

Sarah heard the bump of the boots on the floor, came in, saw the mess they made on the mat, ignored it.

"How did it go?" She saw his face. "Oh. The tendon."

He stared at the floor. Sarah leaned her mop against the counter, stepped closer.

"Rory, it wasn't healed!"

He shrugged. Stared at the fridge and so, after a long moment, did she. From the side she looked like a queen on a coin, elegant lines of jaw and cheekbone drawn up tight, her eternal light brown bun woven with a little grey. She turned to the door as she heard Carl in

the passage, and from the front her face was not haughty but pretty and worn, with the fine skin that does not age well. Her brown eyes grew wary as the door opened.

Carl charged in, tracksuit and rugby boots, scarf and gloves, flung the fridge door open and said without looking at Sarah, “Where’s breakfast?”.

“I’m making it,” she said.

“I told you practice was early today. Team selection, remember? And there are going to be some important people there.” He threw things out onto the counter. Jam. Butter. Bread. “It’s okay,” he said, “I prefer toast anyway”.

He pushed two soft pieces of bread into the toaster, the crusts crumpled in the middle, ears up on the sides. Tore another to bits and ate it as he waited, muscles working in his jaw, staring at the toaster and thinking flyhalf thoughts. The bread disintegrated in his hands, making them look bigger than they were. His hair was dark after his shower, his dark blonde curls already starting to spring back up and curl over the neck of his sports shirt.

“I’ll make you some coffee,” Sarah said and filled the kettle.

“Finally,” he said, tapping his foot, hitching up his new tracksuit pants.

Rory looked at Sarah. “It’s okay,” she said hurriedly, turning the tap on harder, splashing her jeans with water.

When Charles walked in, passing Carl on the way out, toast in one hand, he patted his shoulder, “Good luck Carl, though you don’t need it.”

Carl grinned through his mouthful and waved the toast at them. “You know there’s also a Tukkies scholarship in it? I’m going to get it.” He was out of the door before anyone could react ---

“I know you will!” Charles called after him, face animated.

***

He'd lost track of time, working alone in the school auditorium, just him and the projector, and now he was late. He leaned his bicycle against the stable wall and looked over the door. Paulus was undoing the bandage on Gandhi's leg.

"How is he?" asked Rory.

Gandhi turned his head at the sound of his voice and nickered a greeting, stepped towards him. Paulus clucked and the horse stopped.

"Paulus?"

Paulus shrugged his shoulders without looking up from his work.

Rory slid open the bolt and came in. "You did the ice this morning?"

Paulus grunted.

Rory squatted and felt the leg. The hair was flattened by the bandage, sticky from the DMSO. Hot. But that could be the bandage. The swelling was down. But that could also be the bandage. You could see the lines where it had pressed into the skin.

"I'll walk him for a bit," he said, put a halter on Gandhi and left. Behind him, Paulus sighed, stood up and stretched his stiff back, walked over and leaned on the door, watching them. It was getting dark, the white straps of Gandhi's blanket seemed to float by in mid air.

Paulus shook his head.

Rory walked Gandhi in careful big circles around the yard, keeping him away from Nandi's stable – the two of them went together like matches and petrol, and he was hot enough, he was his own worst enemy, never knowing when to take it easy. He jogged a bit anyway, starting up a damp spot of heat on his neck.

"Uh uh," Rory grumbled as he stroked him cool again, and Gandhi's ears shot forward at the rebuke, then relaxed and he blew out and tried to nibble Rory's sleeve. This was his greatness too. He'd run with three legs. He'd run till he dropped. That's how he could be seven years old and still winning, proving them all wrong. If he hadn't been gelded he'd be at stud now, but they didn't know what they had when he was still a colt. An okay pedigree and a difficult personality made an affordable horse for a small time owner/trainer like Charles. Who would have known that he'd mature into something so good, and keep going so long? Charles always had people making offers for him, even recently when it was clear he hadn't more than a few races left in him. But, leading him around the winner's circle yet again, he had shouted to his friends that he'd never sell this horse, the best he'd ever had. The horse he'd built his business on, the horse that paid the bills, the family's bread and butter. But he didn't say that bit.

There were other scenes at the racetrack that Charles didn't know about. In the bookie queues. The toilets. At the trackside. They never took notice of a mere kid, Charles's so-called friends, fellow trainers, gambling mates. They shook their heads and laughed, spoke as if Rory wasn't there. And Rory tried to stay unnoticed, which meant he couldn't defend his father or turn his back in disgust. Who would have thought that good old Charles would hit the jackpot like this? they skinnered. It was luck, dumb luck. Maybe more than luck, especially as the horse got older, they murmured, exchanging meaningful looks and nods. It couldn't go on forever, they agreed. Charles should have done a better job of managing Gandhi's career. He should have looked for the next good one earlier, had it coming up to take over about now. Gandhis were one in a lifetime and more of his winnings should have gone on a successor or at least a stable full of useful up and coming horses. Less on the bookies and the rounds of drinks for everybody after the race.

Thinking about their bitchy words made Rory hotly, silently angry, but it also made him feel confused. This evening he couldn't get the doubts out of his mind. Too many of the stables he walked Gandhi past were empty, and too many of the others were occupied by horses that weren't making money. Nandi was the one exception, but she was still paying back her big

price tag. The heat of his anger cooled down to tepid. Then tipped and slid down into nausea. Anger was less complicated, less difficult to deal with than the dread he felt now, when he thought about Saturday, already nearly one whole day closer.

Rory turned back to the stable where Paulus was waiting. Together in the gloom they unwound more puffy white cotton wool, poured on a puddle of brown treacly stuff, held it to the leg and bandaged from the hoof up to the knee, turning it into a white post in the dark, a surveyor's white-socked stick. Just as they were tying the knot, Gandhi pricked his ears and leaped forward, sending the bandage unravelling, the cotton wool puffing up like a cloud.

"Shh, come now Gandhi, come boy," they tutted and crooned at him. He turned an ear backwards, listening to them, but then shot it forward again to join its mate as he leaned towards the stable door. He quivered as Charles's face appeared, the dregs of the sunset sullen behind him. Then he gave a shrill neigh and leaped forward again, but this time they were ready for him and held him back.

"How is the leg?"

"Fine," said Rory. Paulus shot him a quick look, then ducked his head and started reconstructing the bandage.

"Good. The day after tomorrow I want him working, sound."

Rory and Paulus stared.

"What are you waiting for?"

They turned back to the leg. Gandhi had edged right up to Charles, Paulus and Rory shuffling after him as they worked. He put his nose into Charles's chest, breathed sweetly into him. Like a kiss offered freely by a little child, it was grace, it was a blessing. Shielded from Charles's gaze by the horse's chest, Rory turned and watched Gandhi nuzzle the man he lived for. He held his breath and watched, sending a prayer, a desperate prayer.

For a moment it seemed it might work as Charles bent his head and scratched Gandhi between the ears.

Then he pushed the horse's head away. "Make sure it happens, Rory."

The dark moon of his face disappeared and Gandhi called softly for him, looking for him, ears twitching for the sound of his receding footsteps. The big feeling in Rory's chest collapsed in on itself. He hugged the horse's head to comfort him, but he knew that he was a poor substitute. Gandhi loved him, but he knew he was not the one.

Gandhi. They used to laugh at his name, there was nothing calm and wise about him. But now Rory thought that in a strange way it suited him perfectly, because he ran for love. Love that did not falter when he was run too often. Too hard. Too soon and too long. Love that was undimmed by the needles and the whispers. It did not flicker or shudder, it was constant. Constant.

Rory felt a rush of love and pity for the horse, fellow hopeless heart slave to Charles.

***

He was not in the mood, but there was nothing he could do about it. Today had been on the calendar for ages. Everyone was here. They had their cold drinks and their chips, and they'd settled down.

"When's the show?" yelled Dylan from the back.

Rory ran his movie. He'd even made his own titles in Western-style script, the kind that looks like it's made out of wooden logs. 'Alberton High School Movie Club - Western documentary - by - Rory Gibbons'. Cheers. Teasing.

Enrico Morricone's theme music over a montage of his favourite bits of old Westerns: outlaws and sheriffs, ranchers and bar girls, cattle drives and stampedes, shootouts and hold-ups, roping and breaking, Indian ambushes and betrayals.

It went down well. Catcalls and whistles at the women with their boobs popping out of their low cut blouses "Yeah baby!" Whoops and yeehaas during the chases. Max got so into it he staggered from his seat clutching his chest and fell to the floor, rolling bleeding down the auditorium stairs as Humphrey Bogart died famously in *High Sierra*.

On screen, the hero's faithful dog licked his dead hand.

"He's free," said the officer. The soundtrack was muffled.

"Free?" wept the heroine as the camera closed in on her tearstained face.

"Free?" Max rolled onto his back. Twitched. Jumped up complaining.

"Sis, this carpet stinks of pee. Who was it? Dylan, it was you!"

Dylan swore at him, threw an empty Coke can, everyone joined in. Max, ducking missiles, appealed to Rory, but Rory wasn't looking.

Rory was watching his final clip. As if he'd never seen it before. Clint Eastwood. Alone. Stopping as he rides out of town. Turning to look back over his shoulder, his face mysterious and grim.

"How does he always know what to do? "

"Because he's got a script," said Max, startling him because he didn't know he'd spoken the words out loud. "Chill dude! It's not real life, it's the movies!"

Clint was fading away, but Rory stared till the screen was blank. Then he smiled and shook his head, took his notes and stood behind the podium, shut them all up and told them more than they thought there was to know about Westerns. Their heyday and decline, the handful of modern Westerns.

"Are they any different? Not such ancient history?" asked Max.

"Not really. Just as bleak and violent. "

"… and gay! Moffie Westerns!" interrupted Dylan. "Remind me never to share a tent with you, Max!" and the room broke into laughter and rude jokes. Rory smiled and stepped down, putting his notes away.

"Coming over to my place? I have *Pulp Fiction,*" asked Max.

"Not today. I have to get home."

"I'll help you lock up."

"No, I'll do it."

"Are you okay? They did like it – but you know how they are."

"Ja I know. It's not that."

"Is it your dad?"

Rory shook his head. Dylan yelled "Max!"

Max said "Call me, okay?" and left.

Rory stared at the blank screen for a long moment, then switched off the lights and closed the door behind him.

***

This time he wasn't late, even though he went past the kitchen first. This time there was still light in the sky, more than he wanted. This time it was a pitiless pale afternoon sky, the sun heading down without so much as a wisp of smoke from a veld fire to hide it. Or soften its fall.

This time he didn't meet Paulus's eyes when Paulus looked up to greet him.

"Has he eaten?"

A pause.

"Yes."

He closed his ears to Gandhi's nicker of greeting. Pushed his carrot-questing nose away from his pocket. Harder than necessary. Then reached into the pocket himself and pulled out the small glass bottle. Stripped the wrapper off the syringe and fitted it with a needle. Drew the liquid up into the barrel. Tipped it all upside down and drew out more, to the exact line. Pulled out the needle and pushed out the bubbles. Holding the syringe facing away, he bent to the box on the floor. Took disinfectant and poured it onto a tug of cotton wool that Paulus was holding.

Paulus stepped towards Gandhi.

"No." Rory took the swab himself. Wiped Gandhi's neck, making a dark smear. Pinched a fold of taut skin and pushed the needle in. Closed the syringe up like a conversation that's over. Withdrew the needle, capped it, flung it into the box, and walked out of the door. Startling the horse who slowly wagged his ears back and forth, one by one, confused.

Paulus stepped closer and put his arm around Gandhi's neck. He murmured to him, swaying, "hmm hmm, uh uh". Clicking his tongue and shaking his head.

"Ts ts, no no."

2

Dawn on a different horse

Even a heartless person could not watch a horse race without being thrilled, in spite of himself. The crowd surged to the rails as the announcer yelled that they were turning into the home straight and Gandhi was leading but Up'ncoming was challenging him hard. Watching from the front it was a seething wave rolling in, impossible to tell how close-run. People next to him were screaming and Rory couldn't hear the loudspeaker anymore. Up'ncoming, Gandhi, that's all he could make out. Rory glanced behind him at Charles, watching through binoculars from halfway up the stands. He saw him bite his lip, his face set and tense, he saw him lower the binoculars halfway, not wanting to watch anymore, then raise them again, caught up in it anyway, win or lose.

As the wave poured past, it separated into cresting leaders pulling behind them the weight of the field, and the foam of stragglers becalmed in its wake. Rory saw the bright new chestnut of Up'ncoming a nose ahead of Gandhi. But the old horse was holding on and even found a burst of speed at the last, from goodness knows where. Not his legs and not his lungs either could have given more. It could only have been his heart.

Was it big enough? The jockey was giving everything he had, the whip a blur from nose to flank. As Rory watched he saw the look in Gandhi's eye and his heart rose, but also caught. Gandhi was desperate not to be beaten, but was that enough? Rory was glad in a way that this was his last race. When a youngster overtook him he would not be on the track to see it. Unless it happened today.

Rory was level with the finishing post and he had the same view as a camera at a photo-finish, which it was. And, like a replay, it seemed to take forever, though it could only have been a split second. Gandhi's nose crept forward and covered the few inches of chestnut nose

beside him, and then eclipsed it. A nail paring of chestnut nose appeared again briefly and then receded. Too close to tell.

And then it was over. The passing wave set up a sympathetic swell in the crowd, excited eddies washing around the side, and the upflung spray of betting tickets. Then the sudden now-whatness, the void, the excitement over, and now the faint irrational depression of anticlimax.

Gandhi's ticket was good. His fans formed into queues at the bookie stalls. Rory, halfway along, shuffled forward, behind a middle-aged man in a Springbok rugby jersey and his friend in beige chinos and a blue Bulls cap.

"That was too close for my old heart."

"Lucky it's his last race then."

"Not really. Who am I going to bet on now?"

In the winner's circle, Johnny emotional with relief and because it was the last time. "I'll never ride a better horse Mr. Gibbons! Never!"

Charles not listening, shouting to his friends in the crowd, yelling about champagne. Johnny dismounted, and before being swept off to be weighed he leaned his head, helmeted in bishop-bird red and black, against the wet neck.

"Goodbye, Gandhi."

"Great ride!" Charles shouted at the bright spot of colour as it disappeared into the melee, but Johnny was gone.

Charles looked around for more. "Hey, Gavin! See why I wouldn't take your offer!"

Gavin nodded ruefully, saluted Charles. "R600 thou at his age – I can't argue with that! And how much on the side?"
Charles grinned, winked.

"You're a lucky gambler – I wouldn't have had the guts ---" Gavin saw something that made him stop dead.

Charles followed his eyes, saw two stewards in suits, one white, one black, watching from the sidelines, talking quietly to one another. Other people looked and, as if on a timer, the wave retreated. Charles to stare after them. When everyone was gone and the circle was empty but for him, Paulus and Gandhi, the two men stepped forward.

***

Dawn on a different horse. A gentler day, winter showing some pity. Rory on Nandi. A very different ride, fillies famous for being wayward, moody, unpredictable. As an entire horse in the racing world a filly was more elemental, likely to scream at her friendly training mate one day, ignore him the next. Rory thought they seemed to answer less to humans and more to themselves than the geldings, who were level and consistent and somehow more tuned into the people around them. Fillies you could love or hate, like people. Geldings you could love or be fond of, or not care too much either way. Geldings were cut into the image of their masters. Fillies were adolescent at this age. Closer to their true natures, perhaps.

Nandi shied where she always liked to, the dark wattle patch where once she had seen a hare or perhaps the idea of one, and never forgotten it. But it lacked bite, was more a dance they both knew the steps to. Steering her back on course at the point where he would see Charles watching, Rory glanced up to look for him.

He wasn't there. Nandi felt his surprise and her rhythm, always mercurial, went awry. Rory finished the gallop on autopilot, the usual intensity evaporated away. Carl passed him.

"Where's dad?" Rory shouted.

Carl shrugged, not interested, pleased to be able to skip the autopsy and head back faster. As he cantered off on the path home, Rory told Nandi to wait, and looked around some more. He recognized Gavin amongst the small cluster of trainers, and answered his wave, but there was a gap in the line. Charles was inconceivably, inexplicably, not there.

Rory allowed Nandi to insist on following Trooper, calming down as she was allowed to move again, though they would not be able to catch Carl unless they cantered and the rule was, walk, cool them down, don't bring a hot sweating horse back to the stables. Nandi jogged instead and Rory kept her on a tight rein, so her quarters swung out one way then another as her energy boiled up against the restriction.

When they finally got home, the stable yard was deserted, the sounds of feeding and cleaning from the stables told only of grooms, not Charles. But Rory looked over all the doors anyway, found Paulus unsaddling Trooper and rubbing him down.

"Paulus, have you seen my dad?"

Paulus looked surprised at the question, shook his head.

Charles was not at the breakfast table.

***

Sarah sat in an armchair in Auntie May's lounge, listening to the old lady moving around the kitchen, switching off the kettle, opening cupboards, muttering to herself. She smiled at Rory sitting across from her. He was looking at the three display cabinets. She didn't need to look across to know what he was seeing. The same gallery of her old friends, smiling, heads cocked, eyes lowered over posies of flowers. All arranged in the same order. The lower shelves segregated into pink, blue and white. It all looked just as it always had. She wondered if it was time for a new way to place them. Perhaps the mother duck and her ducklings could move up a

shelf and march past the feet of the shepherdesses? It would suggest a farmyard. But the thought of a change in order was surprisingly unsettling and she turned half in her chair to look at the arrangement again, to reassure herself with how things had almost always been.

At the top, out of reach of at least two generations of little hands, was the Royal Doulton in bone china and glossy porcelain. Bunnykins sets of baby plates, bowls and mugs. A mealtime tableau in porcelain, with bunnies in aprons and petticoats, moms bending over the babies, waistcoated dads looking indulgently on. Sarah didn't know whether May had inherited them, or saved up for them. It would have been her version of a trousseau. But life didn't follow the same pattern of moulding and firing, painting and glazing. As a young girl, May couldn't have known that her future family would be a second hand one, cracked right through to the ashy clay beneath, hollow at the core. And perhaps not even from the top shelf to begin with. But she'd made do. And looking at this familiar display, arranged in just the same way in May's flat as it had been in the house Sarah grew up in, Sarah saw it now both through the eyes of herself as a child, and through the eyes of a grown woman.

For an adult, this world was what couldn't survive beyond the glass cabinet doors. And this sadness was possibly the means by which May's kind ways had gradually hardened, moulded around something at the centre that had evaporated over the years.

As a child the cabinets had glittered like a fairy tale. So near and yet just out of reach, Sarah had found it intoxicating, had grown up seeing the reflection of her own imperfect face, uncertain and floating, smudging and misting it with damp yearning as she pressed her nose up against it every afternoon and spoke to her friends on the other side.

Auntie May's arrival had been the second biggest thing in Sarah's life, and the fact that she had brought these matching display cabinets and had packed into them, with infinite care, china cats and ducks and plates and shepherdesses, was a very close third. Wherever May had lived after Sarah's father died, the lower shelves were always arranged the same way - in the left hand cabinet, they were all pink. In the middle, all blue. And in the last, all white. Whatever room they were in, light like this one, or dark like Sarah's father's house, they reflected and amplified whatever sunlight came through the net curtains. They glowed. They lit Sarah up like

a lamp. The sheen on the kittens' necks almost seemed to ripple as if they were purring, kneading their china claws into the glass, stretching up to be stroked.

And Sarah had a secret. Fearing she would never be given permission if she asked, she never did – but she stroked them all anyway, all the ones she could reach. She already knew that asking would be the one sure way to lose them, and she lived in fear that one day the glass doors would be silently locked against her. So, holding her breath, careful to rub her smeary fingerprints off the glass, she let herself into these cabinets, lost herself in this shimmering world. And later, at the dinner table, she watched Auntie May. She was a quiet woman, with kind ways rather than the gentleness of Sarah's mother, yet otherwise not unlike her, and comfortable with Sarah's father's grimness. Sarah saw that it did not seem to be hard for her, to be with him, though years later she thought of meringues that dried out in the middle. But that was much later. While Sarah was small, she seemed to hold up, smiling at Sarah when she caught her looking, letting her hug her, stroking her head, seeming to understand.

It was a very quiet house, but when the cats came, so did the light. Sarah's fingers got to know the contours of their bodies, the perky hips and the long shoulders, the crease behind the shoulder blade, all cool and dust-free. And underneath all this, always, was a little girl's impossible hope: a woman who loved these beautiful things would understand her love for her doll. And alongside it lay the impossibility of ever presuming on May's love, of ever testing it too far by asking her to intercede with her father to bring the doll back into the light. And with it, his daughter.

As it was, she knew her daily sticky fingered walks through these pink and blue glades were breathless wonders, more than she could have asked for, never to be risked. So she stole her moments among the shelves.

As she'd grown, she'd reached higher. From gazing into the eyes of the puppies and the kittens, she'd met the smiles of the shepherdesses and the tilted heads of the dancing girls, then looked beyond, to the somehow more serious Voortrekker medallions with the running boys and girls bearing torches, and then, not long before she was eighteen and she married

Charles, the radiant brides and the worshipful flowergirls, and the first of the decorated plates and tea sets that suggested the future.

It had seemed so clear, set out like that. She'd always know that she'd learned her sense of order from Auntie May, but now she thought the real lesson had been from these displays.

Auntie May taught her that order was some kind of defence in life and there was no question that she managed Sarah's father better than her mother had been able to. So Sarah had dusted and ordered and tidied in the hope that immaculately creased corners and ruler straight hems would straighten her own backbone and help her stand strong against her father. And as long as she was with May, it seemed to work. But when she left the house to live in the flat with her new husband, she felt herself go limp, all that ironed in starch seemed to crumble into dust in May's hands. She drooped in her arms and May spoke fiercely to her about pulling herself together and doing what she had been taught, and looking into her eyes Sarah saw May's fears for her, her misgivings, for the first time.

They'd never said more about it. But May had carried on giving her advice on nappies and baby feeding, although she'd been childless herself, and Sarah had taken it, and built a household on it, knowing, somewhere inside, that if backbone could collapse in a moment, then it was all no stronger than a meringue. Which seemed to leave her no option beyond trying to shore it up further, to bleach out the creeping stains, line up the cups, and starch the table cloths long after – long, long after – housewives had forgotten what starch even was. And all the time, she'd remembered the displays with their perfect placing, and slowly, very gently, those smiles and curtseys had started to reproach her.

She knew she seemed quaint and old-fashioned. Sometimes the fun moms at school had made excuses to sneak off and troll her kitchen and cupboards like tourists did to the Amish, using the boys' birthday parties as excuses. She saw their eyes darting around the room, the corners of their mouths twitching.

Auntie May came into the room with a trembling tray of tea, and Sarah was careful to sit quietly without comment in her usual chair. The tray wobbled on the little stool as the old lady put it down, and Sarah saw the relief in May's face at accomplishing this feat without mishap.

"Rory, some tea?"

Rory had walked over to the cabinet and was looking at the Sarie Marais coffee mug.

"Oh I've had that since I was a girl. I collected everything, my parents sometimes laughed. But the funny thing is, times change, it's not worthless anymore. Neels keeps telling me I could get a lot of money for this now on Bid or Buy."

Sarah looked up from her cup of tea, quickly. May was staring ahead of her.

Rory looked at the junior Sunday Times enamel pin, green with a springbok's head. Next to it was the Voortrekker Centenary medallion with a running boy who looked like he knew exactly where he was going, holding a torch in front of him. Beside him a girl kept pace, well enough to be obliterated by him, other than a wisp of the hem of her skirt.

"Bid or buy," he said.

May shook her head, looking into her cup.

"But I've told him, Sarah, I've told him this will all be yours someday." She looked up at Sarah and held her eye. "He's very good to his old auntie," she said, "very good. He takes me to tea every Sunday. I'm leaving him everything. But this … this is for a daughter."

Sarah had a sudden vision of crossing this room, empty of everything else, and opening the doors of the cabinet. Of reaching up to the top shelf, and picking up Little Boy Blue, the dashing chevalier, the little bridesmaid, the bride. She was lost in porcelain folds painted in lavender and blue, twisted into the skirt of the wedding dress where it spiraled around the base, smiled down upon by the Art Deco bride, her hands quiet on the stems of the yellow freesias she pressed to her midriff, a floor length train falling from a nun-like headdress. For a

moment before she twisted herself free from the cold porcelain creases of this dress she smelt the freesias, and the fabric drifted soft around her face. As she found herself again in the armchair, the cup and saucer on her lap, the bride across the room, out of reach, she realized that Auntie May was still watching her, and she realized in that moment that May had always known her secret. As a mother she knew the frantic way in which a child like herself, like Rory, would wipe at the fingerprints on the cabinet doors and only spread the evidence wider. She looked down, embarrassed, but May called her back.

"Sarah."

Sarah looked up again and found something unexpected in May's eyes.

"You were always so careful, I knew you would never do damage. I trusted you. They were always yours, in a way, and now … soon … they will be forever. I hope?"

There was a look of something shy, fearful, a need in her eyes. This woman, always her compass in life, at this moment, adrift, uncertain, afraid, needing something.

"Neels is arranging for me to go into Sunset Home. In Randfontein, near where he lives. I will not be able to take everything. There's only going to be one room and a shower."

"A shower," said Rory.

There was a pause.

"And a toilet and a basin." Said Auntie May.

"Rory," said Sarah very quietly. "I'm sure it will be lovely. Neels is doing his best."

She thought of the certainties that had arrived in those cabinets when Auntie May moved in, and taken their places in her life. She loved them as much for that as for the shepherdess's hair ribbon carefully pricked out in pink glaze, swelled into velvety plumpness by the blind porcelain beneath. She had put her own small hand into the smooth and glistening hand of the dashing chevalier and leaned her head against his uniformed shoulder

and let him lead her away. Now Auntie May expected something from her, something important.

"Would Charles mind?" May asked softly, into her lap. And Sarah heard in her words an admission, the first ever, from May that she did not always know the right moves.

She thought of the days she'd first noticed Charles, riding exercise and helping one of the trainers at the track in some kind of impatient and resentful apprenticeship. Slouching behind a wall smoking when he could, he'd smiled at her as she made her way to Auntie May's office overlooking the track. She had had very little contact with boys and had never been allowed out, but still she could tell right away that he was not a good boy. Too good looking. His face lean and eager, his eyes darting, his hair shiny and almost gypsyish with its curls, though he kept it very short, especially for those days. Every curl seemed cut in half. His body lean but tough, you could see even under the loose shirts.

Auntie May knew everything, saw through everyone. All the horses, all the trainers, all the grooms and the exercise riders and the jockeys. She knew who was doing what. Nothing got past her and nobody got what they wanted without her. Craggy faced trainers softened around her, became gallant, became gentlemen, or they got nowhere. Sarah perched on the credenza behind her and watched through her fringe, and learned, and got trays of tea for May and the latest supplicant when asked. The trainers smiled briefly at Sarah, her presence being part of the test, then ignored her, concentrating on their manners and their protocol, of which the tea tray was the ultimate examination. They sweated over remembering not to commit the faux pas of stirring their tea with the sugar spoon, over whether to offer to pour or to wait to be served. All of this, May watched, seldom taking pity or giving them any clues. Sarah knew that when she pushed the sugar bowl in their direction, she had marked them as her favourites.

Charles, when he approached the desk as Sarah had known he would, did it differently. He smiled openly at her as she put the tea tray down on the desk and hovered uncertainly at her place on the credenza, before obeying a tiny signal from May that told her to leave. As she moved away she saw him take in the tray with all its doilied pitfalls, and she saw him smile, and

set his jaw, and pick up the teapot without asking, and start to pour for May, who she also saw shift in her seat to hide her surprise. He sat straight in his chair, but easy.

They had tea once a week for months, Charles always pouring, until he had charmed May into a kind of watchful but smiling motherly indulgence, which was when he boldly began to speak directly to Sarah on the way out. With winks and nudges he got her to follow him outside and join him for his sneaked cigarettes, the ones he should have been too young for and that she definitely was, the ones he smoked, leaning on one leg behind the wall. Sarah had no idea what he'd talked about with May, but with her he drew smoky circles and castles in the air, training stables filled with great horses, winning posts with these same horses flashing past them like lit cigarette tips in the gloom as the evenings darkened and, under cover of darkness, he pulled her to him by the waist and kissed her with a smoky mouth.

Perhaps it was time to pack away the cabinets.

"Of course, Auntie May," she said. She would think about Charles later.

***

Max was moving. Rory was helping him pack.

"It's no big deal," Max said. "Usual story."

Usual story. Once a year the landlord put up the rent and his mom looked around for something smaller.

"It's been like this since I was six. Every new place we have to give stuff away that won't fit. This year I'm going to give away my beanbag. I'm tired of it anyway. And it'll give me some floor space for my games."

He was taking his movie posters off the wall, rolling them up and putting them into a big old cardboard cylinder dented from many moves. Down came Keanu and *The Matrix I, II* and *III*. Harrison Ford in *Bladerunner*.

"I've seen attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain –"

Rory joined in – "Time to die."

"Worse! Time to enter the toilet roll! Sorry Keanu, see you next year!"

Max slotted them into the cardboard tube, taking care not to bash the edges of the posters already in there. They were originals. "Next time I think I'll put up *East of Eden* and *Streetcar*, let them get a chance to see the light of day. But it's hard to stop them rolling up all the time after a year in this thing. Look..."

He took out James Dean and unrolled him, put four little balls of masking tape in the corners, and watched: after a few seconds a corner lifted and curled, then another, and then the whole thing snapped shut like a blind and fell to the floor.

"Let's time them!"

Rory took out *Streetcar* and they timed them. *Streetcar* lasted longer. They laughed a bit when Brando rolled up.

Max sighed, looked around his small overburdened planet of a room, half-abandoned, boxes parked all over the place, ready for leaving. Face down on the floor like a downed cyborg lay a humanoid shape in once-black fur, now matted and faded brownish-red. Rory picked it up, a big old toy gorilla with golden eyes meant for a bear, his nose a folded origami of leatherette, all the shine rubbed off, like an old tyre worn down to the canvas.

"How about this! Takes up a lot of space."

"No!" Max leapt up and grabbed the gorilla. Fell back on his bed, upsetting a tower of DVDs.

Rory was about to make a joke but then he saw that Max was stroking a bald patch on the gorilla's collapsed ear. It gave him a funny feeling in his stomach.

"What's his name?"

"King Kong."

"Cool. The original or the remake?" He was rushing, not thinking about what he was saying, and Max glared at him.

"Sorry, the original of course. Stupid me."

Max stared at King Kong.

"Last time I lost my computer games. The time before that, my photo album. Before that I was too little, and I couldn't keep track. I lost everything. I remember trying to stuff things into boxes that were already too full. My mom made a pile to give away and I stole them back and tried to fit them all into my suitcase with my clothes, and the suitcase popped open. My mom laughed and then she cried. There were so many things I was trying to look after. I hid something behind the dustbin and I was going to grab it right at the end but it got left behind. I don't even remember what it was. I try to remember what I had but I can't. I was six. King Kong is all that's left."

The stuffing had all collapsed down into the paws and the stomach and King Kong was wasted and worn grey and thin at his shoulders and hips.

"Dad said it was just old junk. Kiddie stuff."

Rory was about to protest but then he remembered about Max's dad.

"Did I tell you he's going to get me the latest phone with all the apps for my birthday? And we're going to the movies in a limo!"

"Cool!"

"He might not be able to come though, he said. Work."

Max twiddled the gorilla's ear.

"But he says he'll order our favourite pizzas from Mr. Delivery. He says he'll get you the one you liked last time, the one with pineapple."

Rory had never met Max's father.

"My dad would never remember something like that. Unless it was about Carl."

Max looked proud. "Ja. He's good like that. Like, he'll remember to get a 2 litre Beat, and Italian Kisses. Yolandi will bring it all, and then take us to the movies. I wonder if the limo will be white or black. With white leather seats."

"Yolandi?"

"His PA."

"I thought it was Tanya."

"Used to be. Now she's his girlfriend."

The gorilla now had little spikes of twirled hair across his receding hairline.

"I liked her better when she was his PA."

Max combed all the twirls out with his fingers.

"Anyway, this time it's Yolandi."

Rory thought suddenly of Gandhi.

***

This afternoon he was eager to get down to the stables. The bandages sat like a row of day old puppies against the creased warm side of the cotton wool. The DMSO looked more like syrup

than ever, generously swelling, glugging, clinging. He hugged the bottle, squeezed the bandages.

Paulus gave him an odd look and he got to work.

He changed the bandage, first rolling up the old, stained bandage, not unravelling it and tossing it in a heap in the box as usual. Then wetting down the leg with his hand and a bucket, scooping out the water and fluffing up the flattened fur. Rubbing out the lines drawn by the bandaging this morning.

He held his palm over the tendon for a long time, gauging the heat. It was hard to say, because of course your hand warmed it up when you kept it there that long. But he thought Gandhi was a little more comfortable on the leg this afternoon. Less patient of their attentions, more heedlessly himself.

Rory was happy to feel his impatience, to chide him for his stamping. And he was happy to lose himself in the routine he could have followed in his sleep; unwinding, rolling up, placing the new pad, cupping it, holding it, clasping the tail of the bandage against it, quickly making the first circle around the leg, pinning the edge under the beginning of the next roll, after which it was easy, so long as you got the tension right. Too tight and Gandhi would lift and dot his toe down like the fussy old woman Rory called him, too loose and it collapsed like a baggy stocking around his ankle. And sometimes it looked and felt just right, but was just a shade too loose to do much good to the swelling.

Paulus told him it was fine now, but Rory wound and rewound it another couple of times. Then, for good measure, he did the other hind leg to balance it. No DMSO, just a support bandage.

When Paulus said it was past time to shayile, Rory snapped at him.

Then he did the two front legs, to balance the back ones he said to Paulus, who hadn't asked. And who had gone into wary silence, careful not to shake his head or twitch his shoulders. When Andile rapped on the door as he marched past, asking Paulus whether he was

coming now or what, Paulus grunted which made Andile pause and shoot a very quick, questioning glance at Rory before walking off without comment.

And then Rory heard Charles's voice. He looked over the stable door to see Charles a few stables down, leaning over a door and talking into it.

"Nandi, mother of kings," he said. "Mother of a great African empire, hmm? How does that sound?"

Paulus watched as Rory quickly stepped outside, closed the door against Gandhi who wanted to follow, and walked down to Charles. Then, very quickly, he packed up and slipped out into the darkness where a glowing dot of red pinpointed Andile leaning on a wall around the corner. As Paulus went out of the line of sight from the stables, his gait relaxed.

Rory came up next to Charles, smelling the whiskey underneath the cigarette smoke. He leaned over the door with Charles and joined him watching Nandi. She was tugging teff out of her haynet, chewing, turning to listen at the door, then turning back. Rory could see the whites of her eyes. She rolled them as she listened to Charles, winked them shut as she reached up and tugged.

"Great line," Charles said and Rory was happy. "Very good!" he said.

"And the great thing with a mare is they last beyond their own racing careers. Want to have beautiful babies just like you, girl?"

"I think she'll have a colt with the look of eagles. She's got it."

Charles nodded, inhaled, wincing against the smoke of his cigarette. "She's going to have great babies."

"When her own career is over," said Rory.

Nandi strolled over and dug her nose under Rory's arm and flung it up, in a game of looking for carrots. He laughed and took one out of his pocket, fed it to her and then pushed her nose away.

“Can’t fool this one.”

Charles smiled.

“She’s got a great future. In fact she *is* the future,” he said.

Rory looked at him.

“Beautiful babies. But you’ll have to calm down, girl, become a responsible mother. A lot of that will come with the change in diet. When you’re not in training anymore.”

“But she’ll win some more races first, hey dad?”

Charles shook his head.

“What about next Saturday?”

Charles stepped back and stared out into the night, smiling faintly, shaking his head. He dropped his cigarette and stood on the stompie.

“It’s over,” he said, walking off.

“What? What’s over?”

“All this. Thank goodness.”

“What about Gandhi? His leg is mending ---”

“All of it.”

Charles walked past Gandhi’s stable as if it was empty, turning his shoulder as Gandhi leaned out at him. Gandhi watched him go, nickered in a whisper that Charles did not seem to hear.

***

Sarah was spring cleaning, though spring was nowhere near. Every frayed sheet and faded pillowcase in the passage cupboard was on the carpet in a leaning pile, leaving a narrow aisle to squeeze through past her bent back and shoulders that shook with scrubbing.

"The mould always gets in here," she said when she saw Rory, who hadn't asked. "It's much too full of course, this house has never had enough cupboard space."

Rory looked at the same pile he'd seen once a year for as long as he could remember. His and Carl's baby blankets and cot sheets were still there. Carl's had been blue, Rory's a less emphatic yellow, and he'd also had the pink for the long-awaited daughter who'd never come. Fifteen springs of being taken out, refolded, smoothed out, the little ducks and umbrellas traced with a finger tip, then rerolled and packed back into this same cupboard. In other cupboards were baby clothes, bibs and babygrows, and those socks they made for infants too tiny to crawl yet, the ones that never got dirty soles or wore out. Kept snowy white from a once a year wash. But this was not the right season.

He knew better than to try and talk to her at these times. But later, when she was making supper, the usual weekly toad in the hole, he said "Mom, why were you cleaning that cupboard today?"

"Because it needs doing! The mould! It makes me sneeze."

"Why now?"

She shrugged, turned a little away. Poked the carrots with a bent fork.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on. Carl is going to university on a scholarship."
"Oh! That's great --- so why is dad saying it's over? What's over?"

She'd poked a row of four uneven holes across the middle of each of the disks of carrot in the steamer.

"It's not for me to say."

"You're my mother! Who else can I ask?"

"He should tell you."

"Tell me what, mom?"

"I shouldn't say. He'll be telling us everything soon, he says, and with Carl going anyway ---"

She started with a second row of holes, parallel with the first. Rory watched. The rows of perforations started going skew, spoiling the symmetry.

"I don't know what's happening but I know we can't train racehorses anymore. He's going to lose his licence."

"What!"

"Because of the last race."

For a while Rory could think of nothing to say. He saw their home, the stables, the racetrack, early wakeups, early bedtimes, morning exercise, race days, horse hairs on the sofa that Sarah could never quite get rid of, the smell of leather, and half the fridge taken up with horse medicine. Their whole world was this. It was one, and it was everything. Except for a few fragments. School. Movie club. His friends.

"What's going to happen?" Rory thought of Carl at university, taking it all in his stride. He saw him on the field controlling the game, his side all arranged around him. He saw him narrow his eyes as he made a quick decision, to kick, run or pass. Halting play or moving it along. Always the right decision, even when it wasn't – he seemed to insist on it, and everyone seemed to agree.

"I don't know."

"What is he going to do? He's talking to Nandi all the time. He says Gandhi has no future."

She'd punched one disk over and over till it broke into bits that clung to the tines of the fork. She shook the fork and they flew about.

"I don't know Rory! I just try to keep things normal as much as I can!"

There was a spray of orange bits spat onto the stove top. She threw the fork down, and went over to the sink for a cloth to wipe them up.

***

The limo was white. With white and black leather interior. The driver looked like one of the bookies at the racetrack, dressed for a wedding, or maybe a funeral. Young but already getting heavy around the neck and the gut. Greased black hair, a bit too long. A black suit and white dress shirt, black bow tie. He matched the car. Right down to the way Rory felt slightly shifty, slightly shady, about even being in it. But it had caused the necessary sensation outside the school gates. Even Jessica Mandy, the girl Max called the queen of sunscreen, sauntered over a little faster than was her usual style. She tossed her hair and peered through the open door as Max and Rory, Dylan and Devon and Casey, honorary girl movie club member, also token girl movie club member, played with the CD player and opened the bar fridge.

"Cokes only! Where's the champagne?" said Dylan.

"Cool ride, Max!" Jessica said, raising her shaped eyebrows.

Max did a studied double take. "She speaks!"

"You are so funny."

Dylan patted the seat next to him “We can make space, hey Max?”

Jessica smiled and put her foot on the doorsill.

“In return for some … services?” The boys laughed and the driver grinned and bowed her towards her seat like royalty, at which she reared back and tugged her foot out of the car the way a horse would panic and pull its hoof out of a tangle of wire. She swung her skinny hips and stalked off, throwing back at them: “I’d rather die”.

“Oh well,” sighed Dylan “I prefer Coke anyway.”

“And I prefer movies” said Max, “Any day. So let’s go!”

It was a pity they couldn’t have gone a different route. If there was a more Hollywood way to get to Eastgate, which there probably wasn’t. It would have been more in keeping with the limo. As it was, the last bit of farmland that used to separate them from the city was now pegged out with white poles in between rows of mielie stalks and browning heads of khakibos. Great ocean liners of hoardings in formation all along the road, showing smiling men and women dandling children between them. Mom, dad and laughing kid, sometimes two laughing kids, strolling through meadows, drinking cappuccinos, all advertising The Meadows Lifestyle Estate. It seemed that if you lived in such a place, all would be well. So long as there was no rusty barbed wire or leaning outbuildings. No failed plans or aging horses. So long as you wore the right khaki trousers and the right loafers, and looked very white, very American. So long as you could look at this winter landscape of headless thinning mielie stumps and not really see it at all. So long as you could make the leap to New England half timbered, white with grey pointing and roofing , without tripping over the sagging barbed wire fence that still, diffidently, surrounded it. And if you couldn’t, no matter, because in due course the fence slumped to the ground and lay in billowing snarls, horse hazards, just as a sleek wall met it, with towers of scaffolding. Give it enough time and it would be easy to make the leap. Someone else would do it for you. Sit back and leave it all to them.

“My parents are coming to see Phase Two this weekend” said Dylan.

"Shoo!" said Max. "You're lucky!"

"It's going to be a wired estate," said Dylan. "They call it intelligent or something"
"Not when you move in, they won't!"

"Ha ha Max. You're just jealous!"

Max was silent.

By now they were past the block long hoardings and into the suburbs. They went past complexes called after birds that were no longer there, Plover and Spurwing, Lark and Darter. After that, bigger trees, silver oaks and pin oaks, with older houses and gardens all rigid as corpses.

"What kind of place are you going to be living in, Rory?" asked Dylan.

"I don't know."

"A plot like now? Or in town?"

Rory shrugged. "Haven't a clue. My dad couldn't be bothered to tell me."

"Are you taking the horses?"

"Yes."

"At least there's that."

"I think we are."

***

He was late for walking Gandhi out. They'd had a heated debate about *The Matrix* and it had overrun.

"Hi mom," he called over his shoulder as he ran through the kitchen, but he was speaking to lamb chops burning alone on the stove. It took him a few steps to stop, but as he did he heard a truck reversing down at the stable yard, and he saw its red rear eyes through the near dark, and he left the chops to chatter and smoke.

He knew Gandhi was not in his stable before he got there. Before he saw two speckled chickens and one black one, a cock and two hens, pecking in his food drum and kicking up his bedding. They stopped to stare at Rory as he ran by, footsteps echoing on the empty cobbles, and the cock started an alarm crow, then swallowed it into a grumble as Rory vanished. As he neared the corner he saw the sunrise of headlights and the glow of figures moving in its light.

He ran out and into the full, blinding glare. Gandhi was silhouetted sharply against it, a metal cut-out jogging in a sheet of hot steel. Paulus, also a cut-out, was trying to calm him, but it didn't help, because Carl and Charles were driving him on up the ramp into a battered truck with railings along the sides. It shuddered and coughed as it idled, and dark grey diesel smoke drifted into the headlights and blurred the cut-outs. From inside the truck, a donkey brayed in panic and its hooves scuttled on the bare metal floor. Gandhi shied at the sound and jumped off the steep side. Rory, by now up next to him, saw his muzzle pinched with fear, his eyes rolling white as they flashed by.

"Careful! The bolt!" Sticking out halfway up the side of the truck ramp was the stitch that the pin of the door sewed through, that latched it closed after you lifted the ramp back up. It was always something to watch out for when a horse jumped or fell off the side to avoid loading. A cannon bone sliding down over the edge of the ramp could catch on it, tearing the thin skin open. Paulus, on the other side to Rory, put his shoulder into Gandhi to push him clear, but Gandhi leapt against him, then lost his balance as he went over the side. The fine-boned leg ground against it and, halfway to the fetlock, a dark line ran down the white sock.

Charles shouted at Paulus to circle him again, and this time bring him in straight! And hurry!

As Paulus turned to face him, Rory saw his tight face and the wrinkles that gathered up his brow, that spoke when he would not. He saw the hesitation, the question in his eyes. It gave Rory a moment to run forward and grab the frayed halter rope from his hand, then turn with the horse and rush him away from the clattering smoking truck, hooves crashing along the cobbles.

He didn't know where he was heading, but when Carl stepped out at the end of the line of stables and stood facing him, waiting, Rory turned without thinking into a doorway. Gandhi hesitated slightly at going through the narrow entrance, but Rory clucked urgently and he trusted to Rory's certainty and followed him in.

It was the feed room. At the far end, two white chickens dozing on the barred and cobwebby windowsill woke up. They chuckled a sleepy alarm, shifting uneasily, looking around for a way out, but there wasn't one.

Rory turned and swung the door closed behind the horse, then looked at its dented metal surface. Unlike a stable, the feed room had a person-sized doorway and a full length, warped metal door with a lock, but the lock was on the outside. There was a handle on the inside in case a loose horse wandered in and ate itself into a colic, but no lock.

He looked around him, fast. Big drums of food with bent lids weighed down with bricks to try and keep the rats out. Sacks of food delivered today, still not upended into the barrels, smelling of porridge. Not much teff, the room was too small, but a couple of scratchy bales of lucerne shedding dried, pressed leaves, and a rich green-blue smell. A steel rake. A rusty green wheelbarrow. A wide-headed, stiff-bristled outdoor broom.

Trying to work fast, but not too fast, treading with care around Gandhi who trembled in this tiny place, Rory jammed the rake and then the broom across the doorway. He scraped feed barrels across to pin them there, slowed by the need not to lose control of their swinging weight. Then he lifted the back-wrenching dead bellies of feed sacks, and the easier bales of lucerne into a wall behind them.

As he blocked out the doorway, the door opened from the outside, and light leaked through the bent sticks of lucerne.

“Come out of there Rory! Now!”

“No!”

“I tried to spare you from this.”

“Where? Where is he going?”

A pause. Another bale.

“To a new home.”

“On an old truck? With donkeys? What kind of home is that?”

“The only one possible for him now.”

Rory blocked out the seams of fretted light with more bales.

“I know what kind of home you’re talking about!”

“You’re wrong. He’s going to a farm.”

The driver’s voice “ - outside Krugersdorp.”

Holes opened up as Charles and Carl pulled the bales and sacks out, cursing because they caught in the crossed shafts of the rake and the broom.

The rake handle wiggled and jerked.

Rory blocked it out.

Gandhi edged further back until his jammed-down tail was right in the corner. His ears jumped forward at Charles’s voice, flicked back uncertainly the rest of the time, and scarcely registered Rory’s constant low clucking and humming and talking. “It’s okay boy, it’s okay.” But he was a good boy, and he obeyed anyway.

"He'll be ridden by kids. It's a riding school."

There was more light coming through, like golden lace edging a dark pillow. Rory moved to block it, but a little slower as he listened, thought.

It almost, almost could be. It was not what he had been expecting, but Rory could see the sand arena and the little jumps, gum poles balanced on battered paint tins.

His fingers relaxed as he thought it through. He rolled a square-sided lucerne stick between his fingers, powdery with leaf dust. Gandhi was still a young horse for riding, and if his leg healed ...

More gaps opened up in the wall and it got lighter. Charles called softly to Gandhi, "Come, boy". Gandhi's ears shot forward and he took a tentative step towards the door.

More lit gaps appeared in the cracks between the bales, lucerne sticks poking out, looking like cracks in a glass window pane. He turned and slowly pulled out the last bale. In the space beneath it a mouse family scattered, leaving a handful of naked pink babies twisting helplessly like blind caterpillars. The corner was empty now. There was nothing more to put into the doorway.

From the truck came the clatter of hooves and a cow groaned. The black and white stable cat appeared from the doorway. She ignored Rory and the horse, her white patches glowed as she shot through Rory's legs into his shadow, and he heard a squeak.

Nobody could look at Gandhi and see a school pony.

"No!" He leapt forward and grabbed the last thing, the wheelbarrow, and wheeled it, squeaking, into the gaping hole in the doorway.

For a moment it blocked out the busily moving and bending legs beyond. But almost immediately it was shoved over, hard. It crashed onto the floor, nearly landing on Gandhi's once valuable front legs.

It was too much for the horse. He panicked and did a corkscrew jump from a standstill, the thoroughbred's strong survival instinct to jump. The top of his head clanged against the doorframe. Such a blow to that part of his head could have killed him, but Rory saw him land, stagger, but keep on his feet. The doorway was naked now, and through the crossed steel shafts of rake and broom Rory saw Charles grab the halter rope. Not giving the reeling Gandhi time to react, he headed back to the truck, Carl shoving from behind, arms above the horse's hocks, his tail still clamped tight as if he was very cold.

They rushed the horse along the cobbles and up the ramp and this time, though he dug in his hooves and tried to resist, they swept him over the skidding metal and in with the other animals before he really knew what had happened. Rory, coming up behind, got a glimpse of an old stained cow's face. Just as he reached them, Carl turned and pushed Rory over the side, and then the ramp was up, the pin dropped through the stitch, and the truck's vibration had changed from idling to first gear. As it moved forward it swung left to go around the water trough Rory, on his knees in a muck puddle, saw the sign tied to the bars on the side:

L . van Driel

Best prices on all livestock

It swung again the other way, into darkness, and the light faded from the yard. Rory ran behind it, stumbling along the rutted track, till he reached the sagging barbed wire fence and its leaning gateposts. There he stopped and watched the red pinpricks accelerate, then wink out on the first bend of the tar road.

3

Forthcoming attractions

They left at dawn but it did not get properly light. Even by the time they would normally have finished with exercise and be heading back to the stables, it should have been brighter than it was. Rory stared out of the window of the bakkie. A low dark thundercloud of smoke welled up on the horizon. Through it the sun could be seen, a shallow embossing. Dim cars passed, ghostly and somehow silent. As they got closer to the fire, lit embers drifted in the air, slid and twirled down the windscreen. They slowed and sound returned, the chuckle and crack of the fire. Flames trickled through the scanty grass of the mown verge, poured like wind through the long grass beyond, leaned across the road like an enormous tree in its stems and branches, bowing its burden of dripping foliage.

As soon as the smoke began to clear, Charles accelerated. Looking behind, Rory saw black khakibos smoke gushing up and spilling out into an ashy-white pool, leaf-swirling with circling birds and lofted embers. Ahead the road was a light band through blackness. Low burned thatch mounds glowed with red interior lights, and long white trails led to smouldering log ends. Cattle egrets stalked and stabbed, and herons froze, lining up with vertical grass that was no longer there. Carcasses of rotted barrels lay in curls and sepia-stained ant heaps crouched.

Charles shook his head and clucked “Where are the fire breaks? What a waste of grazing!” But Rory thought it was beautiful.

When they finally touched unburned land again it was a different world. Still veld, still soil, but no longer Egyptian goose coloured, a hissing, wind-weaving colour swatch of yellow and tawny, russet and grey, and the strange chocolate-maroon of the winter-emptied stems of taaibos. Here, the grass was a silver-white pelt against a sunburned red scalp not rich enough to call soil.

Rory squashed a blackened ember into a smudge that ran like a crack down the window.

And then the bakkie broke down. Halfway up a long slow hill, after they'd passed the Lichtenburg 2km sign.

"We can ride," Paulus said to Rory as they stood in the lurching horsebox, trying to stop Nandi biting at Fleur, and being yelled at by Charles as he sweated over the engine.

"Take the drive-in turnoff the other side of town," said Charles.

They rode past Pep and a tuisnywerheid, with too much window for too little crocheted baby clothing. A lonely Victorian broekieslace building housing Orange Microloans between the brooding aluminium Neanderthal brows of its neighbours. Their hooves clattered on the tar and people came out. A bearded farmer in colour-panelled shirt turned from the ATM. An oil-stained mechanic wheeled himself out from under a car. A cell phone guy with dreads punched numbers into his phone and watched the screen, then them. A mother hurried her two small children out of Dunns, past a bored security guard.

On the outer edge of town they passed boarded up shops and empty garage forecourts. Scraggly empty plots began appearing, and just about when they were starting to coalesce into countryside, they rode past a little shop, or perhaps it was a house, a bit apart from the rest. Its old-fashioned stoep was dwarfed by a pile of perfect, identical boxes, and a teenage Chinese girl stood with one in her slender arms, and stared. Through the window her mother snapped and the girl disappeared through the open doorway. When Rory and Paulus had passed, the mother came out and took another box from the pile stacked against the balustrade, then paused and watched them from behind.

After that, they were out of town completely. The next turnoff was for the drive-in. Rory stopped his horse and stared. This couldn't be it. Two gates, two roads, one in, one out, the out road farm-gated, wired closed and weed-threaded, the in-road slightly more used, the gate slightly open. The 'Whites only/Blankes alleen, Admission R10 per car' sign still just legible. Overhead, the shadow of the screen falling, a sail thrown overboard from a

supertanker. Legs planted in the ground like Eskom pylons. Iron flanks curving up into the sky, scarred with rust-weeping bolts, worn panels slipping, some lying defeated on the ground, in a junkyard of rusting playground equipment - a slide, empty swings, a roundabout. Ahead, the rutted drive climbed rolling waves of disintegrating tar with weeds poking through it. Each crest lined with loudspeaker poles without their loudspeakers. Each pole with a wiry nose hair growing out at each side. Each trough a lap full of faded Coke cans. Beyond, the old drive in canteen and toilet block, the projection room above it, long and flat and lined with windows on both floors. Behind the building untouched veld, bone dry, reassuringly just like all the miles since the fire.

Rory looked back at the road, but there was no other drive leading from this turnoff. Not even an almost-erased old track. There was a Sold sign, that was all. He turned and looked back towards town, but the road was empty. Paulus shrugged and nodded towards the drive.

Close up the building had a shopfront like some of the empty showrooms in town, partially boarded up. There was a level apron of tar gravel in front of the smeared double glass doors. Rory walked towards them, past a Now Showing poster featuring a Western faded to coastal blues and whites, and Forthcoming Attractions warped by water and too murky to see.

He entered cautiously. A foam-froth of litter, hazy plastic beer wrappers and becalmed cold drink cans. Marooned around the huge room, empty Coke fridges. A serving hatch from the kitchen behind, facing onto a serving counter. The kind that you expected to be hot when you leaned on it, and to show panting pink tongues of polony bulging from fat white bread lips. Soaking sausages and pale, embryonic chips. A blackboard on the wall said Today's Specials but featured only obscenities.

He stepped around the counter and glanced into the kitchen. A suggestion of a butchery, perhaps the white floor tiles going up the walls, the kind that were never quite white. Gaping bain maries, industrial stainless steel tables, padlocked chest freezers.

Following the sign for the toilets, he walked down the dark passage, opened the first door, saw the Dames/Ladies sign above his head, stepped back hurriedly, walked on to the

next door, hesitated as he looked up at the Mans/Gents sign. Inside, a row of stained urinals, a row of broken toilets, a bank of basins slung with old condoms, a wall-length mirror cracked from corner to corner. Catching sight of his own distorted reflection in the mirror, he left.

Up the stairs, past the back office dark on the left, an open doorway featured a ray of sunlight too old to be cheering, on the turn, and stained with the leaking of the coming night. Rory entered, headed for the window, looked out at the great screen above the gate. Sunset rays welled through holes in the screen and fell into the room. Below, the bakkie turned in at the gate. Rory drew back from the window, and bumped into something. Whirling around he saw a great shrouded hulk in the middle of the room, that had been watching him silently from behind all this time. He took two deep breaths, watching it back. Reassured, he lifted the edge of the dusty tarpaulin and found a great big old projector bolted to the floor. Gleaming with a depth of care that shrugged off the dust. He started to smile. It had a long green body like a tractor's bonnet, and two pointing arms like a baobab tree, and a couple of enormous empty reels that looked big enough to fit an ox wagon. There were dials that trembled when he tapped them with the back of his finger, and sprockets that spun easily on their hubs. It looked industrial, or agricultural, and ready to go. He was sure it would hum or purr when you switched it on. There were sprockets and knobs dotted about that looked like dots waiting to be joined.

Boots clattered below, and Charles's voice shouted up, telling him to get the horses fed, it was getting dark. Walking to the door, something brushed his foot and held on. He leapt and kicked like a horse in barbed wire, and a curled wrist of film spun through the air. He picked it up. A desert landscape, empty but for cactus figures. The next frame, and the next, and the next, the same. Just the cactuses advancing. Charles yelled again and he ran for the door, stuffing the film into his pocket.

Outside the light was a deep orange with traces of something darker now that more night had been stirred in. In the silver-white grass behind the building, now almost phosphorescent, no paddock fencing, no horsekeeping markers yet. Just a looping three strand barbed wire fence, the everywhere and everything Hansel and Gretel thread of Africa,

and a small drooping gate, the kind that gleamed with silver paint when new. Rory and Paulus led the horses through it into the silvery surf, soothing them as they snorted with deep suspicion. Rory lead Nandi along the fence, drawn somehow to wade in deeper, closer to the still, dark woodland beyond the sagging wire mesh boundary fence.

"What's next door?" he asked, but Paulus knew no more than he did and hung back, shook his head, started to steer Fleur back the way they had come.

Rory stayed at the mesh fence. It was almost completely dark now, though the silver grass still glowed. Nandi stood quietly, ears twitching. He smelled the dry, light, sweetly dead scent of dust and acacia. He sniffed for the smell of earth but there was not enough moisture for that. There was a trace of something else, though. Something darker. Not earth, but in the same category, the category of richness, decay, assault to the senses, offence even. The smell of life.

As Rory noticed the smell, it began to grow. He recognized it as something very familiar and yet knew it to be completely alien. Nandi began to shift nervously as it approached, not quite in fear, and as she did, Rory saw a movement beyond the fence, a hint of something white. It came closer, a thin white lightning-shaped zigzag. As Rory watched, others swam out of the dark, parallel, shifting, somehow hanging together as they danced. Something breathed close by.

Nandi snorted, screamed as if she was in season, galloped away. From behind him, Paulus yelled in alarm. Charles ran out with a torch, shouting and shining it into the gathering darkness. Nandi galloped back to the fence and called through it, brushing her lips against the mesh, then circled around again, high-stepping, tail flag-hoisted. Charles swung in her direction and worried the light back and forth over her, checking hooves, legs, body, neck. She was uncontrollable, galloping up to the fence again, stopping in a cloud of dust that darkened the torch's beam. She called again, tense and staring, nostrils quivering, and when Charles tried to take the dangling lead rope she lunged at him, teeth bared. He leapt back, shouting, and dropped the rope.

Rory approached her more cautiously but it was a while before he could catch the whirling white lead rope from out of the dark, and lead her away.

So the horses stayed on the other side of the fence that night, among the hills and the poles. Throughout the night as he tossed and turned in his sleeping bag on his new bedroom floor, the projector a presence beside him, Rory heard them kick old cold drink cans as they nosed for grazing amongst the crumbling islands of tar.

***

Early next morning Rory, Paulus and Charles walked their boundaries with red and white tape, stakes and hammers. At the gate they turned left, away from the screen, parallel with the road back to town. On this side, just the usual barbed wire fence, okay for cattle, not good for horses, or not if you wanted them unmarked and unscarred. The clumps of grass here were bleached gold, matt pink at the base, the gleam of the shafts dulled by drought and the dust that passing cattle trucks swept off the stony verge and harried over their fence. They picked up faded Checkers bags, crisped brittle by the sun. Spikes of wild dagga poked through, with a few small orange tongues lolling, but mostly they were just a string of spiky beige balls towering above the grass. No path here, so walking meant a mesmerizing zigzag through clumps of tall grass.

"Huh?" Rory became aware of a command.

Charles sighed, slashed at the grass irritably with a steel stake, then stabbed it into the ground at his feet. "I said, we'll start here."

Paulus banged in the stake with a hammer and Rory wound off a length of red and white tape and tied it on the end. Charles wobbled the stake, but it stood firm. He turned around and paced straight over to the other boundary, quite close here near where the

property narrowed to a triangular point and the barbed wire fence met the baggy mesh back fence.

Charles snorted as he got there. “Game fence. Huh.”

Rory looked through to the other side, the dark acacia woodland now lit with morning light into glades and shadows. Quiet. Empty. They turned and walked back along the rusted mesh fence. No path again, not on this side, but on the other, a busy highway of game animals, pocked with large and small buck hooves, paw prints, claw marks, with many smaller paths merging into and leading off it, all the way along. And everywhere, lone tired clumps of unpalatable turpentine grass in the sand, all the rest of the grass eaten down to the core.

In places, the fence had been burrowed underneath and a tunnel worn in the soft dust. Small paw prints speckled the ground there, and tufts of hair stuck out like barbs on wire, caught in the bottom strand of the fence. Charles squatted at the first of these, leaning on a stake like a shotgun, staring at the tracks, rubbing clumps of hair between his fingers and sniffing. Alert as a dog, interested. But then he straightened and looked back towards the building, the grazing horses, and he frowned.

“Tie some tape here,” he ordered, and Rory tore off a bit and bent to the fence.

“Higher! How do you think we’ll see it through all the grass?”

“Dad?”

“What?”

“What is this place?”

“This place,” Charles pointed at the ground, “is our new home. Twenty acres of good grazing going cheap. A second chance.”

Rory looked at it all.

“And on the other side?”

Charles waved a stake dismissively at it. “Wildlife reserve. So-called.” He snorted. “I don’t need to tell you there’s a lot of work to be done if we’re going to protect our investment and turn it into a decent farm.”

He still had the stake up in the air, and now he brought it to his eye and sighted down it into the reserve, squinting.

By the time they got to the end of this section, there was a cheerful string of red and white tape markers stretching back the way they’d come, looking like a celebration and making Charles frown. But his face lit up as they got to the third and final boundary fence.

“Now this is more like it,” he said, tapping the high, straight, tight-strung mesh with a stake. It rattled like coins. Looking up at it from this close, the mesh looked like chromed chain mail.

Paulus hung back. Rory looked through. Grazing cattle to the left. On the reserve side, the same rusted boundary fence as theirs, but with another one a foot away on the inside, identical to this. Making it seem like a cage. Paced out with a well worn path marked with horse hoof prints.

Charles struck a fence upright with his stake and it clanged. All three of them automatically glanced through as if looking for someone, the someone they felt was watching them unobserved, now summonsed by a bell. And so when the man rode up on the horse, he was entirely expected.

It was a grey Boerperd stallion, with a strongly arched neck. A long slate grey mane accentuating its power and thickness. Sweating from the hard hand on the bottom ring of a hard bit. The horse stopped as it reached them and lowered its head, breathing out, but the rider tightened his reins and used his spurs, and obediently the stallion arched its neck again, high stepping and dancing away from the bit.

“Hey, Kaptein!” said the rider, and the horse listened to one signal then the next, its ears going through all the positions, unsure which to listen to, but used to it.

“Snyman,” said the rider, casting a doubtful eye over them - Charles staring, Rory shuffling - and ignoring Paulus who had made himself invisible. Charles rushed to introduce himself.

Snyman nodded. Looked beyond them towards the drive-in building, which tightened his mouth, and the horses, which loosened it again. “It’s decent land. What are you going to do with it?”

“Breed horses,” said Charles proudly. “You’ve got a nice one there. I’m buying some good breeding stock – Steenkamp Boerperds, and a stallion that goes back to Klinker.”

Snyman nodded.

“I like a Boerperd-thoroughbred cross for a nice riding horse,” Charles said.

“A cross.” Snyman’s mouth tightened again. “Huh. You know, the Siener had a vision. A black and white horse – it meant a mixed government, bringing bloodshed. You know he came from around here?”

“Ah.” Charles had suddenly run out of things to say.

“Ottosdal. In the war he lost children in the concentration camp here.” Snyman jabbed his horse in the sides again. It tossed its head, spraying froth from its bit through the fence. “Anyway, enough talk. Look after your fences. Don’t take any nonsense from that side.” He waved his crop at the reserve - “I don’t.”

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust when he walked in the front door of what he supposed he should get used to calling the house.

“Mom?”

The litter was all gone and the floor was swept, the blackboard wiped and the fridges and counter clean and empty. He walked through to the kitchen. Now scrubbed, it was whiter and even bigger. Two shopping bags sat side by side on a steel table, and Sarah was putting milk, butter and cheese into one of the big fridges that roared like a machine in a factory. They

huddled in a corner. She drooped. Then she turned to the bags and took out tins, lined them up on a shelf where they looked no more at home than the milk. She spaced them out, they looked lonely. She grouped them in twos and threes, uncertain provisional groupings, then turned back to the bags with a sigh and took out a wooden spoon painted on the back with a smiley face. She held it against her lips, then, as she saw Rory in the doorway, she pressed it harder to still the trembling, and tried to smile.

Rory helped her unpack the bags.

***

"Hmm" said Charles when he walked in a few nights later, knocking his boots on the mat at the door. The counter was now covered with a blue and green embroidered table cloth and topped with a lamp, and in front of it was the dining room table and its family of chairs. They sat in bewildered exile, like 1820 settlers on their suitcases in the middle of an empty plain. The sofa and armchairs faced each other across a huge gulf. The Coke fridge rattled and illuminated beers, fruit. No Coke. The Today's Specials blackboard was full. In Charles's handwriting, big shouting capitals '– 6 x bran, 2 x oats, 10 x teff – on account!' In Sarah's, taking up little space, 'Milk, bread, eggs, uniform'. In Rory's, 'Uniform'. In Charles's, 'Stables Thursday!' In Sarah's, even smaller, 'K-Voere called about bill', in Rory's, 'School Tues, uniform please'.

4

Now showing

Still seeming more like Massey Ferguson than MGM, the projector looked over Rory's shoulder as he sat on the side of his bed, staring at his bookcase. DVDs in their cases on the top two shelves, books on the bigger bottom one. The curtains at full stretch still left most of the long narrow window bare. Outside, the sun turned the screen into a blank white page.

Glancing at the closed door, Rory took out *The Great Train Robbery*, opened the box and counted his savings again. They didn't add up any more than they had last time. He flipped through the fringe of the battered dictionary that stuck up like a mane from the top of his long faced old school satchel. Cul de sac … currency … dead end … deficiency … shortfall … spontaneous…

He flapped the long bristly canvas lip back over the clinking buckles and shoved it aside.

He looked around the room but it stuck to the same story. Rows of Western posters finally had the space to march along like the choices in a cinema foyer, what's on and what's coming. But it all looked the same from here. His face brightened as his journey ended at the projector. He went over to it and stroked it. He unwound some of the old pieces of film looped around it. He tried to thread it through the sprockets but it was a maze in oiled metal parts that looked like they needed a mechanic to understand.

Charles entered without knocking and Rory jumped, stepped back and sat on his bed. Charles's eyes followed his hands behind his back. Raising his eyebrows, he sniffed around the room, peered out of the window, ran a finger over the projector, inspected it for dust.

"We'll have a heck of a job getting rid of this," he said, kicking the base tentatively, feeling out its strength. It stood unmoved. "It can wait till Carl comes on vac."

"No!"

Charles looked closely at him. “Normal houses don’t have stuff like this.”

“Please dad. I’ll work with you every day after school. And weekends.” Rory’s eyes clung.

Charles kicked the projector again. “We’ll see.” But this time it was more like an air kick, the idea of a kick.

On the way out he lifted Rory’s old black gym towel draped over the frame on the top of the bookcase. “What’s this?”

He recovered fast, but Rory didn’t miss the recoil when he uncovered the photo of a young Gandhi winning the big race, the one that messed up his tendon. Nor the slight shake to his hand as he threw the towel over it again. He glanced at Rory to see if he’d seen, but Rory had already blanked out his face.

“This should be in an album,” he said. But Rory, who’d fished it out of the tip before they left, didn’t answer.

The door closed with relief behind him. Rory took out the film and straightened the long folded crease where he’d sat on it. He walked back to the projector and tried poking the end into various ports and entries. He felt his way, fingertips fumbling, too big, too padded. He didn’t notice as the window darkened, and the screen no longer watched him. From below, the sounds of washing up ceased, Charles’s voice subsided into monosyllables. Doors closed, footsteps trod the stairs. He stood quietly. Held still until they turned into his parent’s bedroom and the door closed. Then he carried on. To his straining eyes it was all still unreadable. Finally they ached too much so he closed them, and let his fingers find the way. Though numb and worn by now, all of a sudden they found some kind of a pattern, some slots to feed it through, some ratchets to hold onto, felt out a kind of river course through a desert, some kind of topography. A blind road swam up out of it, a kind of coded journey that frustratingly, only his dulled fingers could read. And then to his surprise he realized that he had threaded it all through in some kind of way, and now he’d run out of film. He opened his eyes,

and looked straight into the sightless eye of the bulb, but his fingers found a fat power lead, that exactly reached a plug in the floor. Putting it all together, he flicked the switch.

The projector rumbled into motion, the bulb animated the mute screen outside. Dazzled by the glare, Rory leaped for the switch and it subsided. He stared at the door. Everything was quiet.

He breathed again. Jabbed it on again, but kept his foot close by. On the screen, a Western hero edged around a rock high above a river in a canyon, glancing up nervously at something out of shot above him. His boot dislodged a stone which rolled down a loose slope, picking up momentum, bouncing and setting off small gravel landslides that quickly grew bigger. The projector clattered and Rory jumped, the hero slid sideways down off the screen, white punched holes slid after him and then the screen was blinding white again. Rory kicked it off again and all was dark.

In the room that had once been the office, overlooking the back paddocks, Charles and Sarah slept. There was a faint flicker and glow through the curtains, like distant sheet lightning.

On the road outside, an old Ford Escort swerved, braked. An old man watched the hero fall, stared up at the screen as it went from white to dark. Then he climbed out and stood watching, smoking, looking over at the projection room.

Rory, threading the film again in the dark room, saw the headlights picking out the fence and the long restless grass of the road verge. He stopped, sat in the dark, watched the old man smoke, watched him stub out the stompie, get back in the car and drive off.

***

The fatigue of drought, footsore glare and tired air, at closing time on back to school Saturday. In the window of Jet, a chipped mannequin with ripples of flesh coloured Princess Di hair held the hand of a little girl. The child, with built in plaits, a real school pinafore and painted on black shoes, looked disturbingly familiar. Rory realized he and Sarah had just walked past her twin sister, standing with a leg brace on the old chipped Polio charity box pedestal, on the way out of the bank. On her own. No school uniform.

Rory, back to the door, stared at the window, though there was no detail he didn't know by now. He felt the movement of people leaving with shopping bags, their eyes on him and Sarah. The bakkie baked behind them, and over the road, outside the bank, Charles wouldn't let the man in the suit go back in. He checked the passing crowd for eavesdroppers, then leaned in and gave the manager one of his famous racing tips. The manager stiffened and turned. Charles grabbed his hand one last time, then walked back over the road to their side, smiling a little too confidently.

"You're backing a winner!" he said as they drove off, taking up more than his usual share of the front seat, patting his pocket, nodding and waving at people he didn't know. Rory watched the mannequins shrink until a laser flash of sun blanked out the window. He stared out of his window and when they got to the Chinese shop he said "Stop. Maybe they have uniforms here."

Charles sighed, "I'm in a hurry, Rory!"

"You can drop me, I'll walk home."

Charles pulled onto the verge in boiling dust, and peered through the car window at the shop as Rory got out.

"Cheap Chinese junk," he said, sliding forward and trying to see in the door.

Rory kept pace with the bakkie. "Anything is better than nothing!"

Stones cracked and spat from the tyres as Charles accelerated back onto the tar, leaving Rory behind.

Rory stepped up onto the veranda and stood outside the shop door. From here you could see that what looked like a narrow house-like shop front pulled a longer building than you'd expect behind it. And the windows at the back had curtains that were drawn. He became aware that people were parting around him like a rock in a stream as they headed for the door, and that a bell rang at every close and open. He tacked on behind a labourer in overalls and a woman with a swirling floral acreage in rose pink and orange, but the bell still rang just for him as he entered.

A Chinese man about his father's age, dressed in an open necked short sleeved shirt and chinos, looked up sharply as he walked in. He had a lined face and a long nervous neck that looked like it swivelled around a lot, as if he needed to see everything around him all the time. Rory looked around, wondering where the threat was, what was the constant worry that required never-ending vigilance.

He saw cold drink fridges, racks of sweets and chips, a wall of white bread. Deeper in, folded elephant-grey blankets with raw edges and a row of shining paraffin lamps, glass and glitter, a fringe of wick tongues lapping over the shelf, each stitched down the middle with a dotted red thread. Bales of lucerne-green farm workers' overalls and towers of empty plastic buckets. Bundled Lighthouse candles and unwrapped bars of murky green Sunlight soap. A scarred wooden counter crowded with jars of single wrapped sweets, racing form leaflets and grey chip-wrapping paper. In a glass fronted cabinet below the till, Lennon Rooilaventaal and Jamaikagemmer packed in tight with Chinese herbal remedies and mini packs of Disprin. There was a Chinese woman watching him from behind the counter, and she had a similar expression but it seemed more habit than nature. Underneath he thought he saw a face that had the ability to smile, to laugh. When his eyes met hers, however, she went wooden.

A door at the back opened and he caught a glimpse of a pine kitchen chair with a small red satin cushion on it, then the Chinese girl he realized he'd been waiting for closed it behind her, and stood in front of him. She smiled, looked at him square on, full faced. He saw laughter in her face, undimmed, and he couldn't take his eyes off her. Her hair was short in that casual way that looks like it's not thinking, but it stroked her neck like a caressing hand. Her father

spoke a single word in Chinese and though Rory didn't know what he meant, he could hear the watching in his voice. She slipped past him to another customer, eyes sparkling, and as she went by, she turned her cheeky mouth down and raised her eyebrows, a shared joke.

The customer was an old white man, outdoor weathered like a farmer but lacking the farmer's purposeful impatience. And a farmer without purpose is --- what? Some parts of him were faded, others burned dark by the sun. His hair, a little long, was almost colourless and so were his eyes and his khaki shirt and shorts. Under them, his arms and legs were tanned dark brown. When he moved, he moved like a much younger man, someone fit and tough. Rory could imagine him walking behind a herd of cows, not his own, or calmly tracking a lion in the bush.

The Chinese girl greeted him like she knew him, and he said her name, Li. Rory ducked into a row of clothing he hadn't seen till that moment, felt clothing brush cool against his hot face. He closed his eyes in this small dark refuge, breathed in the new clothes smell. He just needed a minute. Then a price tag on a white school shirt swung past his face, and it said R25. He checked the label with fumbling fingers, unhooked the hanger, and leafed down the rail to trousers, did a mental sum, counted on to a blue blazer. When he came back out to meet her father's gaze, he was a customer.

"I want to come back later to pay for this, will you keep it?"

The girl said a few rapid words to her father, who nodded.

"Come back before school starts!" Rory hadn't expected her to speak to him. Her father's face tightened again.

"I'll be back long before that!" She smiled and so did the old man she was serving, and Rory wished he had another rail of clothing nearby to douse his pink face in. When the old man stepped forward and spoke he turned to him with relief at the distraction.

"Do I know you? Are you from around here?" He spoke English too well to be a farmer.

Rory shook his head

“I’m sorry to stare but you remind me of someone from long ago. My name is Ouboet. I used to screen the movies at the drive-in before it closed.”

“That’s where we’re living!”

“What’s your name?”

When Rory told him he said, “Gibbons. I didn’t think that family would come back. What is your father’s name?”

“Charles.”

The old man stopped smiling and screwed his eyes against the smoke from the cigarette he wished he was smoking. In that moment Rory recognized him from the road last night. The bell rang five times in a row like an insistent alarm, and a bakkieload of workers swirled in between them. Li turned to help them and the old man, pushed backwards, raised his hand and left.

***

Colic season. The end of the grass. Summer coming everywhere except from above, where great wet columns built up in the air, but never came down. A strangely desperate time, warm but waiting. Behind the house Sarah’s garden, watered daily, grew. Watching from beyond the back fence, dusty acacias with chocolate stems hung creamy fingers of honey smelling blossom, but there was no green. Bees and wasps clambered around the mouths of dripping taps, weavers and blue waxbills jostled on the green stained grass beards that hung below them, and after they had bickered their way into trees in the evening, Rory sometimes saw the pinky red glow of the sunset through a hare’s silent ears as it took its turn. He imagined it out waiting in the paddock edges all day, flat to the ground as if ducking dive-bombing kiewietjies, ears in a fold flat to its back, all its panting in the quivering petals of its nostrils.

In the middle of the paddock a sprinkler turned, greening a great round plate of grass. All around it, the hairline of yellow veld grass had receded to the edges, pushed up against the new wooden fencing, still golden like thatch, leaving nibbled down spiky roots and pools of sand. The new stallion, ears flat back, harried his mares through it in welling dust, sounding out the dimensions of his new province through their pregnant bellies.

"They'll settle," Charles said, slapping his riding crop nervously against the side of his leg. "Perhaps we should separate him from the mares."

He tapped the crop against the newly built paddock fencing, which felt solid and safe, and was rounded at the corners to protect the foals that were coming. He bit his lip, prodded the sand beneath him.

Eeufees's inspection complete, he fanned his tail and arched his neck and bucked and leaped, turning his final circuit into a joyride, and Charles laughed, "Got the wind up you!"

Eeufees eyed him and dropped into a floaty trot, tail up like a flag, nostrils wide and snorting. Then he stopped in the middle of the green, sneezed the dust out of his nose, and started tearing at the grass like he meant business. The mares watched him in a bunch from the yellow outskirts, beyond the green core. After a while they relaxed their spines and lowered their necks, breathed out deeply, sniffed at the grass where they were, where it smelled of thatch, then wandered over to the edge of the green plate, dropped their heads and grazed.

Charles smiled. "She's due in December," he said, pointing with the crop to the closest of them, a chestnut mare. "The others, late summer. As soon as Nandi shows signs of coming into season I want him to cover her too. Watch her."

Rory nodded. She'd settled since being out of training and off the racing diet that threw her out so badly. She'd never be a quiet horse but it would be easier to tell now.

Snyman rode past on the other side of the fence and stopped to look at the new horses. His horse snorted and raised his upper lip, tasting the air. Snyman raised his whip in greeting, and Charles waved back at him, smiling. Snyman nodded and rode off.

"Of course there's still so much to be done to turn this into a proper stud farm." Charles looked around, swivelling on his heel and swinging the crop. "Proper big loose boxes for the mothers and foals, for one thing." He looked around. The waves of yellow had been cut up and parcelled out satisfyingly, and the ocean waves of grass were dead now, flattened and trodden into dull stubble.

"But at least we're getting somewhere."

"Dad? What made you come here?"

"I told you, twenty acres of decent land." Slapping his palm with the crop now.

"But why here? This town?"

"The family came from here. Ages ago. I still know a few people. That's how I heard about this place."

"Do you know the old drive-in projectionist?"

"Oh, him. Crazy old guy, there's always one or two hanging around places like this. I would stay away."

Charles slapped his palm hard, then closed his fist around the flap at the end of the crop and walked off.

***

Rory felt invisible as he tucked in behind a group of kids in blue uniforms and satchels, horsing around and chasing each other towards the school gates at the end of the road. You knew you were there when you walked under the enormous hoarding divided into dozens of smaller adverts for Spar and websites for R1000 and plumbers and dating sites. When he first saw it, he'd thought it was the entrance to a mini factory site like in the hoarding cities you saw from the freeway leaving Joburg, but now he knew better. As you walked through you saw that behind it was the usual double story brick and board school building, much the same as the one he used to go to, the kind where the toilets smelled of chemicals that burned your nostrils. The smell and taste somehow got into the water too, when you drank at the ranks of fountains at the scuffed edge of the brown playground, under the syringa trees dropping watered down mauve-grey flowers on top of last season's yellow fruits, squashed in the dust.

Once they'd settled, the other kids started to notice him, so he leaned on an orange brick windowsill at the top of the steps outside the main door where he could smell the institutional floor polish, and kicked the wall behind him. From here he could see the playground, with a group of kids his age fooling around close by. And the gate.

Li walked in alone, in front of two whispering girls. She swung her bag and made some space and they dropped a little behind. She saw him, saw his uniform, stopped and smiled, and said: "First day!"

"Ja." Rory glanced at the boys who were now doing kung fu moves and giggling, and rolled his eyes. "Really mature."

He shifted over so there was space for her to sit, and she did, though she was so close now that Rory looked ahead of him as they spoke. "Where did you learn English?"

"At school in China," she shrugged.

"It's good."

"It will get better here!"

The kung fu guys had drifted closer in a series of lunges, “ha so’s” and karate kicks. One of them, the biggest, wearing the tattiest uniform, did a few wild kicks that showed how he’d stone-kicked all the black off the toes of his shoes, and said “Kung fu panda! Haaya ha!” which amused his friends tremendously.

Li ignored him.

He came up the steps towards her and jabbed towards her face. “Haa! Ha!”

“Hey!” Rory stood up and suddenly he was eye to eye with him. So close he could see the pink edges of his pimples. The boy stopped with his arms arranged ha so in front of him, and then rearranged them into an easily interpreted boxing pose. For a moment the best Rory could do was not step backwards, and before he had his balance properly, he felt movement beside him as Li stepped towards the boy, swinging her school bag again. The boy stepped back; half fell down the steps and was suddenly at the bottom looking astonished as her finger advanced towards his face. But instead she flicked her nails against the strap of his bag where it squashed into his big shoulder.

“Same as mine,” she said. “Where did you get it? My parent’s shop! R49.99 not R79.99 like Jet! So why do you say rude things about the Chinese?”

The mob went quiet and they shifted their bags behind their backs as the boy melted back into them.

“Losers!”

Li tossed her head and sauntered up the steps, where Rory shifted again for her on the window ledge, about to say something, he didn’t know what, anything, but before he could think up a word she’d swept up her bag and, with a cheeky and challenging smile, marched past him through the door. He tried to shift along imperceptibly as if the gap on the sill wasn’t really there. She turned on the threshold and did a little mini kung fu move with her arms that only he could see, winked, and vanished inside.

Only then did the bell ring.

***

In the midday glare almost nothing moved. Just the tails of the horses as they stood under their new shade cloth sun shelters, whisking flies with no conviction. The sprinkler pulsed like a metronome. And from the reserve, there was a chestnut flicker as the herd of springbok lined up along the fence stared at the green, shifting in their deepening dust bowl, throwing a handful more dust into the haze above them. And the thud, thud, thud of nails hammering into wood sounded dull, hadn't the energy to travel through the thick dry air. Then the thud turned into a ringing clang as Charles hammered into the metal sheeting of the new stalls, built into the base of the drive-in screen. Rory ran up the drive, swinging his school bag, already unbuttoning the top button of his new school shirt.

Charles yelled, "Hurry up! What took you so long?"

Rory took in the work he and Paulus had done that morning, counted the stalls they were almost finished building. A big one for foaling mares. Enough normal size ones for the other horses. More than enough. There was one left over.

Paulus saw him counting. Rory met his eyes, an idea swimming out of the dust of the work.

***

In the back bedroom, sheet lightning flickered, stirring Charles half awake out of a rainy dream with a grunt of approval, and then he slept on.

In the projection room, Rory was nowhere again. The bulb shone the great screen alive but it had nothing to say. His fingers wouldn't listen to him anymore. They slipped and felt like thick flippers, like great flapping asbestos gloves trying to thread a needle. The film had become more slippery and somehow also more bouncy, snapping back when he tried to double it over into a slot. He knew there was no point getting frustrated, it would only get worse. From between the speaker poles came the haunting call of the dikkop, no, it was an owl this time, the dikkops had fallen silent long ago. He tried closing his eyes to feel his way through the steps of the projector again, trying to stop wishing he'd paid more attention to the code he'd stumbled on last time. But it was gone.

Ouboet ran his car onto the verge, following the tracks he'd made last time, the grass still bent, the tracks still there, already the beginnings of two parallel paths. The land remembered. He got out, and leaned his arm along the open door. Lit a cigarette and thought. The screen was lit though he was standing behind and underneath it – he knew from the spray of light out from the edges, and the circus troupe of moths that spun slowly in the columns of light that shone through the squares where panels had fallen off.

Frowning, he watched Rory in the lit room that floated above the darkness.

A strangely sleepwalking child, especially for someone he thought he knew. At odds with his face, the kind that looked made for cheek and pranks, the kind that used spark to camouflage the dreamy gentleness in his eyes. The kind who would at this age be pulling back from his mother, after the impish golden blonde beauty of the little boy began to firm and lengthen into the still-golden beauty of youth, and the dancing eyes still into dreamy thoughts and depths. Just like the other one. Ouboet bet he spent his days covering it. But it was all muffled, somehow, and sad. He sighed and closed the dicky door behind him.

The sound of a car door outside on the road made Rory open his eyes again. The same car, headlights shining into the grass. The same man, stubbing out his cigarette. This time Ouboet turned off his headlights and closed the door, carefully. He looked up at the window, and Rory saw by how he did it that he had been watching for a while. Then he walked slowly towards the gate where he waited for Rory to join him.

“You need to know what you’re doing,” he said. “It’s not like a DVD machine!”

“I know that!” All Rory’s frustration came out.

“On top of that, it’s a collector’s piece, you know that?”

“My dad wants to get rid of it.”

Ouboet winced. Looked up at the window.

“Would you show me how to use it?”

He nodded, dropped the cigarette under his heel and they walked to the house. Rory turned to him as they approached the front door, but Ouboet nodded. He didn’t need to be told. They went up the stairs in silence. As Rory closed the door behind them and relaxed, Ouboet was already greeting his old projector with a proprietary pat. He looked over at Rory with a question in his smile.

“It’s okay,” said Rory, “so long as we talk softly.”

“I used to come and check on it when this place was empty. But it’s been a while.”

He picked up the battered piece of film and started to lead Rory through the maze.

“Start here, okay? You won’t see one of these too often. I’d keep quiet about it. Strangers used to come from time to time. From overseas. Offering me a couple of hundred dollars for it, thinking that a funny old man in Africa wouldn’t know what it was worth. No, not there.” Ouboet watched closely. “Good. Now let’s try with a longer bit. I see you found all my old off cuts. That’s better, now thread it through and let’s see.”

This time the machine drummed in a purr from deep in its chest. Out in the badlands, a riderless horse appeared on the horizon and galloped towards them. It stopped and nuzzled a wounded man leaning on a rock. The man spoke to it.

“Pity we don’t have sound anymore, though those speakers were bad!”

But Rory wasn't listening. He was staring at the horse on the screen. He glanced at the towel-draped photo. Feeling Ouboet's eyes on him, he turned back to the machine.

"How did a place like this get such a good machine?"

"This used to be quite a town, you know. And this place was at the centre of it. Except for one weekend a year when everyone from miles around was at the showgrounds other side of town for the agricultural show. But the rest of the year, everyone came here."

He walked over to the window, leaned against the window frame, looked out at the emptiness outside.

"View's changed a bit," he said. "On hot nights like this, people used to come out here and spread blankets in front of their cars and eat sandwiches and kuier. I would look down and see cigarette smoke rising from in front of the bonnets. Courting couples further back, leaning against the sides of the building, slipping shots of brandy into their coke tins. Further forward, families, little kids running all over the show in their pyjamas. People used to braai. Chops. Boerie rolls. Beers. The smoke would drift up in front of the screen. The men would get loud, like after rugby. There would be a family movie first, then more of a skiet and donder after the kids went to sleep in the back of the bakkies. I can still smell those braais. Careful! It's about to end. On the big reels you have cue marks, which you have to be careful not to miss. Most of this job is watching and timing."

"What happened? Why did it close?"

"What happened to all the small towns? The money moved to the cities and the people moved there after it. Your family included. Although for them it was a bit different."

"Why?"

"Well of course, after the tragedy."

"What?"

Ouboet's face became very grave and he stood up suddenly, started fussing around closing down the machine. "If you don't know then I shouldn't have said. I must go now, it's very late."

As he left, he turned for a moment. "If you like movies, come over to my place one day after school. I'm putting together a documentary. I have a lot of old footage from when I used to film local events. If it's not too boring, you can come help. That new Chinese girl, Li, she can show you the way.

Rory smiled. It was good to see.

***

There was a glow behind him, in the east, as he picked his way along the old wide road to Bakerville. The months, too many months, without rain had stiffened the grass in his headlights, yet softened the road beneath him. At this time of night, the world belonged to the hares and the owls, and a pair of courting hares stood rigid, haloed in the headlights. He let the car slow as he waited for them to panic and run practically under him before they sorted out their startled dazzlement and got off the road. He caught a glimpse of them as he passed, crouched on the sparse verge between the corpses of grass, the frayed, the bent, the strawlike stalks poking up into the night like principles whose meaning has long been forgotten.

The light was coming too fast. He eased under the sagging shadecloth and watched the colour fade up the corrugated iron walls of the house. He had a sour feeling in his stomach, the hungover resentment of the insomniac against the too-bright cheery day. A dry headache in the front of his forehead, too many cigarettes and not enough sleep. He left the car ticking in the chicken wire and corrugated iron carport and went inside, closing the door on the dawn. He wasn't ready for it yet, but there was no point trying to sleep now. So, to ward off the

splinters of light that came through the cracks in his curtains now that he no longer kept alcohol in the house, he chose coffee and film.

After an hour or two during which tractors and drum majorettes, centenaries and cadets, school fetes, cinnamon pancakes and koeksisters had failed to work their usual soothing magic, or even to numb through repetition, he stopped. A curl of film in his bone-thin hand, he looked up at the window, through which the sun stared, not much dimmed by the closed curtain.

He knew where he'd been all this time. After 1979 came *ET* and the terrorist attacks on Sasol. In the year he married Karla, he screened *The Killing Fields*. War movies were always popular. An old man to marry such a young woman, he couldn't believe he was what she wanted, and never asked for more. But she did, and when he was tiring of Vietnam movies, she was starting on her trips to the doctor, the ones that made him feel guilty, because of course he knew it had to be him. The week *Platoon* opened, he'd become accustomed to spending his days in Dr. Gey van Pitius's waiting rooms with *Huisgenoots* that were even further behind the times than his movies.

At night she watched with him in the projection room and he brought her coffee in the long intervals between reel changes, and he closed the window to shut out the movie noise and tried to talk to her. He told her it didn't matter, because it didn't. But she stared at his moving mouth as if trying to lip read, as if the sound wasn't working, and he saw that she couldn't hear, that while he had so much, she did not feel the same way. And he could not be everything to her. Then came *Rain Man*, not a popular movie, and he was starting to know there was something wrong. The following year came the Eugene Terreblanche-Jani Allan story, to make a complete mockery of men and women. By this time the trips were longer, to Klerksdorp, and she was getting paler and quieter.

The only day he'd ever been late for a screening was a Saturday night in the winter of 1989. At this time of year, night came dishearteningly early and though it was not even six when he left the hospital in Klerksdorp, soon it was pitch black and the road was a relentless interrogation of oncoming lights. It seemed wrong to be heading this way, towards home,

when at dawn tomorrow she was leaving Klerksdorp in an ambulance headed in the other direction. But it was Saturday, the big night of the week, the night everyone who was going anywhere came to the drive-in, and on top of it, it was a long-awaited new movie. He knew that even the grumblers who had sworn to boycott the drive-in after *Rain Man* would be there.

When he drove in, the place was full. He climbed the tarred rollers, meeting the wave where there was a gap between bakkies and blankets, clots of drinking men and teenagers sharing puffy sleeping bags. Coming down the back of them, he tried not to drive over the empty bottles already rolling in the troughs, and kept an eye out for the little children who would be sound asleep before the opening credits were over, but for now were still running around, overtired and not looking where they were going.

Up in the projection room, he quickly threaded the thin reel of local adverts, and when the crowd heard the familiar music from *African Mirror* they started to settle. He now had a few minutes in hand. He wheeled the great wagon wheels of the feature into position. By the time the African Mirror was over, he was back in his rhythm. Fresh film, fresh images, no kinks or scratches yet, did not submit so well to being tied up in the innards of the machine. It tended to spring back at you, but he kept a firm hand on it, and within minutes the new feature was running, to cheers from the crowd outside. He checked that the smaller sound reel was properly in synch by opening the window and letting the sound in – when it was closed you had to lip read. Then he sat down, lit a cigarette and let his hands start trembling. He faced the screen, not watching the movie.

He saw wheeled trolleys rattling over linoleum floors, past walls painted halfway up in pale green, scuffed as if by bicycle tyres at the corners where they banged into the too-tight turn. He saw plastic tubing, miles of it, and the untied end of a hospital gown that he'd tugged up and retied at the back of a tired thin neck, stuck with feathery hair.

He saw a tin can fly up at the screen, which was showing the interior of a building all in red and black swastikas. Nazi interior design, much use of flags.

He saw worn sheets sprigged with hospital crests. He saw skin like putty into which his rubbing fingers sank without tone, without even the spring of the film that pushed back against the world, against the things that could happen.

On the screen, Danny Glover played it not quite straight against a gaping white man with black hair.

Curtains thin as sheets closed in a ripple around the hospital bed. Then they settled and were still.

Now it was bottles they were hurling at the screen. He walked over to the window and looked down. The usual drunks were more animated than usual. He opened the window and heard “Joe Moor” booming out of the speakers on all those poles, lacing the sound together, lacing the cars together, with their occupants’ derisive laughter, booing.

It was hard to sort out the crazy things going on, but he gathered Hollywood had just turned Afrikaners into international idiots.

When the curtains opened, the bed was gone and there was just a gap in the row of sleeping people.

The next day he was up in the dark again, to drive to Klerksdorp and from there, to Johannesburg. To the hospital where, on a clear day, you could see all the way to the Voortrekker Monument.

Over the next two weeks, everyone in Lichtenburg came to laugh at *Lethal Weapon 2* and “Joe Moor” was repeated, laughing, in the streets. And Ouboet drove to Johannesburg most mornings, back in time for the show. He was so damn tired that he forgot what the joke was, the German accents or the body, twisting on the bed. The Dutch character names or the idea of the temple of the body. The frailty with which human dignity rested on a few millimeters of film or a thin sheet. The red swastika flags or this flattened blue cotton sheet, the thinness of it, the thinness of this worn-soft sheet. The way cotton is softest just before it falls apart in your hands.

The first crack of the roof from the sun brought him back. He realized he'd been rubbing the scrap of film between finger and thumb. But film did not soften with friction, and the images did not blur. Not that way. He put it aside.

It was a long time ago and now his life was on a perpetual loop, layering images over and over each other. In the years after that, he'd screened *Die Hard* and *Pretty Woman*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Ghost*. Without a murmur from the war and action movie brigade, who seemed to have lost interest and let their kids come anyway. The tacky Afrikaner villain was now an international movie cliché. Back home, his movie distributors discussed the particular quirk of the South African audience, who unaccountably would not accept their portrayal by foreigners.

In 1994, like everyone, he'd queued for the end of one outworn world with farmers and farm workers and felt as quietly excited as the one group, as worried about what was coming as the other. What he didn't expect was for the farmers to move to Centurion to sell life insurance, leaving their workers to move into the location in town. He didn't expect the audiences to thin, and thin, with more and more speaker poles pacing out the empty spaces between each car. But it had happened nevertheless.

Even in the city there were no jobs like this anymore, and he had even heard that they were trying to automate movies completely so there would be no more projectionists. So here he still was, still filling the gaps in his life with film. And all this time it seemed that in spite of his early promise, Charles had not been destroying himself. Like a normal person, he'd made a life, married, had children. More of a life than Ouboet had succeeded in building. And produced a nice boy. Hauntingly like the other one.

Ouboet sighed and turned back to his film. Little Voortrekkers in brown uniforms with yellow neckscarves, solemn, important, on the Day of the Vow. During the ascendancy of Terreblanche, just down the road in Ventersdorp. These days it was easy to forget how popular he had been. Before he fell off his horse. Before he half killed a petrol pump attendant and then got killed himself. In the days when he was putting the Battle of Blood River back where it belonged, a simple puzzle piece in the simple flat puzzle of this country. Such certainty. Terreblanche had even parked an ox wagon on his verandah, like a bicycle, ready to ride.

Why were the people who had no future to offer the most emphatic, the most certain? Was that why Charles had been blessed while Karla lay on a hospital bed and Ouboet walked the corridors before going home to try and paper over the images with film?

He did not open the curtains all that day. The roof cracked with regular gunshots as the iron heated up and then cooled down again.

***

Li was waiting for Rory at the school gate. To begin with they walked as if going home, but just outside town Li turned off the road and onto a path through the veld. Once it had split into three, Rory chose the outside one and ran up so he was next to her. When they parted around a crouching grey ant heap, he jumped it and overtook her, and she laughed, and ran to catch up. Where they merged back into one to squeeze between a donga and a fence post, after a giggling jostle, Rory won, but seconds later she sprinted past him on a new path. They raced to cross ahead of one another as the paths wove and unwove and as she brushed past him, he took his eyes off the path for a moment and promptly tripped, took comic giant steps through trackless veld and just managed not to fall.

"I surrender!" He raised his hands as if crossing a finish line.

She shook her fist to the roaring crowds of grass and they slowed to a walk.

A woman sailed past, cutting through the grass, made taller by a box balanced on her head with a five litre plastic jug of cooking oil, oranges bagged in plastic orange string, and topped by a tray of eggs propped at 45 degrees. Rory looked at the steep rows of eggs but they sat as steady as her expression. He looked at her arms but they did not float up from her sides.

On the horizon grass shook and as they got closer, old women with sickles balanced on their heads stood up to watch them, comment and chuckle. Then they bent to cut more

bundles of thatching grass, shake it, scrape it over a bit of wood with bent nails in it on the top of a fence pole in the middle of nowhere, then bind it with the same orange string as the oranges, the same string that baled the teff the horses ate, fixed halters and tied up stable doors to stop horses opening them. As they passed Rory picked up an armful of tied bundles and balanced it on his head, took a few steps before it slid over his face onto the ground, and, laughing at the woman who shouted and waved her sickle at them, they ran off.

A line of enormous bluegums rose up on the horizon, dwarfing a handful of scattered tiny old corrugated iron houses, and at the same time the veld around them changed, became pitted and lumpy in wheelbarrow sizes, almost the shape of unmarked graves in the veld, grown over with grass sometimes, more often gravel-bare and scantily weedy. The path swooped and dived through them, then hit a straight wide gravel road and suddenly they were walking amongst the pilgrim's rest houses. One had a sign - 'Diggers cottage' - and sweetpeas growing up the fence. Another had white plastic garden chairs stacked in its tiny porch, an old car resting down on its springs nearby. One small garden was a pen crowded with coloured cows, dwarfed by a single Eland-shaded Brahman bull, laconically chewing. But they were set far apart, and in the spaces in between were acres of gravelly earth. As they walked, a big herd of cows walked up a side road to meet them like any country road. But then a tiny, skinny person trotted by, teak stained, pick in hand, and as they passed they saw from the fluffy white hair that she was female, and white, and very old. From the porch with the white plastic chairs a tall bearded man watched them, raised a hand in a slow wave.

"It's here," said Li at a cottage with several rusted trestle tables outside the door, with rows and rows of rocks arranged in a grid pattern over them. Face alight and still panting after the run, Rory ducked inside. He felt like the Brahman bull. It was so tiny, so neat inside he could only do damage. A brown and yellow covered lounge suite with wide roads of flat wide wood curving up the arms. A dresser with Mazawatee tea tins, the old lady in her bonnet with the child on a stripy background. Cross-stitched Bible verses, old black and white photos that looked familiar, the same houses as these, but far more of them, with donkey carts in the wide, muddy road, and crowds of people. Family photos hanging from nails on the wavy corrugated

iron walls. In a corner, a painting, a portrait, of a kind-looking woman in her thirties, with a small polished table in front of it, a vase of fresh wildflowers on it, a candle.

At the dining room table sat Ouboet, working on some film and a complicated looking machine. All around him were reels and boxes. He smiled as they came in, gestured to them to sit down.

“Great house!” said Rory

“This is where the diamond rush happened. There are still a few diamonds which keep some of the older guys like me going. But not many people stayed on.” He gestured towards the photos on the wall. “Dreamers came with hopes of overnight riches. But most left with only losses. There’s a graveyard out the back, full of babies’ graves from 1928, 1930.”

“Why babies?”

“Tents and no plumbing in a good rainy season add up to cholera. The families packed their tents and moved on. If it wasn’t for the gravestones, you wouldn’t know they were there, those little graves left behind in the ground made hardly a dent.”

He looked over at Rory, and for a moment no-one spoke.

Li looked from one to the other. “The babies should be remembered. I will visit the babies.”

Ouboet nodded.

“This is my memory project, it’s a documentary of the town, I’ve spent many years on it, going through old footage and African Mirror inserts over the years. Remember African Mirror? No of course you wouldn’t, you’re too young. The locals would cheer when they saw their own town on African Mirror at the drive-in – your home now.”

“Did you know my father?”

“Yes, but only as a boy.”

“Why did you think he wouldn’t come back?”

“Nobody does,” Ouboet indicated the crowds in the photos.

“You said there was a tragedy.”

“You must ask your father about the family history. It’s not my place.”

Rory said nothing and Li looked from him to Ouboet.

“It’s getting dark.” Ouboet got up and lit a paraffin lamp, “I have to save the generator for the editing machine.”

Rory glanced out the window at the sunset reflecting off the building clouds.

“Will it rain?”

“Yes. But not today.”

They sat on in the pool of warm lamplight like they’d always been there.

5

A bowl of peaches

Sarah put the last of the early peaches Martie Snyman had brought around into a bowl on the table and stood for a moment to look at them. Fur-pelted and still warm from the sun, they glowed like children's faces above the collar of the pottery bowl that was the first thing she'd made in pottery class, back when brown and cream were elegant. She smiled and stroked their cheeks. Then looked around the room, nodded. There was enough space here for Auntie May's three display cabinets, and they were not in the way of the boot tramp from the glass front door to the Coke fridge and then to the kitchen. They were on the other side, the side that faced the paddocks. Inside each cabinet, everything was in its place. The bride and the flowergirl, the shepherdess and the bunnykins, all seemed to glow in the light and airy room, though they did seem more cramped in those cabinets now that there was so much more room than they'd ever had. Up close, you could see fine surface cracks in some of the older things, not from damage but from age.

The routine apocalypse of a thunderstorm was almost upon them. Listening to the thunder, her face became preoccupied and she glanced out of the window again. Outside, as expected, they were getting no further, and now the sky was blacker and the storm closer, and waves of dust were crashing around the fetlocks of the horses, and it really wasn't helping. Rory, and Paulus behind him, leaned into squalls of sweating shoulders and the swinging sterns of hindquarters, hands wrapped with ropes as they tried to steer the horses, position them. Charles was darting from Eeufees to Nandi and that wasn't helping either. As she watched, she saw Rory trying to shut it all out for himself and the mare, and she saw how, for a second, it worked, and Nandi started to listen to him and stop yawing from side to side. But then Charles would run at them again shouting and Nandi would again try and leap forward out of Rory's hands. Sarah couldn't hear Charles's words, but she didn't need to. He was swinging a twitch like a club, trying to grab Nandi's nose and feed it through the loop of orange string on the end.

He almost got it right, twirling the stick fast to tighten the loop, and Nandi twisted her head and lowered it, eyes rolling white, standing very still, but then Charles rushed it and she jumped, which must have hurt her, and it shook loose.

The phone rang and Sarah looked at it like an intruder, then walked over and picked it up. It was the man from K-voere, the persistent one, and she decided on an impulse she regretted immediately, to change her story.

“Hold on, he’s outside,” she said, laying the phone on its back on the polished side table, and walking outside biting her lip.

It was much colder outside, and darker, and shaky with thunder, and the sand stung her ankles. She had to get very close before they heard her over the wind.

“Can’t you take a message?” shouted Charles, but he jabbed the twitch at Rory. “You get her ready,” he said and headed for the house, swinging it by its loop of worn orange string. Rory gave her a quick nod then turned all his attention back to Nandi, with a sense of haste kept carefully in check.

Rory and Paulus moved fast, but calming couldn’t be rushed. Nevertheless, quite soon Nandi stood still again and Paulus walked Eeufees up again from behind. The stallion sniffed her and stuck his lip in the air, snorting. Then he leaned his head on her back, lay his neck along her spine, and though she quivered and sweated, she stood still, ears flicking. But as Eeufees leaned back on his hind legs and started to climb onto her, Charles came running at them, and the mare stiffened, braced her spine and shot forward again, this time right out of Rory’s hands. She galloped to the fence and called through it into the bush that welled with wind.

“Why didn’t you take the twitch?” Charles shouted, but Rory concentrated on running to catch the twisting, trailing rope. As fast as they’d come, the clouds were already moving off, the sky lightening. But in the dust, just a spat or two of rain, as if a damp dog had shaken itself. The smell of wet fur.

Paulus sighed. Beyond the fence the dustbowls were fleur de lis’ed with buck prints.

Charles turned, tight with anger, and walked back into the house, slapping his leg with the twitch. When he entered, Sarah was standing waiting, watching the door, her back to the table with the peaches.

Rory caught the whipping rope and calmed Nandi, who gave a great long sigh and then walked behind him obediently. Halfway to the stables, Rory looked towards the house which flashed bright in the sun, the dark clouds behind it.

"I must go," he said and handed Nandi's lead rope to Paulus.

He ran, fast, stopping just outside the front door to collect himself before he walked in.

***

The storm clouds followed Rory again as he walked back from school next day, but he ignored them.

"Where are you going?" said Charles as he walked past the new paddock gate.

"Just getting changed."

"There's no time, the rain is coming".

Rory dropped his school bag, glanced down at his new school shirt, and went to help. But when a drop of tarry black creosote flecked his school shirt, he ran for the house, undoing the buttons on his shirt, not waiting for what his father might say.

Charles turned back to his work but Paulus was edgy about something.

"What?" Charles paused, paintbrush in the air, sludge dripping down the handle.

Paulus glanced into the tree above their heads.

Charles felt something drop on his head, looked up. A monkey lounged on a branch above his head, eating a peach.

“Hey! Voetsek!”

An entire troop shook loose of the syringa trees and bounced towards the fence. In a moment they were gone leaving empty branches trampolining behind them. Tearing the gooey pip out of his hair, Charles ran for the house.

***

Inside, the day was almost as dark as night. The kitchen seemed very bright, its sinus-aching fluorescent lights blackening the sky outside the window. The washing machine roared and clanged next to Sarah as she sorted washing on the floor.

A drop of blood fell onto the clean white floor in front of her, and then another spattered onto a pile of clothes. She clucked. Looked up at the rows of wet biltong strung from the ceiling, sighed, why did it have to be the whites? and moved all the piles out of the way.

Someone shook her shoulder and she jumped. Rory was shouting at her – something about the living room - but she couldn’t hear what the matter was over the noise of the machine. On his white shirt, half unbuttoned, a clot of creosote radiated planetary rings of oily brown.

“Your shirt!”

“Not now!” He grabbed a mop and a broomstick and shoved the broomstick at her, pointed it towards the living room door. She ran out to the living room with the broomstick, glanced back at him when she reached it, but he wasn’t following.

He was staring at the blood on the floor. As she watched, he looked up slowly at the ceiling, not wanting to see. Then all the urgency in his body disappeared. He leaned back against the washing machine and propped the mop against it, staring upwards. The mop slid down and hit its head on the floor. Sarah closed her eyes, then turned towards the living room.

She stepped through into another world. The small table was lying like a beetle on its back, the phone spilt on the floor. The cushions she'd just plumped and placed point-down on the chairs lay everywhere, one with its tummy fluffing out. The cloth had been torn from the dining room table and the brown and cream bowl lay in puzzle pieces scattered on the floor. Half eaten peaches soaked into the cloth like whiskey stains. And one by one, a group of monkeys bounded towards the window, then changed course and sprang up onto the top of Auntie May's glass cabinet, the one with the yellow, some still holding peaches. It rocked, and some of the figures slid forward towards the doors. The monkeys watched her from their perch, eating. Peach juice dribbled down the glass.

"Get off that! Off!"

She ran at them with her broom but was scared to hit at them in case she knocked the cabinet over.

"Off! Help!"

Charles entered, swinging the twitch, stopped dead, swore, and ran towards them. One by one they dropped onto the windowsill and out of the window. They were all gone in a second, except for one youngster, too old for its mother's arms but desperate for them now. Overwhelmed with confusion and panic, it rushed along the window ledge from one side to the other, thinking it was trapped, running straight past the open window as if it wasn't there, then jumping up onto the top of the cabinet again, where it felt safer. As Charles got closer, it grimaced, cowering. Charles flapped his arms more wildly, but it seemed unable to move.

He looked at it for a moment and then an idea struck him, flaring in his eyes.

He upended the twitch so the loop dangled from the bottom without taking his eyes off the monkey, then raised it over his shoulder as he approached the cabinet again, this time cautiously, not wanting it to run. The reflection of the blunt club swam over the bunnykins family.

Sarah shouted, “No!”

“Dammit Sarah, I won’t break anything!”

“No -” she said again, not finding the words anymore than the monkey could find the window.

The monkey dropped its peach. It went over the lip of the cabinet and fell onto the floor where it rolled into a corner, wobbling where the little mouth had taken a bite already.

***

The meat dripped watery blood in patterns on the floor. Rory watched the dots connect and form pools in a row along the tiles. He thought of the fleur de lis prints in the empty dustbowls, of the twirling drops from the sprinkler.

The washing machine shuddered to silence at the end of its cycle, and the silence was like the dawn of an entirely new day in a new world. Trying to get his bearings, Rory heard Charles shouting from the living room. Then he heard Sarah shriek. He ran for the door.

In the living room all was still, just in the wrong position. The table still on its back. The cushion stuffing still spewing, but in freeze frame. Dribbles of murky peach juice running down the cabinet doors. His mother had her hands over her mouth and was waiting for something. His father stood holding the twitch like a club, about to bring it down over his head. The monkey was staring at him. The only thing that moved was the peach as it trembled to a halt.

Rory's arrival restarted the sequence. The monkey jumped away from this new threat, fell onto the windowsill and from there out of the window, and ran off towards the fence howling, the troop answering from beyond the fence. He was met halfway by a big male who was coming back for him, and who bounced aggressively a few paces towards the house before they ran off together.

Rory stared at Charles who slowly lowered the twitch, jabbed at him with it.

"See what happens when you don't put your foot down!"

Rory held his eyes. Said nothing. Charles raised his eyebrows and looked at Rory thoughtfully.

Sarah picked up the mortally wounded cushion, hugged it to her, and put the small table back on its feet, back the way it was supposed to look. Then she took a rag and started rubbing at the glass doors.

***

His fingers knew the way now and he could even keep his eyes open without feeling disorientated and losing his way. When it was all ready he waited a few moments before switching it on. Not only to delay the pleasure, but also to savour the journey that had got him this far. Then he turned it on, and watched the film like a train following its tracks, down from the heights of the enormous bicycle tyre sized reels, tuk tukking its way through the tunnels and over the loops, then past the glare of the bulb.

On the screen, the hero skirmished with the baddies, but it was only act two, not time for the big showdown, so they retreated without too much trouble. He rode the horse he'd cut out from a wild herd, a glowing copper palomino stallion. He'd known which one was the best, he'd known exactly how to choose. He always did.

In the next scene he was hunting.

"Not tonight!" muttered Rory, but he supposed he had to, living out in the hills above town, watching the town as he ate beef jerky and drank coffee off a fire. There was trouble below on the plain, ugly Mexican bandits threatened, and would return. The hero had a plan. He knew what to do. He must do – after all, he knew a good horse when he saw one. And he had to eat. So Rory waited. Through the crosshairs a deer grazed with a fawn. Seeing this, the hero lowered the gun, and Rory smiled. But then, before Rory could move, he swung it up again, and his finger tightened around the trigger. Rory jumped up and stood on the switch. The screen went dark and the machine vibrated into silence. But not before Rory had seen the deer look up, see what was coming, turn and run, but too late.

Rory tore the film off its tracks and jammed it in its box, threw it in the cupboard along with the rest. Fell backwards onto his bed and dug his knuckles in his eyes hard so the flares and spotlights behind his eyelids would erase the film in his head. Which they didn't, so he opened his eyes again, hoping to overprint them with the old familiar, which worked as he scanned the movie posters, the bookshelf, but snagged on the tented black gym towel on the top of the bookcase.

He touched its corner, started to lift it, and then dropped it again.

***

Rory stared at the path as he walked. You couldn't walk straight, you had to angle your feet to fit with the steep camber that led to a tiny eroded gully in the middle. When the slope got too deep you would walk alongside and start another path, and there were many such new beginnings all the way along. When he was little he used to run paths like these after rain, kicking the stream in the middle, sometimes imagining himself on a tiny leaf boat going down

the canyon, over rapids and waterfalls, swirling in circles in the quiet pools, looking out for danger from the cliffs above him. But there was no rain, and the canyon was dry.

Li looked back at him as he scuffed the ground, stared at his feet. She jumped in front of him and grinned, and he smiled back, but automatically. She hopped from one path to the other, forcing him to slow down or stop, and after she'd elbowed him right off the path, he started to laugh and fight his way back.

She stood blocking him, leaning back into him, he felt her hip and her warmth, and he tickled her, feeling her skin slide under his fingers, and this made her squirm and jump to the side, and he broke through and ran, "The winner!" but then she leaped in front of him again out of nowhere and stood again, head angled back listening, so he could see her ear as he crashed into her and they went flying, and halfway through twisting and wriggling out from underneath him, she stopped, and he stopped wrestling those skinny strong arms. They looked at each other and laughed. And he dropped his head onto her chest in mock exhaustion, and lay there for a moment in the camber, gently sloped and smelling of dust and girl and the paraffin and bread scent of the shop.

She shifted, her hip was digging into the hard ground, but he lay still, eyes closed.

"Hey!" she said but he felt the tiny weight of her tilted breast against his head and underneath his cheekbone the hardness of her breastbone started to give way. It started to give way and he wanted to give way with it. Roll down the slope to who knows where, just trust that he would find at the bottom a soft unexpected peace.

"Come on, get up!" she said but quite gently this time. He opened his eyes and looked over the small mound of her breast to the grass beyond. He leaned over and snapped off a piece of brittle grass.

"I have my instrument of torture," he said, running his fingers up the grass from maroon knuckle to narrow beige and yellow shaft. "Get ready to suffer!"

He brushed it along her collar bone and then down, and she took a quick breath.

Then something in the veld screen beyond caught his eye, a different pattern, and he reached out over her body and started to trace it with his piece of grass. When he saw what it was he dropped the grass. Sat up.

“What’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer. She turned over and looked behind her. Ran her fingers from a mielie pip on the ground, around a loop of faded orange string and up a braced thin stick, bent over like a spring. They had almost been lying right on top of it.

“What is it?”

“A snare.”

“What?”

“To catch a bird. Or a hare.”

“Hare?”

“Rabbit.”

“Aah! To catch food!”

Rory glared at her.

“What? To eat!”

Rory dropped back onto his back and stared at the sky. Li tickled him with the grass, down his collar bone and then up his neck, but he pushed her hand away. Li raised her eyebrows and sighed, leaned on her elbow, traced patterns in the dust and watched him out of the corner of her eye.

They were still for a long time, then Li caught a movement on the edge of her vision and turned her eyes towards it without turning her head. A bird like a chicken, speckled all the colours of the veld, each feather rimmed with grey, the centres chestnut brown, stepped into

their glade, not noticing them they were so still, completely focused on the mielie pip. It walked carefully towards it but Li could see that its thoughts were all on it. It dipped its head to peck and Li shouted “Shoo!”

Rory sat up as the bird whirred up into the air, clattering with alarm.

“What?”

He watched it flap heavily, coast, and sink into the grass a little distance away. Then he looked at Li in wonder. She shrugged, smiled.

“What’s it called?”

“What?”

“That bird. Like a chicken.”

“Francolin.”

“Francolin.” She nodded, smiled again. This time he smiled back.

They looked closely at the snare. All the same colours of the veld and the bird. Invisible from further than a foot or two away and even then, like blacksmith plover eggs, you had to be looking. Hard. And even then, it was just the slight bald patch in the grass that you had to look for, like with the eggs. A bald patch no different from those between the clumps of grass, and yet slightly, subtly altered. Rory knew he would never find it again once they walked on.

She untied the plastic string noose and handed it to him.

“Thank you.”

He held it between his fingers and looked through the loop. It could have been him who set this trap. The same orange string. He knew the peeling fronds of plastic, how they faded where they frayed. Halter string and teff string. Stable door tying string and twitch string. Noose string and trap string. He knew this trap, it was his whole life, in his bones like the grass and the horses. He wrapped it into a bundle and put it into his pocket.

***

Ouboet felt the difference between them as they worked together threading film through their fingers like string, but this kind was slippery, bouncy, snapping back at you with a story to tell. He smiled as he felt what was growing between them like a person, a presence.

"What are you smiling about?"

He shook his head as he sorted through his boxes of photographs. "Never you mind. Ah, here it is." A smiling farmer in the foreground, a small strong black handler in overalls in the background, ignoring the camera and concentrating on holding the great hefty bull, Supreme Champion Geyerspan Bonsmara bull Lichtenburg Agricultural Show 1981.

"That bull looks like he can't wait to get away and gore someone!"

Ouboet looked at him thoughtfully, nodded slowly.

"This box is a mess. I must put them in order. I've lost so much stuff, I have no idea what's happened to it all." He put a bundle of old photos on the table as he worked, and Rory flipped through a few. Stopped at one.

Three white men in khaki and bush hats, guns against shoulders, proudly posed in front of a pile of something with the curves of flesh but the chaos of a woodpile that reminded him of something he'd seen before. Looking closer Rory saw with the same lurch of his stomach he'd felt when his class had done the genocide, that it was a heap of dead animals. A hopeless tangle of limbs, out of which stared disembodied springbok faces.

In the background several black women in heavy dark Victorian dresses butchered the meat. One bulged with pregnancy.

"What? Oh, you've found the last of the great hunts."

"Great? How can you call them that!"

Ouboet leaned back in his chair and answered calmly. "Back then people thought the wildlife would last forever. The same mistake they made about the diamonds – the kind of mistake people are always making but never learning from."

Rory snorted. "That doesn't make it okay!"
Ouboet acknowledged it without words.

"I mean, look at this!" Rory took the string out of his pocket. "We found it on the way here, will it ever stop?"

Ouboet shook his head slowly. "Taking just what you need is a very different matter to this kind of slaughter." He threaded the sun-faded string noose between his swollen knuckles. "This is nature; something has to die for us to live. For something new to be born."

Rory stared at the circle of string. Glanced back at the photo, avoiding the foreground, he looked at the woman labouring at the butchery. She must have been so hot in that great cinema curtain of a dress, and heavily pregnant.

Ouboet turned back to the editing machine and Rory watched. Not the machine. Ouboet's face. Not such a very different face as his own father might wear in twenty years' time. With kinder wrinkles, though, and brighter eyes. And a completely different mouth. But essentially time was doing much the same thing to both of them. On the outside there was not much to indicate the difference.

Aware of his stare, Ouboet smiled at him, then turned back to the footage, where he saw something that made his smile fall right off his face like badly threaded film.

Ouboet glanced covertly at Rory as he reached for the off switch, but Rory had not missed anything.

"Wait!"

He looked at the screen. Ouboet sat back and let it play. He watched Rory's face with a strange expression.

On the screen, two teenage boys, brothers, sat on the top pole of a fence at the agricultural show, playfully shoving as if trying to push each other into the pen below. They were laughing, but from below an enormous bull watched them, snorting, its eyes cold and angry. From their checked shirts and waist high jeans it looked like something out of the 1980s. But one of the boys was a young Charles - and the other was Rory. Not a younger or older Rory – just plain Rory. Down to the smile and the green eyes, though the hairstyle was wrong. For a moment the camera lingered on his laughing face, on the tense way he glanced down into the pen below. This Rory was trying to pretend it was all just a joke, nothing but a joke, but on the face of this Charles was something else, unconvincingly covered over with a smile. Something that Rory saw often in his father's face, deeper than the wrinkles and the suntan, and recognizing this look made Rory wonder how he could ever have thought him similar looking to Ouboet.

Li gasped as she looked at the screen. "Rory!"

Ouboet glanced at the screen but there were no surprises there for him. He turned to watch Rory again. Then the camera cut away from the cattle shed and the swaying boys to families at the funfair with ice creams and candyfloss.

Rory and Li turned and looked at Ouboet.

Ouboet took a long time answering.

"He was your father's brother. His name was Robbie."

"Ouboet, I don't know what's going on. Please tell me."

He motioned Rory to silence. "You have to talk to your father."

Rory shook his head but Ouboet turned his back and started packing it all away. "That's enough. I'm tired."

***

Rory and Paulus set out with a wheelbarrow full of rubble to fill in the hole in the far paddock along the road, just before it narrowed to a point. The hole was at the base of an old tree stump. Some kind of old animal burrow among the roots, now collapsing in at the sides, getting dangerous. A wiry thorn bush almost covered it, and as they chopped its skinny branches away they saw something pale and square beyond the hole, propped up against the stump. A few more chops with the spade and they could see what it was.

It wasn't propped. It was dug in. A concrete tile. The kind that was used to pave yards and warehouses, the kind that wore through to the blue grey gravel in the middle. But this one had never been walked on. And letters had been carefully chipped into it.

Moagi Frans Keoepile

2 Jan 1963 – 27 July 1964

Die here hou hom

"He lived here," said Paulus.

"I don't know where he lived. Maybe."

"His name. His name means he lived here."

Rory looked around. The house was far away and from here it seemed to stare straight into its screen. Just behind them where they stood was the fence and the reserve. Just in front, a few steps away, the fence with the road just beyond it. A narrow strip of land, going nowhere. A silent and empty place, except when a lone vehicle rushed past. Seldom visited and then only by animals. A good place for a farm worker and his wife to bury their 19 month old baby boy. Rory could see how the father might have put a foot on the bottom strand of wire, in

a gap between the twisted barbs, and trodden it down so his wife could climb through. Then passed their little burden, perhaps in a small box, perhaps in a blanket, to waiting arms on the other side. And nobody would ever have known.

Rory looked back at the tree stump. The ground still sloped away from it the way it does from very old trees in the veld. This must have been a big tree once, maybe a wattle, it must have looked like it would mark this place forever. To those who knew what lay there.

Paulus saw him looking towards the road and he shook his head. “The family, they lived here,” he said.

“How do you know?”

Paulus looked at him. Bent and pulled a blackjack from the grave. “My brother, he is buried like this.”

“Where?”

“On a farm, when I was small. His grave, it is the same. But you must be careful.”

“Why?”

“If the boss sees you on his land, he will chase you away, and if he finds this,” he waved at the gravestone, “he will take it away.”

“Why doesn’t he leave it? It’s just a small baby.”

“He is scared people will take his land.”

Rory couldn’t picture the old owner of the drive-in. Would he have been a farmer, or more like one of the shopkeepers in town? But the shopkeepers lived in the neatly kept houses on the good side of town, lawns soggy with watering, or the scruffier houses on the other side of the vlei where the owners let their gardens go brown in winter. They had junk in their backyards, on that side of town, but it was still town. Out here it was neither suburbs nor farms, not until Snyman’s emphatic fence. And the people weren’t quite farmers, but they also

weren't townspeople. On his walk to school he saw ostriches and he walked past what looked like a stockyard, with lots of small wooden pens and a wooden sided ramp that led up to the sky and then stopped. He walked past a small warehouse with faded signs for seeds that seemed empty most of the time. He crossed the railway line, and then passed Li's shop, and then turned left at the garage, after which the verge stopped being veld and weeds, and became mown green kikuyu with jacarandas, pepper trees, willows. He could see how Snyman's farm was something to lose. He could see how these houses were something to lose. But in between, where he stood now, it was not so clear.

He looked back at the house. He could see the parents working here. The father climbing the tar waves with a big outdoor broom, sweeping up bottles and the brown paper bags the hamburgers came in, the mother cleaning the kitchen, frying the hamburgers and chips and then keeping them warm in long lost basins, the size of a baby's bath, that would once have fit into the holes in the bain maries. The owners must have known the child then, toddling around the servant's quarters. They must have known when he died. But they did not know where he was buried.

Perhaps right here, the father had chipped his baby's birth date and his death into this tile, under the strong blue-green limbs of a young wattle tree, sitting in the grassless shade. Just a few millimetres under the smooth cement surface he would have hit the gravelly interior of small grey blue stones and so that's how deep he went. Careful work, done without the chisel spalling circular shock waves as they hit the gravel. Or perhaps they had paid someone to do it properly. Clearly, his parents wanted a decent burial for him. Shade for the grave to soothe them, and the living solemnity of a tree. Such scruffy trees, but they could be trusted to survive winter fires. And they were often out on the fringes, away from the jacarandas and the silver oaks that make up a tamed garden.

And when their work was done, did they turn, spade in hand, and walk back to the servant's quarters behind the drive-in building? Francina in the kitchen and Daniel the gardener and groom. Perhaps the boss had given them R20 for the burial. And that had gone on the tile and paid for someone to chip the letters in, down to the stones.

There were still a few strands of the thorn bush attached to the stump, and after they filled the hole by unspoken agreement they drew them across the tile, then piled the cut branches in front of it. You wouldn't see it now unless you knew it was there.

***

They were fixing the back fence again today, though Rory couldn't see what you could do about the deepening holes underneath it. As Charles twisted wires back together with gritted-jaw pliers, Rory watched him. Charles hadn't changed that much. He had never developed a stomach, the cigarettes and the nerves, not to mention the trainer's life, had kept him as thin as he had been at sixteen. Though Rory thought he was the kind who would have stayed that way even behind a desk. He'd have been the kind of office worker you saw out on balconies sucking at cigarettes, looking morose, stubbing out his stompie in the half dead potted palms, the blinds snapping behind him. Wearing a suit that was just a bit too loose for him, narrow wrists poking out of the sleeves, like a man who felt his height, though Charles was no taller than average. His hair was greying but he still had it all, and it still had spring in it. Without combing in the morning, or exactly four weeks between barber visits, it would have been bushy. As long as Rory could remember he'd kept it this short, shorter than it had been on the screen. He hadn't changed much. His darting, preoccupied grey eyes, not at all. A bit paler perhaps – did eyes bleach in the sun?

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Then stop staring at me like that and hand me the other pliers."

Rory passed them over and saw his skin against his father's. Perhaps it wasn't the eyes that had lightened, perhaps it was Charles's skin that had darkened. Because on screen it had looked very much like Rory's did now. And Robbie's.

"Dad-"

Charles straightened and watched a little beige Telkom-type bakkie bouncing along the inside of the wildlife fence, slowing to allow the springbok to move off the track, away from the fence. They didn't go far, just into some acacia shade where they stood, flicking the flies away with those nervy little tails. The bakkie stopped when it was level with them, and when Charles saw that there were two black men in uniform inside, he bent back to his work with a cluck of his tongue.

Rory stared as they climbed out, slamming the doors behind them. There was an official looking badge on the driver's door. The engine ticked.

"Good morning!" said the driver, walking over to the fence.

"Morning," said Charles. They smiled at Rory and Rory smiled back.

"We are the local game wardens, and so we are also your neighbours!"

Charles had not straightened, and Rory saw him make a face at the word neighbours. The wardens exchanged a thoughtful glance but kept smiling.

"We patrol regularly (Charles raised his eyebrows) looking for poachers. Mostly snares and traps but suddenly we are finding signs of guns".

Charles straightened slowly, his face wooden.

"They are getting very cheeky, but don't worry, we will catch them!"

They glanced into the paddocks behind Charles, at the irrigated patch.

"You are aware of the water restrictions?"

"I have a borehole."

"Doesn't matter! The rules still apply."

Charles said nothing.

“Please check the regulations, and we will see you soon!”

The springbok flicked tails and ears, stamped bone thin legs.

6

For King and Empire

He had separated the great reels of the Westerns, *Red River* and *Hud* and *The Magnificent Seven* from the *Great Gatsby*, *Mean Streets*, *Far from Heaven* and some others he had never heard of but was going through anyway. Other than kinked ends that lolled out of the track of the reel and lay exposed in the dust of the cupboard, they looked fine. In the bottom corner of the cupboard was a stack of dusty magazines, and as he took them out he felt himself go hot and breathless at the same moment that he saw what kind of magazines they were.

Inside, the photos were so close up that if he hadn't seen the outside covers he would have been lost as to what was going on. Sometimes there were disembodied faces but they didn't help him orientate himself because they didn't connect in the usual ways. As it was, the heaving piles of flesh reminded him of Ouboet's great hunt photo, and the hot, dizzying arousal that had come from nowhere, went back into nowhere, just as fast, leaving him feeling weak and embarrassed.

He threw them back into the corner of the cupboard, then thought of Charles's face if he found them. Opening the long scratchy top lip of his school bag, he slid them in, between his maths book and his financial literacy book. He might get away with it for a bit, because they were about the same thickness as his school books, and anyway this was just for now. On his way to school on rubbish day he'd slide them into the jaws of one of the black wheelie bins sitting waiting for the rubbish truck on the mown verges, beneath the big syringa trees.

But rubbish day was only next Monday, and on Wednesday in financial literacy he slid one out by mistake, just for a moment, but George who looked so slow and stupid, saw it and whistled.

By break time, at the tap, he was surrounded by George and his friends. One of the water fountains was clogged by something and water dribbled out in a thin incontinent stream,

helplessly wetting a great sheet of bare and grubby ground beneath it. As Rory stood plugging the hole with his thumb till the water pushed up around it, George said “If you don’t give me that magazine after school I’ll make sure the headmaster hears about it.”

Outside the gates after the final bell rang, Rory laid the bag on its back and took care to slide just that one out, trying to attract as little attention as possible. But of course George started pointing and grinning and laughing with his crowd of friends, and people started to come over, and Rory cursed silently, knowing it would be all over school in five minutes’ time. Then it got even worse. Li walked by with one of her friends and he could tell from her face that she’d seen everything; and as she paused and stared at him in surprise, George called: “Hey, Kung fu! I’m going to fung kyu! Get ready, baby!” digging Rory in the ribs like one of his friends.

Rory shook off his arm and rushed to close his bag, and there was a bad moment as the whole pile started to slide out, so he had to slow down in case George saw, and by the time he’d looked up for Li, she was miles up the road, her friend Marina looking back and grinning nastily at him. So there was suddenly more need for delay than hurry. He stood by as George and his friends fought over the magazine like hyenas over a carcass and after a few minutes, their scuffle moved them off away from him. Rory took his time straightening the tops of the books, slowly closing the lip of the bag, until Li and Marina were out of sight.

***

Charles was pacing outside, rubbing his hands like a character in a movie pacing the platform at the train station in a fifties movie. Or maybe it was a Gatsby type of scene, earlier than that, and perhaps it was the corridor outside the maternity ward he was pacing, sharing cigarettes with other anxious fathers to be. To really look the part, he should have been wearing the kind of suit that men back then considered casual wear, and Rory could imagine him in it, knotted

tie leaving a triangle of skinny throat open, hat well back on his head, showing hair pomaded or macassared or brilcreemed or whatever that gooey stuff was.

He brightened and stiffened as Rory came to the door and looked out.

“He’s on his feet.”

“Great! Real little fighter!”

But Rory glanced behind him into the stable, looking worried. Eeufees’s first foal wobbled like a frail bridge table that had to be propped just so to stay upright, legs like cotton thread but with carved knees so enormous they could have been hips, and felted hips so wonky and sunken even his mother’s nosing and snuffing seemed to blow him about. Rory didn’t like the way he had his sheep’s tail clamped between his legs. He didn’t like the dullness to his coat or the tucked up stomach, or the way he seemed so unresponsive towards his mother, for all her eager attentions. Paulus stood with his hand hovering under that tight, strained belly.

“He’s weak.”

Charles was smoking now and he wrinkled his brow as he blew the smoke away from the door. “I’ll call the vet.”

“I think he just needs time with his mother.”

Charles was already heading for the phone.

When the vet left that evening, the stable was littered with tubes and plastic packaging. The baby was reeling and its mother was frantic to get back to him. Paulus was shaking his head but Rory just got on with it, putting her back in the stable the first moment he could. She blew and nickered deep and rich, and the baby held its head up to her breath, like she was an open window in a stuffy room. But though there was no wind, he still swayed.

Rory did what he could, knowing that leaving them undisturbed, untugged and untubed and unhandled and unexamined was what they really needed. So mostly what he did was look

in at them from outside the door, Paulus alongside. Both caught in that strange place of wanting to do something while knowing the best thing to do was nothing.

They waited like that a long time into the night.

In the darkness behind them the sprinklers spat in time.

Inside the house, Charles waited too, forgetting to eat his supper halfway through, and pacing about the room, turning things over in his hands, adjusting their positions. When he took out his black spectacle case and put on his reading glasses, then took out the personal goals notebook that was part of the Success Course two years ago, Sarah made sure to be especially quiet. But not because she needed to be.

At about ten o'clock she made him coffee the way he really liked it, and put it by his elbow with a lemon cream biscuit. He smiled when he saw the biscuit, and she left him in his soft spotlight of the standard lamp with the old fashioned candytwist stem.

Next morning the foal was doing okay. Sarah made breakfast in the kind of silence people keep when they want to stay in the dream of the night before. Rory came in from the stables and washed his arms down in the big stone sink in the same way, a kind of watching that was a holding, a waiting, without impatience. A waiting for something coming in with the tide that could not be hurried. They moved around each other in the kitchen on lapping waves that advanced and retreated.

Then Rory spoke. "I didn't know dad had a brother."

Sarah felt the tide suck out and frowned at him. He dropped his eyes but carried on anyway.

"Is it true?"

She nodded.

Her stomach felt choppy. She looked sadly at him but he pressed on. "You knew?"

“Only that he had a brother who died when he was young. I don’t know more than that, dad doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“He said the family came from here a long time ago but I didn’t know he meant himself too!”

“How do you know about it?”

“People here remember.”

“What people? He said to keep away, Rory, be careful. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Why won’t you help me? Why do you keep things from me?”

It was all ruined now, the waters a swelling, bulging upsurge from the deep.

“Rory, please!”

He sighed, pushed the rising words back down and waited for the usual rhythm to slowly cover it all again.

So the next hot glary Saturday when Rory was leaning against the bakkie waiting as usual for Charles, and when Ouboet happened to walk past at the same time as Charles came out of the bank looking angry, Rory was somehow not surprised when Charles recognized him, or when his look darkened further then, or when he looked away fast. Or when Ouboet ignored Rory and walked straight past him as he pushed himself off from the bakkie and started to smile. Or that when Sarah arrived with her skinny Checkers bag with the lemon creams’ red and white packaging sticking through the gaping armholes, Charles snapped at her for being late. She glanced at Rory who gave her the warning look she’d forgotten to check for first. Then Charles drove off too fast for such a hot late morning, attracting stares, and the waters closed over it all again.

Later that day after the racing results came in, Rory walked past his parent’s bedroom and saw Charles on the phone, form book and goals notebook open on his lap, orange Bic pen

in hand, laughing. Beyond him the dropping sun coming in at the door from Rory's room spotlighted the crocheted white cotton bedspread Sarah had bought from the Zimbabwean woman outside Pick n Pay, that was always draped over her private trunk. Its bashed metal corners poked out through the holes. The on purpose ones that were part of the pattern, and the ones where the cotton had snagged on the screws and the hinges and been sawed open by the years. Sarah sewed those ones up all the time, but they kept reopening.

***

That evening, when he found Charles dressing a burn on Sarah's hand in the kitchen like he would a cut on a horse, a half eaten lemon cream on the drying rack beside him, Rory made a decision. Turning around, he went back up the stairs and straight through his doorway and lifted the black gym towel off the photo of Gandhi. He folded it and shut it closed in a drawer, with some force. Then he took the remaining magazines out of his bag and flipped through them, weighed them in his hands, and checked the prices on the covers. Then he put them back, in one bunch, at the front of his case.

"I'll take them all" said George, as Rory had known he would. "What do you want for them?"

He reached for the flaps on Rory's school bag.

"Cash. On delivery." Rory put his case behind him.

"But I have to inspect them first!"

Rory shook his head. "You can do that when you bring the money tomorrow."

George frowned but Rory could see he wanted them. The first one had been doing the rounds at the toilets, R5 for five minutes. George was making R20 each breaktime.

"I'll let you look at them before you hand over the money."

Some smaller boys came running up to George, fighting over the ragged magazine. They had almost torn it in half. "Hay man, stop it!" George turned to them.

Rory took the opportunity to leave. The sports master was watching him; it was his week on playground duty. Li was watching him too. He couldn't think what to say to her so he avoided her. Which was easy as she seemed to be avoiding him too. Thank goodness by the end of the next day it would all be over.

When George sms'ed asking him if he could get more, he did not reply.

***

Later that week Ouboet was very quiet as they worked but he wouldn't say why. Li was relating the latest playground skandaal and he didn't sound surprised, or amused, or unamused, but he did shoot Rory a very hard look. Li watched both their faces but they were saying nothing. Later Ouboet warned her away from a box of photos, saying he didn't know what was in there, and things could turn up in the oddest places where they had no business being.

Rory wished they could see him later that night as he went through Charles's wallet and took out the business card that said "L. Van Driel, Livestock Dealer: best prices for horses, donkeys, mules, all livestock." Of course he couldn't imagine feeling able to invite them here, so it was just wishful thinking. But it would have been nice if they'd seen him pick up the bedside phone, and, after covering the receiver for a long, listening moment, dial.

***

It meant standing in the unshielded sun, but he'd stepped out of view of the window of the private quarters at the back of the shop. Away from Li's father's gaze that the thin sheet of curtain did nothing to conceal, even though it was drawn day and night.

The car park outside was no more than a widening of the bare verge, but it was the only place close to home that would do, so Rory turned his back on the window that was doing such a bad job of hiding its disapproval.

He looked up the road towards town. The bluegum outside the shop was the last outpost, after that it was another country through the heat shimmers. The dry country with the long veld grass and the plastic Checkers bags ended and the town began. The verges were mown and watered emerald, and silver oaks offered battered copper trays of dusty flowers, and jacarandas pooled their wilted flowers on the road beneath them. The road was like that all the way through town, to the other side where Checkers packets reappeared around the crowded location, and, beyond that, past the silent, immaculate bunker of Monsanto. Marina's mother worked there, Li had told him, and she got her instructions from bosses she'd never seen by e-mail every day from Chicago. Marina didn't know what it was like inside though, you couldn't just go there after school or anything. They wouldn't let you in, not even if your mom worked there.

The occasional car drove past from that direction, but Rory could see from miles away that they were not the ones.

A woman walked through the waves of heat towards the shop and passed very close to him so that he smelled the paraffin in the checked orange and brown blanket wrapped around her, filled at the back with the rump of her big baby. Both of them looked sidelong at him as they passed. The baby, lulled by the walk into complete incuriosity, was splayed over his mother's back like he would never leave.

Rory would have preferred a weekday afternoon, but he'd had to wait for Paulus's off day, and in spite of his pleading, Paulus had refused outright to let him come along. He told Rory to leave it to him. And to look out for his bakkie at the Chinese shop.

Rory hadn't known he had a bakkie. Let alone how he would recognize it. And something on Paulus's face told him not to ask any more questions.

Most of him was fretting and worrying about the next steps, but a bit, a tiny little bit of him was relieved that Paulus had taken over and was telling him what to do. It wanted to let a dusty blanket hold him tight and carry him along, for it not be his to think about, not what he had done that could not be undone, or what therefore would soon have to be faced.

When he looked back at the road a dented old bakkie white against a cloud of dark grey diesel smoke was wobbling through the heat towards him, and this time he knew this was it. He recognized Paulus's profile as he leaned over from the passenger seat, pointing to the shop and talking to the driver. Looking behind them, Rory saw a stack of leaning cages, each half filled with something dirty white, like handfuls of used cotton wool speckled with shavings and dropped on a stable floor. And behind the cages, something darker. At the same time as he realized triumphantly what it was, what it had to be, he also realized that his secret thought had taken shape now in the form of an elderly white bakkie in the white light of midday. There was no longer anywhere to hide, and he was afraid and elated at the same time. Perhaps he should have left it alone. But it was too late now.

The bakkie pulled up, shedding curling white chicken feathers and clucking frantically. Paulus's brother turned off the engine, though, in mid-cluck, and the bakkie settled again just as fast as a chicken does, sitting back on its waggy bottom, the trembling smoothing away as it waits for whatever is coming.

Behind the toppling cages full of white chickens with red combs stood a horse, tied with an old halter and orange string to one of the hooks on the side where you would stretch a tarpaulin to cover a load. His knees were trembling as if the vibrations through the hot bakkie floor were still corrugating, but the engine's last shudders were long stilled.

Rory stared. He heard but did not register the clack of the door as Paulus climbed out, flat as a slap.

Paulus walked around and stood next to Rory. In the driver's seat, his brother hunted for a cigarette before getting out and joining them, complaining of the heat. Neither Paulus nor Rory replied.

"When did he go, Paulus? Was it only July?"

Paulus looked at Rory. Through his eyes, a very slow burn of anger like an undoused coal at the bottom of a forgotten fire. Rory noted somewhere that Paulus had let him see it. He felt himself rocked by how strong the red anger was that burned through. It touched the tip of a fuse in him and Rory felt the flame start to race into his insides. It was like a lightning strike on a telephone pole, there was nothing he could do but watch it go, burning up the wire with white light like strips of magnesium in the science lab. But then the horse stumbled, his hooves slipping on the bare steel pan, and Paulus touched him on the shoulder, and his touch tweaked out the burn and twisted it over like a cigarette you're keeping for later.

"We have to look after him now."

Rory tried to calm his breathing and focus on the horse.

It was always about the horse.

He nodded.

Off to the left Li came out onto the verandah of the shop holding a *You* magazine and stopped dead when she saw them. She looked at Rory, then at the horse, for a long moment. She took in the bakkie, and Paulus in his suit and white shirt, and his brother. She looked down at the magazine in her hands and took no notice of her father when he came out and spoke to her. He took her by the shoulder but she shook him off, then pushed the *You* into his hands and walked back into the house.

The first thing was to get the horse off the back. There was only one way, by lowering the tailgate and getting him to jump. It wasn't far but it could be too far. So the first thing had to be, to get him to do this enormous thing without falling. Because Rory knew he would certainly try. He would always try.

He climbed up next to him, and stroked the harsh winter coat that should have fallen out in spring, but had held on because he still needed it. Stroking him was a journey over his sunken neck and sharp shoulder, then a bumpy ride along his ribs. But he turned his nose to stare at Rory, to take him in through murky eyes, and after a long while he dropped his still soft nose into Rory's palm and breathed into it in greeting.

This time it wasn't white lightning but something that cut, not burned, a jagged line deep into him. The kind that would hurt for years to come, and finally set rather than heal, into a thickened, twisted scar.

"It's alright boy" he said. "You'll be alright."

Paulus and his brother meanwhile unloaded cages of protesting chickens to give Gandhi the room to swivel his pinched hips around so he could face the drop. Rory gently pushed at his hipbone to get him to step around, and the horse swayed like a rickety table. Rory saw the patch of mange in the baize of his rump, now a tented hollow between spine and hip.

He didn't see Li run up, head held high and lips tight, until she was at the bakkie. In one hand, she held a piece of bread. In the other, a cube of cheese. Paulus's brother stopped her going too close to the tailgate. She stopped and watched, and she sucked the tightness out of her lips and into concern for this horse.

"Rory-"

"Hi, Li."

"I see why you needed the money. I've brought him some food."

"Just let us get him off first." But he saw the cheese and the bread, and he smiled, then turned back to the horse. He packed grass over the tailgate to try and help him keep his footing. Below, Paulus scooped hot sand into some kind of mattress for him.

Then they were ready, though the horse might never be.

"Maybe he can't, Paulus."

“He will do it!”

Rory murmured to him and reminded him of the last race, and the other great ones. The horse dozed and swayed in the blanket of his words, eyes half closed.

“You must do it now.”

Rory knew it. Raising his voice so that the horse looked up, he said “Come on Gandhi, you can do it. And nobody will ever ask anything of you again. I promise.”

As he promised he knew that he would never seek a hiding place for this thought turned skin and bone again.

“Do this for me and I will do that for you.”

Gandhi sighed but he also raised his tail a bit, flicked it. Seeing that, Rory urged him forward, one step at a time, till they stood on the edge, knees buckling.

“Come with me, we’ll do it together”

Rory jumped, ready to hold the horse on landing, and Gandhi, as he’d known he would, jumped out and landed, stumbled heavily, leaned on Rory until Paulus hugged his thin shoulders and steadied his front feet, and he stood there, blowing with the effort, sniffing his new surroundings.

“Welcome back,” said Rory.

Li came up beside Gandhi and he sniffed at her. She offered him the cheese which he kicked off her hand with his lip. The bread he took like a toothless old man mumbling spaghetti.

“Hold your hand flat,” said Rory, unfolding her palm, and she smiled in delight at the horse’s acceptance of her offering.

“We need to get you home,” said Rory.

***

Charles stood back, tapping his crop against his leg, and looked at the stables. They were in good shape, finally. Pity about the screen right over their roofs. But that was so enormous it would be difficult and dangerous to take down. In the meantime, at least it threw some shade on the horses.

From the direction of town, a small group of people appeared out of a heat shimmer, an emaciated old horse walking slowly in their midst. It looked like something out of the Wizard of Oz. Charles was just shaking his head, you got some strange types out here, when he realized that the skipping Dorothy was that Chinese girl he'd seen outside the shop, the Tin Man was Paulus, of all people, in his day-off smart clothes, and there in the centre of this whirlwind was Rory, who he could tell had seen him watching. He didn't recognize the horse.

"Hey!" he waved his crop at them. They took no notice, and turned into the driveway. Even as he felt the anger rise that they could bring such a creature through his gates, he was also noticing its fine cut head, cheekbones slicing through to show some remnant of good bone, good breeding, underneath.

He marched towards the gate and Rory met him halfway. Li, alongside, took one look at Charles's face and dropped back quietly. Paulus peeled off to the stables, picking up a bucket for camouflage as he went, and whistling. Counting on his actions to make him invisible, in spite of the red flag of his suit and tie.

"What do you think you are doing? Bringing a diseased old moke in here?"

Rory turned to the horse and stroked his nose. Then looked his father in the eyes.

"Don't you know who this is, dad? After all he did for you?"

"No!" It couldn't be him. Charles raised his hand, the one holding the crop, to chase the horse or else to take the halter by force and lead it out as fast as its shaky legs could carry it to the roadside and slam the gate closed behind it. If he did all this fast enough, he might push the smoking memories back down, along with the burning guilt and shame.

It couldn't be him.

But the horse had recognized Charles. He ignored the raised whip. And greeted the hand with a deep rolling nicker that vibrated through him like the comfort of distant thunder receding after rain. Like the rich throaty glugging as a mother hen calls her chicks to food. Rory looked at him at surprise that such a deep sound could come from such a wasted stomach. Gandhi buried his nose in Charles's open palm as if into a feed bucket. As if into a checked brown and orange blanket smelling of paraffin and dust.

Charles couldn't move. The crop dropped from his hand and fell into the dust at his feet.

A white downy breast feather trembled in the horse's tangled, too-long mane. He combed it out with his fingers and it started to drift away. Rory, watching, saw that his father's narrow, nervy fingers were slow and clumsy as an old man's, and in a flash he saw how they would one day look - those clawed numb sausages rimmed with horny yellow nails, that would not work properly as they fumbled their pyjama buttons. He looked at his father's face but there he saw the same thing coming.

Charles caught the feather, too light to fall hard, and smoothed the down till it lay flat and pressed in his hand, brylcreemed against the scalp of his palm. The edge still cowlicked irrepressibly up, though, and he touched it with the tip of his forefinger.

Charles coughed and rubbed it off against his trousers, rubbed his hands over his face. Then he took charge of himself with a great effort, picking up the crop and looking around for Paulus who was suddenly right there.

"Put him in the last stable," he said, but without the authority he intended for those words. "Give him water. Something to eat. But just … ahh … just teff for now."

Then he turned on his heel and walked to the house, fast. He slapped his thigh with the crop but he was out of step and he missed, and the crop swung up like an empty child's swing, and flew out of his hand and onto the driveway in front of him. He stopped, and stared at it as it lay in the dust, as if he was trying to remember what came next. Then he stepped over it and walked on to the house.

***

Li brought bread the next day, and sweets, and Rory told her what horses eat, and after that she brought carrots every day. Slipping up the driveway just as far as the stables, turning in quickly and running to the last stable where Gandhi stood eating teff and having the winter coat rubbed off him by Rory. After a couple of weeks the woolly continents that stretched between shoulder and hipbone had shrunk, and the light caught the occasional glint from the fine summer coat beneath. Li stroked it, humming, smiling.

"He's younger than you'd think. Seven is only old for racehorses" said Rory.

"He's old but he's really young?"

"Ja. Racing is a different world."

"What is it like?"

Rory thought back to the mornings, morning after morning, punctuated by racedays. He thought of the smell of veld fires in the mornings, the sun struggling to heave itself over the pall of their smoke. "Mostly hard work. Lots of exercise on the track."

"You raced him?"

"No, not me! I'm too tall. Jockeys have to be smaller. You could be a jockey, for example."

She laughed, liking the idea. "But I can't ride!"

"I could teach you."

Gandhi used his head to push Rory out of the way so he could sniff Li for more carrots, and she laughed again.

"He's getting cheeky. He needs exercise. You could learn on him!"

She seemed uncertain, looked at his still skinny ribs.

Rory was suddenly selling it hard. "He loves to work, it makes him happy, he'll get better even faster. You'll be helping him."

Li stroked Gandhi's bony face and he leaned into her, resting his head against her. She was surprised at how heavy it was, and that he would let this weight rest in the cradle of her arms. He breathed deeply and blew warmth into her stomach, smelling of fresh grass. At the top of his head was a bad scratch, healing now. She rubbed his ears and he twisted his head and pushed into the rubbing, asking for more.

She looked up at Rory who was watching, and she shrugged, smiled, and nodded.

"Okay."

Rory suppressed the flood of energy that made him want to leap and yell "Yes!"

All he said was "Tomorrow, after school."

***

It felt very high up, and the horse so narrow between her legs it felt like she was balancing on a fence pole. A moving fence pole, that swayed and lurched. The saddle felt so big and so odd, rigid, poking her, the leather squeaking, as if she was sailing along on a leather boat on a sea of nothing. Was this how it felt up a mast on a sailing ship? Bulky reins threaded through her fingers, pushing them apart, rubbing the webbing in between. She'd been told to do nothing but hold them, for now. Just to tighten her heels against the horse's sides, which made him walk forward.

Rory held the round metal bit at the corner of Gandhi's mouth, suddenly aware that he was no teacher and that this horse was no quiet school pony. Tentatively he clucked him forward, and walked him in a slow circle in the middle of the glare of the lungeing ring. Dust rose like muggies off the surface of the bright white sand.

For the first three days that's all they did, a couple of slow circles, which took them ten minutes. But Li knew now when to squeeze with her heels, and even when to pull back on the reins to stop, and how to pull to the inside to turn him, and being Gandhi and not a bored old school pony, he did it all for her so quickly that she was starting to enjoy herself.

Then, on the fourth day, Charles came and shouted at Rory that he didn't want strangers in here, this was a business, not a kiddies' riding school.

Wordlessly, Rory took down the pole across the gate and led Gandhi out, not to the stables, but out onto the roadside, along for a bit, then over to a big unfenced piece of veld next to the wildlife reserve. Li said nothing as they walked along, but stared ahead, tight lipped. When Rory started to lead her around in a big circle, avoiding the taaibos and the antheaps, Li said "Stop."

She slid off the horse and walked off in the direction of home.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. I've had enough."

"But we've only just started! Please come back!"

"Your father is angry. I am a stranger. You would be a good Chinese boy, so obedient to your father. Maybe I should be a good Chinese girl for once and listen to mine."

"What?"

She undid her hard hat and dropped it on the ground with a thud. The breeze started to cool her hot damp head. She walked away.

***

Rory dodged sprinklers as he ran down the mown and shady willow and syringa street from school, dangling the hard hat upside down by its chin strap. He turned right at the robot where the garage was, out onto the road home, crossing the invisible line between town and country. No verges or willow shade here, just plastic bottles, veld that should have been green by this time of year, and the occasional loom of straggling bluegums. And Li, walking home faster than someone like George could run.

"Li!" She had to have heard him, but she just walked faster. They were almost at the shop already and Rory was desperate to reach her before she disappeared inside like she'd been doing all week. He sprinted and reached her in the bareground shade beneath the shop's bluegum, skidding to a halt on the gum seed gravel, the kind you were guaranteed to skin your knees on if you braked a bike on it. He knew he'd fall and he did, and dug seeds into his seed-scarred knees like he'd done when he was little.

"Li." He grabbed her arm when only half up and she shook him off, offended. "Please, I need to talk to you."

She shrugged, but waited, kicking gravel with her dusty school shoe.

"You need to understand, my father is not someone you can talk to. You have to keep out of his way. My family is very different to yours."

"What?" She was furious. "How do you know? How do you know how it is for me with my father?"

Rory just stared at her anger.

"Come with me," she said, and pushing him in front of her, she marched up to the door.

***

The bell tinkled above the door in the empty shop. Li's mom looked up with a smile, which broadened when she saw Rory.

"Good afternoon!"

But then she saw Li behind him and her face emptied and Rory saw how professional the smile had been, how salesperson-y, and how chilling was the blankness behind it.

Li's mother spoke to her quietly and rapidly and Rory did not recognize a word, but he knew what she was saying. Li replied, sounding casual, but Rory saw her hand shake as she opened the fridge and took out a single Coke. As she shut the door the gossipy fridge went silent and closemouthed.

She said a few more words to her mother, and went outside, Rory hurrying behind her. Li's mother rearranged something on the counter in front of her, glancing up from time to time as she watched Li march to the log under the bluegum outside the shop, Rory following.

The log curved up at one end like a boat. Li sat in the prow, Rory in the bows at the distant end of the log. In between was the swirling grain of the wood, beaten silver grey in the sun, circling old wounds and amputations, flowing on around them. Rory traced the waves, stopping when he got too close to Li, a grim island on the far periphery of this ocean. She drank the Coke without offering. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her wipe away a tear.

"Li ---"

"My name's not Li."

"What?"

"Li is my surname. There was a mix up at Home Affairs. But I like it, so I keep it. And it drives my parents crazy."

He smiled.

"My father doesn't want me to be friends even with Cantonese boys, let alone South African boys Rory, haven't you worked that out?"

"Why not?"

"Same reason your father doesn't want you to be friendly with a Chinese girl! In case you don't end up marrying the right person."

This was all moving too fast for him. "Marrying!"

That came out all wrong. He saw the hurt in her face.

"I mean, we're too young!" It just got worse.

"Ag Rory! I am not going to get married! No matter that my father says I will soon be too old. I am only telling you this so that you should understand my father!"

She looked around, shook her head. "How could you understand. There is nothing the same here. We are from the country, did you know that? No, you never asked. But it is not like this. It is full of people. All of them struggling. And no jobs for their children. People like my father, when they are young, they go to the city, they try to find work, they live like the black people do in Hillbrow, have you been there? No? I have. And then they leave China. And no matter how far they go, they try to live like before, stay close to the same people from the same areas, even if they're in Durban and Newcastle and you only see them at the Easter tournament. And do you know who they expect me to marry? Not just a Chinese boy! A

Mandarin boy, from the same part of China! Apparently there is one in Durban, and one here in Zeerust."

There was a road sign opposite the shop: Zeerust 41kms. Rory stared at it.

"Do you know that I have to steal carrots when nobody is looking, and run away before they make me do more homework, or help in the shop, which I do not do enough? Because I am getting cheeky and forgetting who I am! You think you are the only one with family problems!"

Rory couldn't meet her eyes. He glanced at the closemouthed windows to his right, grimly shuttered with cotton bedsheets so faded and thin you would be able to see right through them if you came up close enough.

"This month is very hard for my father because this time last year my grandfather died. This month we need to look after his grave, but it is not here. We need to gather our whole family, my cousins, my aunts and uncles to honour him, but none of them are here. He has only a picture of my grandfather on a table and he has a candle and incense burning in front of it. And my mother. And me. I am all the family they have here."

Rory thought of the picture at Ouboet's house, the picture of the kind looking woman with the table in front of it.

"Li?"

"Yes?"

"What is your real name?"

"Wai-Lan. Wai is a family name for daughters, it means intelligent. Lan means orchid but it also means I am the oldest daughter of this family. Even the old Chinese who have been here three generations, if they are named like this, they can go back to their village, and the people there will know exactly who they are, which Li family they come from, where they belong in the family."

“At least you always know where you belong”.

She shrugged.

“Which name is just for you?”

“What?”

“Just for you, the back to front girl who’s not scared of anything?”

She laughed, then sighed. “Three names, none of them for me only. Four, if you count Wendy.”

“Who’s Wendy?”

“It’s who I’m supposed to be. The name my parents chose for me when we came here, to use at school and everywhere except at home.”

“Like Paulus?”

She laughed, nodded, and passed him the warm Coke. “Like Paulus.”

Then she traced the waves in the wood like he was doing, bending out and back again where they parted around the rock of an old shorn limb.

***

They rode along the fence line, the same reserve fence, but here beyond Charles’s property there was no-one trying to plug the holes or stop it sagging. One of the fence posts had fallen over and the fence was flat for a span.

“Let’s go in!” Li turned Gandhi towards it.

“Wait! He could get tangled.”

Rory jumped off his horse and stood on the flat fence to make sure it was flush with the red earth.

"Okay," he said. "You can go now."

The horses turned left on the other side, drawn towards their magnetic pole, home. Paths joined theirs, other creatures were drawn to the same place too. As the great hull of the screen grew above the low acacia tops, they turned off the path and rode deeper in the reserve, away from the firebreak and the bakkie track and the open land between them and Charles's fence. As they did so, they rode through the herd of springbok, some standing in groups under the shade, others pacing the fence, staring at the green lucerne patch on the other side.

From this side it looked impossibly green, blue-green like a deep lake. The horses grazed half on half off it, fat and glossy. On this side there was no grass, just ribs and drifts of sand.

"Wait for me here." Rory turned and went back the way they'd come. He cantered back soon with a half full sack of Broodmare Supacondition 14% Plus Full Fat Soya.

"Give me a hand," he said, and they dragged it by its ears, getting flatter and flatter as the cubes tumbled out of its open mouth and lay in the dust. The springbok watched but didn't move. Only after they remounted and moved off did a bold few step carefully towards it, lowering their heads and snorting at it. Then the whole herd was there, eating. A mother looked back to her lamb still lying under a tree, and called him through her nose, and up he staggered, and cantered in strides too big for his body to the food, and ate.

It was a hot bright day, with an intensity to the brightness that was explained as they rode out of the patch of acacias. As they went deeper into the reserve away from the fence with its sandy tracks, the ground was less eroded, the grass cover still in place. On the side of the sky they had not seen until then a thunderstorm swivelled towards them like a spinning umbrella, head down and wings out like a black and white speckled hen defending her chicks, purring with fury. Dust balls tumbled out from beneath its skirts and fled past them, whirring

like startled chicks at the stage where, when they fly, they actually lift off and really go somewhere.

Li turned for home, but Rory yelled in the rising wind “It’s too late! Get off!” and they led the horses into the shelter of acacias, ducking their heads into their shoulders. The horses shuffled their hindquarters to face the wind and Rory and Li stood in their lee. For a while they were lost in the storm skirts, in the mayhem halfway through a carwash, between the great striped spinning mops closing in, always scary even though you know it’s okay. Rory glanced over at Li and she raised her eyebrows and laughed, meeting the challenge. But in the end it was mostly squealing bother and no real attack, and minutes later the storm had lost concentration and moved on, pecking in the sand, herding her dust chicks before her.

The sun was heading towards a late sunset but after the storm it was still very bright, sparkling off the drops in the horses’ manes. The horses sighed and lowered their heads and started to graze, and Rory wiped a finger along Li’s rainbeaded arm from her wrist to the angle of her elbow, with a smile. Then he saw something in the glittering grass beyond.

A shape stepped out of the dark trees beyond, into the vivid late afternoon light. As it saw them, it stopped, raised its head high in alarm. The horses looked at it, snorting, outraged. A warthog would have been fine, even a rhino, but something that is a horse and yet not, is monstrous, horrifying.

Gandhi thought he’d try out his legs again, and Li was dragged off by him in a half circle, but she didn’t let the reins go.

“Stroke him!” called Rory, battling to hold his own horse, and as Li, running alongside in giant strides, laid a hand on his shoulder, Gandhi slowed. Still jumpy, the horses turned back to look at the zebra.

He hadn’t moved. Ears high and tight, he stared down his nose at them. Rory felt slightly embarrassed that he had seen them struggling to control a couple of easy horses. He felt he could have looked at them with less contempt. As they watched, the zebra lowered his

head, bored, and his body relaxed. He sniffed at the air, then the ground, then ripped out grass.

Behind him, a whole shimmering bar code of black and white filled the clearing. Mares and growing foals, all grazing, the fuzzy-furred foals coming forward to stare curiously, stamping their legs in cheek, but making sure never to cross the invisible line that would have taken them out from beyond their father's protection. Then losing courage and galloping back, rumps down, to their mothers and peering at the intruders again from under the gates of their mothers' necks.

But how did they know their own mothers, what made them so sure they were running to the right ones? Rory remembered something about newborn zebras and their mothers imprinting on each other's individual stripe pattern, each one unique as a fingerprint, apparently. Yet their stripes all seemed the same, wide over the rump and loin before curving over the point of the hip down into the stifle, at what would be the waist in a human. Meeting the bands that wrapped around the belly at that point, but, he began to see as he compared two mothers more closely, often in quite different ways. One mother had what looked like jagged rips from behind the saddle area to the stifle, a long ragged cut with a blunt bladed knife. But mostly they flowed smoothly, merging seamlessly in subtly different ways.

"Beautiful" breathed Li beside him, and he came back to his senses, realizing he'd been mesmerized by the stripes. In the meantime, the zebra stallion appeared to have forgotten about them or was ignoring them, and Rory burned with embarrassment. He mounted his horse, almost wanting to startle the stallion this time, but although the foals shied and some of the mothers glanced up at him, the stallion grazed on, sneezing a fly irritably out of his nostrils.

"Come Li!"

"Can't we stay? I have never seen a zebra out of a movie!"

But Rory was grumpy about it in a way that made him feel like his own father. "Let's go."

***

The next afternoon, Rory shouted ahead at Li who was trotting Gandhi: “Is this why you wanted to learn to ride?”

They had branched off from the path to Ouboet’s house and were heading for the tallest of the bluegum islands, some distance from the houses. “So you can visit some ancestors? Not even *your* ancestors?”

Li laughed. “To be free!”

The air was fresh and sharp with the teasing of rain in the sky, and Gandhi stuck his nose eagerly ahead. A jolting, nose-poking trot was the closest thing he got to the racetrack now, and he liked Li. But he had very little stamina and in spite of his ambitions, slowed soon to a walk, breathing hard.

“He’s okay,” said Rory. “He’s a natural athlete, they never lose it entirely.” But Li slid off and led him anyway, through a gap between two enormous bluegums, one dead, one sighing in the breeze, at a spot where the sagging barbed wire fence had been flattened by a fallen tree. The tree had also smashed a gravestone, and narrowly missed a bulgy enamel heart like a green candy apple on a steel stake.

They led the horses through the graveyard, asparagus bush and wag ‘n bietjie snagging and tearing their clothes. Few gravestones were undamaged. Many were broken, others seemed to have been cracked by heaving earth. Everywhere, cow pats and dry horse manure was scattered like gravel, and the gravestones were glossy with hide oils, polished and patinaed with bovine rubbing.

In one corner, low fenced like a playpen, they found babies’ graves. Hand engraved by ordinary people in clay or stone, sometimes even in cement.

VAD

Ons lief dochtertje

Gertryda Susara Stefneta Paulina van Vuuren

Geboren 13 Jan 1930

Overleden 26 Jan 1932

Veilig in Jezus armen. Ens.

Surprisingly, a modern-looking granite slab with sandblasted letters, looking so new, no older than modern ones in the main Lichtenburg cemetery:

Hier rus ons seuntjie

Marthinus G Gouws

Geb. 22 Jan 1934

Oorl. 2 Feb 1934

Veilig by Jesus

Li was frowning at the scrubby, leggy thorn bushes. “How could they let this place go like this?”

Rory shrugged. “Their families left them behind. Who’s left? One or two old people, that’s all”

She clucked in disapproval and started clearing Gertryda Susara Stefneta’s grave, which seemed smaller than her name.

Rory walked on. Right at the back, the asparagus bush and thorn gave out and, in ant-run bare earth, with animal burrows dug beneath them, stood a scanty row of silver painted crosses, the silver they use to paint roofs, with plate size rosettes saying across the top...

For King and Empire

Then, across the centre of the paint-tin lid rosette

Tpr. R.F. Corderoy

28696

14th Feb. 1902

19th Imp. Yeomanry

Rory was staring at one that said no more than

Here lies a British soldier.

... when he heard Li calling him.

She was kneeling in front of another modern-looking granite gravestone, staring at the sandblasted inscription.

The straggling pioneer plants were surprisingly tenacious, reaching out for him as he walked, holding him back. He tore himself away from them, then stood beside her and read:

Robert Andrew Gibbons

Born 13th July 1965

Taken tragically from us

21st January 1981

A light has gone out forever

A wag ‘n bietjie had etched a row of evenly spaced blood dots down Rory’s arm. It was a neat line, swelling like raindrops, and it looked like a code of some sort. A telegram, in some kind of language that was familiar, that he should have understood. As he watched, some of the dots

merged and a trickle started to meander down his arm, bending one way and then the next as it connected the dots.

"You have found an ancestor," said Li, standing up and stepping aside so that he could take her place.

Robert Andrew Gibbons

The words on the granite gravestone could have been carved yesterday, but that meant nothing, Marthinus Gouws's gravestone was the same. Rory had the sudden impression that the years were concertinaed together, old and new running together, his cues for placing himself in this world or the last, blurring and fading.

1965

1932

1902

Here lies a British soldier

Veilig in Jezus armen. Ens.

As he watched, the dots started to dry and the little trickle dried up, having got nowhere. He wiped his arm and erased the message, leaving a scar of them in outline.

"Robert Andrew Gibbons," read Li. "What's your whole name, Rory?"

"Rory William Gibbons."

"Who is William?"

"My grandfather."

“So which one of those names is for you?”

“I don’t know.”

***

Rory kicked around the old Ford hulk that was not much more than fenders, that looked like the kind of spider with those very long front legs, almost praying mantis-like. There were springs and pieces of punched metal, it all clearly meant something, but it was not a language he could read. He had heard a story about a pilot who landed in a farmer’s field and needed a specific part to fix his engine, and the farmer said “Hold on a minute” and rooted around for a bit in all the old junk in his shed and came up with the exact thing, covered in cobwebs and dust.

If there was a part like that in this shed, how would Rory know? It might be just the bit he needed.

“Pass me the spanner!”

Rory ran back to the tractor beneath which Charles’s impatient feet kicked, and passed the spanner to the waiting fingers.

“Stay there! Stop drifting off and making me wait!”

So Rory stood and watched the feet twitch as Charles grunted and clanged.

“Dad?”

“What?”

“Is it true you had a brother?”

The feet stilled.

"Who told you that?"

"I never knew it was a secret!"

"It's not!"

There was a clunk and a curse. Charles's knuckles gripped the skirt of the tractor and he dragged himself out, leaving a long scuff mark in the dust.

"Don't *you* go and turn it into a mystery too. Or a tragedy. I've had more than enough of that the past thirty years! Now do you think you could manage to pass me the right spanner this time?"

Rory held out a fistful, startled as a hoopoe's crest, and Charles grabbed one. He disappeared underneath the tractor again without commenting on Rory's expression.

This time there was a clang and a curse and a crack.

Rory hurriedly picked up all the tools he thought his father might need, and ranged them from largest to smallest across his palm, but there were plenty of gaps in the line, and he did not know how to fill them. He knelt and offered them to the void below the tractor.

***

Rory was trying to get the foal to eat green grass from his hand. He had him on a baggy halter, knee deep in the green irrigated field, the one with the centre pivot. He had the mother with him too, to encourage the foal, and she was tearing at the grass with her full concentration, snorting ladybirds out of her nostrils. Rory tore off a big soft handful of kikuyu and brushed the foal's pinched little muzzle with it, but the foal moved away from it, his nostrils wrinkling with distaste. Rory offered it to its mother, who swung her head towards him and grabbed a perfunctory mouthful, before getting back to work on the puffy emerald green duvet that swelled around her knees.

"Look boy, mommy likes it, have a bite, hmm?"

He tickled his nose with it again. This time the foal didn't even turn away, but let Rory bury his nose in it like a bunch of flowers and did not respond, not even breathing in its sweet growing smell.

Rory sighed and gave the rest to the mother, who swished her tail and chewed like a grass eating machine. The vet said there was nothing wrong, it must just be a virus, there were many they had not yet identified. And by the way, when were they going to settle his bill? So Rory had just gone into around the clock caregiving mode, trying to find a way to make the foal eat and drink.

But the foal's knees and ears seemed to have grown bigger as if they were outgrowing the rest of him, not being grown into as they should, as was the charm of the oversized baby proportions. And his coat in between was dull against the shining grass.

Rory heard a small plane pass overhead, then its engine noise changed, and it circled. Rory looked up. A small white plane, faces through the window looking down at him. It waggled its wings, the pilot waved, and it flew back towards town. He watched it out of sight, envious of how it could simply circle, and leave.

It seemed very silent after that. Rory took the foal back to the stables and got him to drink a few mouthfuls of water.

When he walked in the front door, the phone was ringing.

"Hey boet, you'll never guess where I am!"

Carl sounded so different Rory hardly recognized his voice.

"In Pretoria?"

"No man, I'm here, I got a lift, but you'll have to come and fetch me. Is dad there?"

"No, he's gone to Mmabatho Sun."

“I’ll call him then.”

“His phone has been off all afternoon.”

“Oh.”

Carl said nothing more for a minute.

“Well then you’ll have to get mom to come. Quickly, because Brent needs to get to Madikwe before sunset. Tell her to come to the airfield.”

“I know where it is but I don’t think she does.”

“You come too, then. If there’s time, Brent might even give you a spin. He’s trying to get his airmiles up.”

When they got to the dusty airfield Carl immediately hustled Rory towards the plane “It’s an experience! You feel like you have the world at your feet!”

Brent was leaning over from the pilot’s seat and pushing the door open for him. Rory climbed up into the plane. Behind the seat was a gun bag in khaki with olive green straps and leather buckles. It was part of a matching set with a big leather hat, and a soft tog bag, casual but expensive, no doubt full of khaki hunting jackets and boxes of ammunition. If the Kennedys came hunting in Africa, Rory could imagine them travelling like this. It smelled of leather and oil and money, of worlds out there that he had never thought of.

Brent flashed a smile at him and yelled over the sound of the engine to put on his seat belt. He leaned forward to flick dials and tap instruments, then, after raising his eyebrows and giving Rory a thumbs up, he spoke into the radio, taxied out to the end of the empty runway, waited, talked into the radio again, and they were off, kiewietjie wings flashing as they swirled up alongside like dead white leaves.

They flew over the cement factory’s stern skyscrapers and its newer phase, a bright marquee dome, festive and monumental , like a silvery blimp hovering over Mongolian steppe. It looked like it might take to the air at any moment, dragging its moorings. Beyond the factory

gleamed whitish slimes and what looked like dirty mieliepap from the bottom of a cooking pot thrown out into the veld. Beyond, on the Ventersdorp side, mielie fields reformed in perfect oblong patterns with green and brown irrigation circles scattered over them like coins.

On the horizon sat a stationary storm cloud, interior rooms lit with flashes of lightning, and a haze dropping down from its foundations, that did not reach the ground. The shadow it cast looked solid as a forest, as a bluegum plantation, and it gave the land notches and valleys like an escarpment that did not really exist.

The wing dropped and Rory lay on his side as they circled the town and headed towards Botswana, over the game reserve. Brent tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. A pair of vultures hung alongside, tilting a little from side to side as they balanced on some unseen platform of air that seemed as solid as earth to them. But those slight, calm adjustments made with nothing more than a splay of feathers or a tightened wing muscle, above such a gulf of nothingness, made Rory feel queasy. The plane, too seemed to rely on cables and flaps, rivets and shuttling metal parts, each clunk or rattle very workaday and ordinary, yet very loud in this enormous silent sky. He looked away from the wing and felt he had to play his part in keeping them up, by not reminding himself that this machine did not look built to fly. Perhaps, as Carl once told him about rugby games, it was all about playing a part, “the secret is to believe you are a winner” and somehow nature and gravity went along with your force of will. Perhaps that’s why Brent already had the pilot’s confident smile. So did Carl, for that matter. Rory tried out that smile, with his head turned away from Brent, baring more of his teeth than usual, and glared to make it more convincing. He caught his reflection in the window and had to laugh.

The town seemed to be a dividing line, because on this side the pattern of squares and coins was sparse and quickly broke down into bush studded cattle country. Farm houses here had brown wavy tracks leading in from the tar road, splitting into shady green deltas.

Further out was a thick band of what looked like chewed scars, with long raked mechanical teethmarks and bubbling white proudflesh bulging up from the centre, a neglected injury not bandaged closed. Rory saw from where it was that it must be the ancient riverbed that sparked the diamond rush. Bakerville. Somewhere down there was Ouboet’s mining

cottage. On the edges, as the white granulations became more scattered, a shadowy square of bluegums enclosed more certainly from the air than from the ground, the graveyard. The graves looked like pockmarked earthworks, a different style of mining excavation, more orderly yet less completed, unfinished business that now had little chance of being resolved.

The wing beside him dropped and they lay over the land, chasing their own shadow back towards town, following the Zeerust Road, and Rory saw the drive-in below them. A couple of baby-sized coins of blue-green lucerne and emerald kikuyu, a warehouse-like roof, the kind of inbetween plot you saw on the outskirts of a town. The fence of the reserve next door funnelled close to the road in a narrow wineglass neck, like a game capture fence. The shadow of the screen seemed to sail out, unleashed, towards the house. And Rory saw it for what it really was, and felt ashamed. An offcut, not worthy of farming, not big enough to accommodate a tidy oblong or a proper irrigation circle, their land looked pinched off and jostled in between the road and the reserve, scraping by like a bywoner. All the work they'd done down there looked bitty; vaguely, waveringly drawn. Next door Snyman's farm reasserted the proper look of a farm, the delta without an outlet, the firmly incised irrigation circles amid the pocked bush, cattle land beyond - the formula that worked on this side of town, in this transition zone towards the Kalahari.

Brent brought the plane in to land, and kept the engine running as Rory ducked out and ran to where Carl and his mother stood waiting, smiling at his ruffled hair and relief at being back on the ground.

"So what do you think?" Carl was in magnanimous mood. "Lekker hey! The only way to travel."

"I saw our house."

"There's a whole world out there" Carl said. "Maybe I should train as a pilot."

***

As they turned into the gate, Carl's carefree talk about rugby, friends, hunting and startup businesses dried up. He took in the "In" and "Out" signs and the old prices for the double show, still there. He took in the stables hunched under the weight of the screen, the already-sagging paddock fencing, the patchily irrigated circles, the dust beyond.

"I thought you'd have done more" he said, getting out of the car.

"There's been a drought" said Rory.

"Still." Carl took aim at a dead clump of grass and booted it towards imaginary goalposts.

"And there's been trouble about water. Restrictions. Fines."

"Oh for goodness sake!" Carl strode off towards the boundary fences. Rory trailed behind him, seeing for the first time that the fence poles were furry with dust where they'd had too much creosote, rusty where they'd had too little.

"And dad's been fighting with the bank," said Rory.

"This is good, though," Carl said, gazing at a fence. Rory didn't correct him. It was Snyman's ever-gleaming fence, impervious to rust, slump or wirecutter. Also, somehow, dust, drought and lack of money. Like that plane, above it all, through some trick of confidence, luck, force of will, who knew what formula that others struggled for without success.

At the stables, Paulus greeted Carl the way he greeted Charles, and called him Baas. Impeccably polite - you wouldn't know Paulus had known Carl all his life. Carl asked Paulus how he was but turned away before he got the answer. Paulus did not seem to notice. He had other things on his mind. He looked impatiently at Rory, and gestured to the foal in the stable behind him. The foal did not look up as they approached.

All thoughts of the world beneath Rory ended then. And of planes turning around and heading off into the distance.

“I’m going to get some medicine now,” he told Paulus, who still believed in the stuff.

“Shouldn’t you get the vet?” Asked Carl.

“He can’t do anything.” Rory said.

Carl looked around him.

“His bills been paid?”

Rory looked down, shrugged.

“Ah.” Said Carl.

When Carl walked in through the front door, Rory was reminded of how strange their home had looked to him in the beginning, until he got used to it. And he noticed, for the first time, that Sarah had stopped trying to fill up the empty spaces. The chairs closed ranks around the dining room table, pushed in flush. The chalk notices on the board were old, blurred. Nobody looked at them anymore.

“A Coke fridge! Cool!” Said Carl and took a beer out, sat back in Charles’s chair, looked about him. Rory went to the kitchen for the medicine, then went back to the stables for an hour. Then he returned to the house and put the useless bottles back on the shelf in the kitchen.

Charles arrived back five minutes later, just as Carl was out of sight behind Aunty May’s cabinet pouring himself one of his whiskies. Rory could see from his hangdog shoulders and suspicious eyes, casting about for the plotters behind his back, how it had gone that afternoon at the casino. But when he saw Carl, his eyes lit up and his back straightened, and he ran his hands through his graying hair that was in need of a cut before striding over to hug his son.

“You’re bigger than me!” He laughed.

“Well, probably got twenty k’s on you,” said Carl, who poured Charles a drink. “We do weights in the gym as well as workouts on the field.”

"Thanks" said Charles, as Carl handed him one of his own whiskies. He offered Carl his chair and Carl took it as if for the first time. Rory saw the colour come back into his father's grey face and was sad that it never did that for him. But it meant a good evening, at any rate. Sarah, hearing happy voices, came through from the kitchen and perched on a dining room chair with a glass of white wine that Carl insisted on pouring for her.

Carl spoke a lot about his life and his prospects, about selection for provincial teams, about making money playing overseas, about what that did to your chances back at home. But after a while he started asking about what he called the farm. Charles started drinking faster at that point, and sounding too casual. He spoke of plans Rory had never heard, plans of going into saddlers, plans of marketing the place as a spelling farm for resting racehorses. It sounded very grand even to Rory's ears. But Carl had something new and adult in his gaze, and sometimes he mused, frowned, and did not speak for a minute or two. Rory had never seen him do that before.

"What about your crossbred riding horses? How is that new stallion doing?"

"Oh that's still all systems go. Some more foals due soon. He's turning out fine."

Nandi had finally been forced to accept the stallion, just a day ago, although she had had to be restrained the whole time and it had not gone well. In spite of their precautions, she'd managed to kick him as he dismounted, and he had shot off backwards, eyes rolling, so they weren't sure the mating had succeeded. They were hoping. The stallion's confidence was dented too. He had been meant to mate his favourite mare that morning, but it had been a failure. He was not interested and could not be persuaded. He probably just needed time to forget about the bad experience, but Charles had got the hell in and gone off to Mmabatho Sun.

Carl swirled the whisky glass and watched the ice cubes melt, then looked around at the furniture again. There was nothing here that he did not know. Nothing new.

Charles coughed into the silence and Carl looked up, smiled, and got up to pour his father another drink. They came to the table for supper reluctantly, and quickly went back to

their chairs and their whiskies, though Carl held onto his glass for longer, and got up to get refills for his father more and more often. And he went back to the varsity pranks and the rugby games and the selection gossip and the behind the scenes stories of famous players, and Charles started talking big too, to match him. They were at it for hours after Rory went to bed, and it delayed his movie watching till two in the morning.

By this time, he was no longer in the mood for Western bombast, log cabins, John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, it was all just more of the same. Yet he reached out to the screen for something. Something beyond the pretence and the appearance of the hard man. He saw that the lone rider, who spat and brooded and then righted the world, was being waited out by the banker in his funny tight suit and hat, by the railway men who watched the dusty cattle riders bring the herds to the railheads and then took over from there. Once, he was sure Carl would have been the one driving the herd. But now he thought Carl might do that for a while for fun and then be the one in the suit, or the railway man, who watched, and did his sums. But as for himself, Rory could not see which group he belonged in. It was no longer clear that the cattle drivers were the better or the wiser men. But the lizard look of the banker who just stood still and waited, and it all came to him … Rory was starting to see what it meant, Charles's banker in town had something of the same look, that closed down yet watchful gaze. It made him think, perhaps just because he was tired and his mind was wandering, of Wolmaranstad.

Wolmaranstad was halfway to Kimberley, civilization so far behind it was forgotten, and the land around it was even drier than here. They'd driven through it once, him and his father, going to look at some mares. It was so remote it should have been sleepy and slumping. But there was a bustling new phase to the town that was unsettlingly out of place with the old. There were a lot of new, bright blue or cherry red double cab bakkies with a lot of gleaming chrome on them. A lot of bulldozing, a lot of new building. A boom. There were still the Dunns and the Ellerines and the cafes with dirty floors selling vetkoek and chips, but there were also new houses ornamented with columns and mouldings, in walled security estates where the ground was still red and raked raw. There were plush bed and breakfasts and even a wine shop where the prices were R80 and up and you felt you'd made a mistake to walk in the door. On

the edge of the town there was newly turned and graded soil in the location. The sun glared off new zinc roofs, walls were plastered with fresh red soil cement, there was a soccer field next to the railway line with new white goalposts. There was a diamond trade here, the kind that seemed to have nothing to do with the Big Hole or the Cullinan Mine. It was all diamonds in dry riverbeds again. Like Bakerville eighty years ago.

There were also, according to the farmer who was unlucky enough to have no diamonds on his farm but was trying to sell the diamond guys fancy horses, diamond auctions on Friday afternoons. You couldn't just go and gawk or hope for a good deal. You had to be invited or somehow qualify to attend. You wouldn't know all this even existed unless someone told you. It was after those, on Friday nights, that a lot of wine was sold. The man who ran the shop, and the bed and breakfast attached to it, had the same look as the bankers and the railway men. He'd dismissed Rory and Charles the moment they walked in for a cold Coke, immediately conscious of their dusty clothes, regretting their choice. He took their money and they got the Cokes but to him they were irrelevant, flotsam washed in by the national road. He would not have looked at Carl that way. He'd have recognized Carl, come out from behind his counter, lain bottles like babies in his arms and shown off their labels to him.

And Carl would not have been embarrassed even if he'd only come in for a Coke. Nor would he have been ashamed to be driving home with an empty horsebox because the horses were too expensive.

The diamonds would come to an end there someday, same as Bakerville, and nobody would buy that smooth shopkeeper's overpriced wine. But he'd have left or changed tack by then, no doubt. Followed the wheeler dealers on to the next big thing. Hustled, made a big buck at the right time, moved on. Maybe he was a homegrown Wolmaranstad farmer or businessman and the boom came to him, but he wouldn't let it leave him behind either. Or move on too late. Or to the wrong place. You could see that from the look in his eye. Bakerville would have been that way, once.

Rory switched off the projector and went to toss in his bed, restless, frustrated.

The next morning he got up early, nauseous from the late night, and went out through the stale air of the living room where smeared glasses and empty whisky bottles stood around carelessly on the dining room table.

At the stables, the foal was dead. Its mother was nickering low through her nose and trying to nudge it to its feet. She whinnied loudly and paced the stable, face drawn and nostrils tight, as Paulus and Rory carried the sunken body away.

7

Time for some changes

This time the storm was a great supertanker pivoting in its moorings, taking up half the sky at all times, groaning and clanking with thunder, grinding out lightning sparks. Yawing, heeling gunmetal gray, attended by popcorn-cloud tugs. When it passed overhead Rory gazed up at its pitted underside. It was like lying under a bed looking at its foundations from a few inches away, holding your breath. But for the most part it was on this hemisphere and then that, blotting out two quadrants of the sky, illuminating the other two.

What was it getting into position for? Was it leaving port or docking? Looking at this cliffside was like looking into the darkness, his un-adjusted night eyes blinded by black. The other hemisphere its polar opposite, for which somehow the dark became a mirror, bouncing extraordinary blue into the sky, glare into white walls, and from time to time blinding him with lasers from the sun. He never knew where they were coming from or when the next one would flash and dazzle him.

It was like being in a stable with a vicious stallion who was trying to pin you against a wall to kick you. There was no safe space to retreat to, no place to be safe and wait this thing out.

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By evening the hull was holed and tons upon tons of water poured over them. Dark and drowning and pitching drunkenly around the slippery decks, trying to keep their footing, Paulus and Rory got the horses into the sodden stables, all but Nandi.

She'd always reminded Rory of a wild animal who was only tolerating them until she could end her exile and rejoin her kind. In a way, all mares were like that, but she was especially so. And tonight the storm called her home. Answering some voice only she could hear above the roar of the wind and the crashing of waves from the sky, she leaped out of Rory's reach and galloped across the surging paddock towards the back fence.

"Get her in! She'll hurt herself!" Charles was shouting from just a foot away. Rory hurled himself off the deck of the stable yard and plunged out into the streaming, tilting wilderness beyond.

At the back fence, Nandi now stood very quietly, shaking, waiting like the Xhosa maiden at Hole in the Wall for the man of the sea to come out of the white laced surf beyond. The thin pencil tracing of fence was lit every few seconds by lightning and each time it seemed to bulge towards them, to thin like some placental membrane netted with veins and stretched to breaking point.

Knowing the moment for catching a horse, he ignored what was plain to her and to him, that something was coming, and walked up to her anyway, and slid his arm around her tense, drenched neck.

He thought he saw lightning flash again, very close this time, and he heard the thud of thunder, and felt the ground shake in answer, but this time none of this was from an immense height. It was close. Like a lion coughing to itself, making the throat of the ground quiver.

Rory looked around. The long grass was no longer stirring and flattening, but seemed to stand like she did, waiting for something, braced.

Lightning flared again and then it was right upon them, in zigzags. It tore open the fence in a great striped tsunami rippled with bands of white and black, and it knocked him down, and at the same time, high in the sky a light went on, a long glow of sheet lightning, that showed him, as he scrambled back up and stumbled back to the mare, this other lightning made flesh and brought to earth, revealed as the zebra stallion who Rory realized had been here before, long ago.

He could smell where the zebra had grazed him, he could see it high-stepping like any stallion around a mare in season. Horse, it smelled of horse, but also wild, like wild animal. The smell of his first night here, the smell of soaked, steaming earth and dark yellow urine, the smell of a stallion between his back legs, as close as a caged human being normally got to uncontrollable wildness.

Ignoring Rory, the zebra stallion stretched his neck under Nandi's raised tail and he sniffed. Then he raised his head and curled his lip back showing his long teeth, and snorted. She was nickering to him, and crouching. As he leaned forward, she backed into him, and he slid his head along her spine to her withers. And, as he crouched back on his strong back legs, zigzags bulging in his hindquarters, and mounted her, he took her withers between his teeth and he bit.

And Rory stood, arms around her neck, seeing the flattened ears and the bared teeth and the peak of the wither in their bite, and the rolling eyes that saw him but did not care, and the straining hug of the front legs around the mare, and the ripple of the zigzags in the powerful shoulders. And he stood like Nandi and sweated, and trembled, and did not move.

And then other local lightning approached, torchlight hiding Charles behind its flare.

"My god!" The torchlight jiggled. "Don't just stand there! Do something!"

The stallion and the mare were locked together now, his head almost reaching hers, her head half turned to meet his.

"We can't! She'll be hurt!" The torchlight hesitated. Charles knew it was true.

"Then get out of the way! As soon as he dismounts and runs I'm going to shoot him!"

Rory released his futile grip on Nandi's neck, grazing the wild coarse striped fur as he did. The stallion's eyes flickered. He stepped back.

"Hold the torch!" Charles stepped forward and stood next to Rory, aiming the rifle at the zebra, rain crawling over the barrel like a torrent of ants, raindrops caught in the torch beam like tadpoles or ant eggs or some kind of wriggling larvae.

The zigzags shuddered, and shifted, and the stallion reared back off Nandi, and he gathered himself again. But instead of whirling and galloping for the fence, he sprang forward, and headed straight for Charles, forelegs chopping.

Charles yelled and went down in a melee of stamping legs, vanishing into the black and white striped grass under the flashes of moonlight. Like a wildebeest going down under a flurry of lions in the black and white beam of a documentary spotlight.

"What's going on?" Carl shouted, running up with his rifle.

Rory ducked his head into his chest and ran straight into the zebra, and when the flashing hooves and teeth hung over his head like a breaking wave, he threw himself straight into them.

"What the hell are you doing? Get out of the way so I can shoot!" Yelled Carl.

An iron hoof punched Rory on the ear and then he was beaten all over, and he curled up and rolled, felt Charles underneath him, then on top of him, then the wave passed and it rained on, but the weight of it had been released, and they stood up in the mud and watched the stallion gallop back through the broken fence. Carl cursed at them to get out of the shot, then fired at the zebra, but it was lost in the storm.

Charles was panting. He felt in his shirt pocket for the reading glasses that Rory knew were inside the house on the folded newspaper on his armchair in the empty yellow lamplight, that he didn't need right now. Then he felt in the mud for the dented rifle.

Carl just stared at them, shaking his head. Then he turned his back on them and left.

Nandi sighed, then snorted, dropped her head and started tearing at the squeaking grass. Rory stood up shakily and walked over to her. He led her back to the stables like a lamb. Charles, still patting his pocket, and wiping the gun, watched him go.

In the stables, he rubbed her down to dry her. The coat at her withers was scuffed and missing stripes of hair, and he stroked it. She twitched under his fingers, and so he squeezed her withers gently, and felt that she was bruised. She tried to shake him off like a fly, with a great quake of her skin just at that point, so he moved on, running his hand over her loins and quarters. She was covered in raking bands of mud but that was all. The damage was all inside. What if she hadn't been pregnant by Eeufees, and now she was, by the zebra? Rory tried to imagine the kind of foal she might have by mistake. Stripy, zebra-like --- Charles would go crazy! But would he take the chance of aborting her and then trying to get Eeufees to cover her again? Eeufees had been really badly put off. And their chances of getting Nandi to accept him again after tonight were very poor. Perhaps Charles would take the chance and wait, and hope for the best. But Rory knew that he would surely kill the foal at birth if it came out with stripes.

***

The kitchen door banged open and Carl came in, threw his precious rifle onto a table, and stomped up the stairs, then turned around, stomped back down, collected his rifle, and started back up the stairs. "I'm getting out of here as fast as I can" he said as he went.

"What?" Said Sarah. "What happened?"

"Dad is not coping, and Rory is a complete waste of time!" Carl said.

Charles, covered in mud and bleeding from his hand, entered. He had heard.

"Then come back, Carl, and help me make this place work! Can't you see that I need you?"

Carl looked around the room with a hunted expression on his face. “This is a disaster dad, can’t you tell? I can’t let it drag me down.”

Charles wiped his hand slowly over his face, leaving a smear of mud and blood diagonally across it.

“Please, my boy.”

Carl stared at him, at the defeated note in his voice. When he spoke, his tone was lower, but very uncomfortable.

“There’s a big game in two weeks’ time, and the provincial selectors will be there. Surely you can see I can’t give that up? It’s part of my plan for my future.”

Charles nodded slowly, and kept nodding, as he stared at his own muddy, bleeding hand, and as Carl walked slowly up the stairs. But when Sarah came to take his hand and wipe the blood off with a warm damp cloth, he backhanded her across the mouth without warning.

She gasped and fell back against the deep industrial sink and held onto the edge as blood ran from her lip, and Rory walked in the door and saw them.

“Tomorrow morning we are going after that beast and you are going to shoot him,” said Charles. “It’s your last chance to do the right thing.”

***

That night Rory watched them all. All the hunting scenes. Every movie had them. Stagecoach ambushes, wagon train attacks, buffalo hunts, stalking mountain lions – all that changed was the way they did it. From the reins flapping, both hands on the gun, comically speeded up scenes as the bandits swooped down on the mule trains; to the tense stalk through the dry

mountains, the danger of the wily mountain lion circling around behind them and pouncing; to the plains studded with buffalo carcasses as still and silent as ant heaps in the veld.

In the kitchen near the back door Charles looked up briefly as the lightning flashed again. Then looked down at the rifle as he polished out the scratches on the barrel.

Rory watched them all except for that first one with the deer and her fawn. And when they ran out, he scrounged around for more. And found, finally, the one he couldn't take his eyes off.

The hero had stampeded a herd of mustangs into a narrow, blind canyon. There was no way out. They were trapped. But as he rode in to close them off from behind, the herd stallion galloped up to fight him. A beautiful black horse, he neighed his challenge and reared up and chopped at the hero who just managed to swing his docile gelding out of harm's way. Then he circled his lasso and caught the stallion, who took off at a gallop. The hero spurred his horse and they raced back through the twisting canyon and up a stony track onto the plateau above. Finally the wild horse began to tire, but as the hero reeled him in, it become clear that it was all a wily trick. When he was within striking distance, the stallion reared again and struck out at the gelding, who shied, unseating his rider, then bolted off, dragging the rider off completely. He galloped wildly through the badlands, but the hero hung on doggedly to the end of the rope, skiing through the dust, and finally the stallion slowed and stopped, staring wild eyed with exhaustion, head hanging, wet as if he'd been through a storm. He stared at the hero as he walked slowly up to him. It was over. The hero had won against the forces of nature. He'd reduced a magnificent creature into a cowed prisoner. As Rory watched, his heart closed, petal by petal, like fingers curling into a tight huddled ball.

But he carried on watching anyway, long after the screen had blazed into white, long after the scratches on the film had stopped raining down it, and the screen was bare.

***

Charles had asked Carl to come along, and Carl had agreed. Paulus watched the three of them ride off, without speaking, into the lightening sky. It was going to be a beautiful day.

***

They found the herd in the same glade where Rory had seen them with Li.

He'd been trying to avoid this place. It glowed in the dawn, and insects rose like steam off a pot that was brewing. Like the first hazy flecks of how water and soil took shape and formed life. Amongst them, the herd grazed with the intensity of getting down to business. The mares stamped at the muggies, and swished their tails to keep them away from their swelling bellies. The foals trotted around behind their mothers when the riders halted on the edge of the glade, and peeped at them from under their necks. They did not seem overly surprised to see riders approach, especially this quietly.

The stallion gave them even less attention than last time. Even as Charles, amazed at their luck, whispered to Rory to take careful aim and shoot. Behind him, Carl quietly raised his rifle and took aim.

Rory raised the rifle and looked down it to the stallion who met his gaze as evenly as before. He prayed for the herd to take fright and gallop away. He prayed for the stallion to stop looking at him.

The stallion wasn't chewing anymore. He was just taking him in. Him, Rory, as if he was a horse to consider. He might be acceptable, might hang around the fringes, minding out for the heels of protective mothers and the stallion himself, if he got cheeky, like any growing colt. Or he might just be someone to ignore. But clearly he was not someone to fear. This irked Rory, and he thought about teaching him better.

Charles shifted irritably next to him and Carl whispered “Shoot now! It’s a clear shot!”

As Rory took aim, focusing on the third black stripe behind the shoulder, he realized that he was being watched by a foal, safe as houses behind both its mother and the stallion. Rory noticed its curious gaze, saw it wanting to step out from behind cover and explore these new and possibly entertaining visitors. Not bold enough to approach them head on, though, he turned and walked the invisible fence lined up with his father, and started to get into the shot.

“Now! Quickly!” Whispered Charles.

The foal paused at his father’s hip. The stallion’s chest was still open. He was still looking at Rory, but he glanced at the foal for a moment. There was thoughtfulness in his gaze now.

“Rory! Shoot!”

The foal stretched his head forward, wanting to sniff noses with his dad. He got more into the shot.

And Rory said “No.”

“This has to stop.” He threw the rifle into the wet grass, which startled the herd. The stallion spun and galloped off, his whole tribe on either side.

Rory turned his horse, faced Charles and his astonished expression for a moment, and turned for home. Carl was galloping after the herd, and he shot, but had to stop to reload.

“Rory!” Charles shouted after him.

“Dammit Rory! Come back!” Then Charles swung around and dug his heels into his horse, cursing at it because it also wanted to go home with Rory, and started galloping after Carl.

***

The word had not cracked the world open like an egg. Though he was spilt and formless within, on the outside nothing had changed. It didn't even seem any later. The usual fast drying early morning, before the sun gave up and drifted through the endless heat of the day, was still tender and luminous. The same blacksmiths tapped and tinked with their fluffy bundles of chicks beneath them, then tipped over and stabbed for insects in the wet grass. The same francolins raak raaked on the same dew stained ant heaps. He followed the same tracks he'd made with Charles and Carl earlier, when they were different people, but now those tracks were turned on their heads and as he overlaid them, he erased them, he unwound them.

His horse was eager to gallop, elated by the thought of home and the comforting routine of breakfast. Rory thought of Sarah who would be starting the day in the same way as she always did, hoping in this way to pull it on track to be a sufficiently normal day. He thought about how that one word would make sure it never went off the rails again. He thought of how everything would be lined up, the cups and the saucers and the plates, marching to order and pulling her in their wake. Such a small domestic train of chipped saucers. Such a big word, a meteorite, to fall in their midst. There was no smaller way to do it, of course. He'd tried all these years to do it with needles and syringes and poultices and bandages. And DVDs and curls of film. But there had been no way, and it had taken the enormity of a two letter word to change everything.

He needed to get back quickly and explain that. And how he would make sure that it was always good for her, from now on.

***

When he rushed through the door, Sarah jumped.

"It's all fine, mom, it's going to be fine from now on!"

"What are you talking about? Where's dad and Carl?"

"They're still hunting them, but I wouldn't shoot, mom. I said no. And now he knows he can't make me do things anymore."

Sarah looked at her son, his face on fire, that sleepwalking look gone forever, and she hugged him with the answering joy in her, and also to shield him from the way her heart clenched again straight after it flowered.

"And mom, I'll be able to make sure he can't touch you."

She saw the same open hearted enthusiasm he'd had as a small boy. She remembered it, how she'd tried to protect it, how she'd watched him bravely trying to shield her when he was much too young, not even reaching Charles's belt buckle. She remembered how that light in his eyes had died, slowly, no matter how hard she tried to keep it lit. Now it was back and she felt like she had a second chance.

This time she would not make the same mistakes.

"You've always been that way, Rory. Maybe now is the time for some changes."

He was confused. "But it's good! It's a good thing!"

"Yes it is. Without doubt."

"So what do you mean? What needs to change?"

"Nothing, Rory, you should change nothing. I was talking about myself."

The clouded cautiousness crept back in to his gaze and she could not bear it. Not already. Not so soon! There was no time to lose. "Rory! Look at the time. You'll be late for school. Hurry and change, I'll pack you a sandwich. Come on, come on!" She flicked a tea towel playfully at him, shooing him out of the kitchen, shooing the clouds out of his eyes. He laughed and ran up the stairs.

She twisted the tea towel around her fingers, feeling the clouds that she'd skimmed off him, now caught up in its worn weave. Then she picked up a cup from the shelf of clean dry

ones, and dried it. Realized what she was doing and stopped. Looked around the kitchen as if seeing it for the first time. She'd more or less succeeded in making it into a normal kitchen. There were still miles of unusable space. But in this corner, if you looked just at this corner, it wasn't too bad. A checked curtain framed a small window into a back garden with tomatoes ripening, beans twining, chickens kicking compost. Inside, those shelves of neatly packed crockery. If you turned your back on the wilderness of empty tables and gaping bain maries, and stuck to the rules, everything in its place, you could make it work. Sort of.

She put the cup back and straightened the line. Then, with an air of finality, she folded the tea towel and hung it over the sink, wiped her hands on her apron, took it off, hung it from its hook next to the sink and then changed her mind, balled it up and threw it into the dustbin.

Rory came back in as she finished his sandwich and packed it into a lunchbox. His hair was damp, his bag swung over his shoulder.

"Mom, what about when dad gets back? I can't go. He'll kill you." He started to drop his shoulder to shed the bag.

"No he won't. Don't worry. I have a plan." She unzipped the bag that lolled from his arm, pushed in the Tupperware, and hoisted it back onto his shoulder. "Go."

Surprised by a voice he'd never heard from her before, he walked out of the door, glancing back at her, trying to work something out.

She watched him walk down the drive towards the gate, and then she turned back to the shelf, took a cup out of the row, did not adjust the other cups to hide the gap it left. Then she walked towards the fridge.

On her way out of the room she stopped to look at Auntie May's cabinets. She took the bridesmaid out. She had bands of pink and purple in her ridged dress. And a posy of flowers tied with a long looping blue ribbon. She did not quite look at you, but smiled away to the side with a rosebud mouth that looked old fashioned today. Sarah traced the ruffled china-cloth as she carried her up the stairs.

***

In her bedroom, she put the cup down carefully on her dressing table, and the bridesmaid next to it, and then closed the curtains. Worn thin as one of her old nighties, they did not keep the sunlight out, just took the brightness off it, the jarring morning brightness. Even at this hour it was strong already, clean washed by the rain. Then she carefully unhooked the frail crumbling string of the crocheted table cloth, taking care where it usually snagged on the corners of the trunk.

It was her father's old military trunk. Like him, dark, metal, dented. She had chosen this to hold her things; it was part of an old secret. The last place he'd look. But when her father was dead, you'd think she'd have replaced it with something of her mother's. But in the end, her mother who'd never had much, had even less. Less than anyone she knew, even for a generation that prided itself on parsimony and economy. Making a virtue out of their poverty. They'd had less than even other people in their church who also thought that a child's love for a doll was giving in to the devil. She had been the weak one. Holding onto the little she had. But for some reason she could never bear to give her little things up, even when shamed by her father. And her mother would keep quiet as he shouted, but later she always tried to help Sarah hide them.

She unpacked her now onto the dressing table. The doll from her granny. Even at the age of six she had known, as she unwrapped her in bliss, that she would never be allowed to keep her. Perhaps if her golden hair had curled less riotously. Or been less bright. Perhaps if her porcelain cheeks been less red. Her cheeks less plump, her mouth less of a love curve. Her dress less smocked and be-ribboned.

Her father thanked his mother-in-law and she could tell from his voice that he would not be able to make her give it away. But he would not let her have it either. Later he shouted at his wife that her mother was challenging him with that doll, she was laying down the

gauntlet, it was a battle. But her mother spoke up for once, and said that her mother just thought it would make Sarah happy to have one beautiful thing.

For a while her father kept it in a box with his black boots. A while later, her mother told him she'd put it away in the attic. But all the time the doll had been in here, where her mother knew her father never went. Waiting for the day when she could come out into the light. Sometimes when her father was out, her mother would call her to open it and play with her a little. But when her mother died, she knew she'd have to wait for her father to die too before she saw her again. Finally she took possession of the trunk but though she thought of her often, lying there in the dark, she seldom took her out anymore. The doll had never lived in the light.

Now she looked long into her pretty face. Unfaded, unyellowed, because she'd never lived in the sun. Undrawn on in koki pen, uncracked by play. Perfect.

Then she looked up at the bridesmaid whose sideways smile seemed to be directed at the teacup next to her. The one with the green flower. Like her, Sarah turned and looked at the cup.

***

In woodwork, the glow finally wore off, sandpapered off into a soft dust on his fingertips. He looked at them, and he thought. Or rather, he let pictures run through the reel of his mind. The foal. Its father. And mother.

He thought about Sarah making his sandwich. The tomato bleeding into the white flesh of the bread, then wrapped and packed in the lunchbox. The lid closed as if it would never open again.

Something was different. He thought of a character in one of those overwrought South American movies, the mother of an idealistic young fighter who, against all odds, keeps a neat house in a barrio, geraniums in paint pots at the doorstep. He thought of that woman when she hears the revolution has begun. Pale and resolute and holding some great burden away from him. Suddenly grim, stronger than anyone.

They were making a bowl. He was hollowing out the core of it. It was almost complete, when he dropped it on the floor and ran for the door.

***

He stopped at the threshold of her room to calm his breathing. He knew he had to be very clear now. Except that his mother lay asleep in the bed, curtains drawn at midday, all looked normal. The trunk under its white lacy cloth. An empty teacup on the bedside table.

But as he walked around the bed to open the curtain, he saw the doll lying next to his mother, the sheet tucked up under her chin, one arm out on the cover. He had never seen it before, but his mother lay curled around it as if it was a baby. He looked closer. The pie collar frill of a hand embroidered dress. A gathered pink gingham sleeve ending at a chubby wrist. Pale baby nails. His mother's hand, lying over her. Nails pale, blue at the base. He looked at Sarah's face, knowing her lips would be blue. He called her name, knowing she would not answer. He shook her, hard, knowing she would not stir. He ran into the bathroom and looked in the basin, in the medicine cabinet. Then he ran out, grabbed the phone next to her head, and dialed. As it clicked through, he heard Carl's voice downstairs and Charles's footsteps, tired, heavy, on the stairs.

***

When Charles and Carl stepped in at the door, sweaty, muddy, arms scratched and bleeding, Sarah was sleeping as if it was nighttime. Rory sat on the bed shouting into the phone. Charles's first confused thought was that the noise would wake her. Then, that it was high time she got up anyway. Then he stopped thinking.

To Rory, watching his father's face as he spoke on the phone, the frozen anger looked, suddenly and surprisingly, exactly like fear.

And in the middle of everything else clogging up his brain, came the clear thought: perhaps that's what anger was.

***

Dr Gey van Pitius hadn't done house calls for years. And these days, there were paramedics for most things, even childbirth. So when he did have to drive he knew what to expect. A car pulled over in the shade of a bluegum on a farm road, doors locked, keys in the ignition, windscreen murky on the inside, flies clustering at the windows. Or, more often, this. The silent isolation of a lonely bedside in the heart of the home. Curtains drawn. An empty tea cup. The family instructed to search for brown bottles with handwritten labels in the kitchen or the cowshed. Giving him time and space to see what, if anything, he could do.

This time the younger son came back quickly with the bottle. The label meant he could tell them that she probably didn't need an ambulance to Klerksdorp. Not as things stood. Thank God.

The father, as he'd expected, took that that as a signal to go downstairs and try to muffle the clink of the whiskey bottle, followed quickly by the older son. Hopefully he would be

back at the surgery by the time the alcohol melted the fear and warmed the anger. But the younger one didn't move from his chair next to the bed.

"You're going to have your hands full once I leave" he told him. "You should get some rest now. Get your brother to come and sit here for a while."

The boy just looked at him. A beautiful boy, but the kind he'd worry about one day, maybe. The kind he sometimes found in those dust-covered cars. The kind people would talk about later as being too sensitive, too "artistic". That kind. At least the older one looked like the kind who could get things done, even though he had fled the sickroom as fast as he could go.

He sighed. "Listen to me, my boy, I've seen this more times than I can tell you. Life's not as easy out here as city people think. It's lonely. People do strange things. It's not your fault. It will be much easier for you with her, and with your father, if you don't blame yourself, like you're doing."

A brooder too. Those boys in cars with windscreens sticky on the inside, their mothers were the ones he found in beds like these.

"She will need a lot of looking after. Make sure you share the work, okay?"

The boy nodded, and the doctor saw that it was good for him to be kept busy. "Do you think you could make me a cup of coffee, my boy?"

***

Carl was sitting with Sarah as she slept. He held her blue-veined hand. She was too gentle for a life like this. So was Rory. If you didn't toughen up, you got run over like a bird in the road. He patted her hand, willing her to wake up. He thought he felt her squeeze his fingers.

"Mom? Mom?" He said. "Come on now, you need to get better. You need to take things less personally, mom! I wish I could show you how, mom, because can't you see? This is not working!"

He sighed and looked around the room, tapped his feet. Inside him, a feeling of panic was growing. He was trying, he was really trying, but it didn't matter how hard he worked on his own life, anything to do with his family just seemed to suck him in like quicksand. They were their own worst enemies. He thought for a while, watching her sleep, then made a decision.

Rory sat in his room and stared at the dark screen out the window. His phone rang and he sighed, punched the No button, held it until it beeped itself off, screen dark as the one outside. Downstairs he heard the fridge open and close. The bakkie left. He looked out of the window. It was Carl. But his stuff was all still here, in the room they were sharing for the holidays.

***

He thought the truth might leak through on the loose sprockets and be rattled out in the rustle of the film. He listened for a rhythm to the rustling tuk tuk, that might be a code, if he knew how to read it.

"What should I have done?" he asked the close ups of Clint Eastwood and Paul Newman and John Wayne. But they just slitted their eyes and drew smoke meaningfully into their lungs. He watched everything, all the way through, though it had been growing in him for a while, that these heroes only knew everything if you didn't stray from the script. Off script, off screen, they were just doing a job. Like his father, only they did it better.

He had been looking for signs, the rabbit tattoo that would help him enter another world. But. Maybe thoughts of the matrix were just mad.

And even if it's true, Keanu, even if you are right. And I believe you are right. It's all very well for you up there on the screen, Keanu. But down here, it's just me. I think I see a rabbit tattoo in a zebra stallion's stripes. I think I see it in a broken down racehorse's eyes. I take my lead from a part-wild mare, because she seems so certain. And then it turns out I am wrong. It's not some kind of answer. It's just me making a complete mess of everything.

Perhaps dad is right. Perhaps I should be more like Carl.

He thought of the finger that stabs, pitying, exasperated, at a gap in a line of screwdrivers to show him "there, there is your place".

But I hesitate, and I listen, and I watch for the rabbit tattoo. I'm trying to decode the pattern of the stripes, I'm looking for an aeroplane part I've never seen before in a shed full of junk. I'm feeling for what the mare feels.

But maybe I am wrong. And I should plan out my life, perhaps graphic design or IT, and I should follow it without looking back.

He thought of the smallest to biggest march of the screwdrivers.

Perhaps I should take my place in the line. Because I saw that rabbit tattoo. And I was waiting, and I obeyed it. And it led me here. And it was not harmless. Look what it did.

Look what I did.

***

"Rory, please don't blame yourself." He was dozing in a chair beside her bed when she spoke, and he jumped at the sound of her voice.

"Mom! How are you feeling?"

“I’m sorry. I wanted you to be free.”

He shook his head. “By doing that?”

“How else? He would never let me go. And so you would never be able to go. I had to remove myself.”

“Promise me you won’t do that again!” He was vehement.

She shook her head, too tired to speak anymore. Rory watched her sleep, feeling love, feeling trapped.

***

Carl was leaving. Earlier than planned. He’d phoned Brent who was hunting at a farm near Madikwe, near Groot Marico. He was going to fly down and fetch him. Carl would hitchhike to the airfield.

“Seeing as mom is doing so well, I’m going to have the break I need. He’s invited me to do some hunting too.”

“Well you’ve got your gun, might as well use it,” said Rory.

“Ja, properly, this time.” He looked Rory in the eye as he wrapped his Winchester into its bag, a slim padded envelope in military green, then patted it.

“It’s about time you made friends with one of these yourself.”

“I know how to use a gun!”

“I’m trying to put this nicely, Rory. After everything that’s happened. I could just punch you for how much trouble you’ve caused around here, but I am trying to get through to you.

You should try and understand what it means to carry a gun and to use it, all the time. How the world works. We've been doing this forever. Since the dawn of history. Man the hunter."

"So you're saying this, with its fancy telescopic sights that makes it easy –"

"-Easy!"

"To shoot an animal from 250 metres away, is the same thing as a Bushman with his poisoned arrows?"

"It's still you and the animal. You look it in the eye. It feels like you know it. You stroke the trigger. One jumpy move and you miss by miles. If your heart beats too hard, if you battle to breathe quietly, sometimes it seems like the animal hears you and takes fright. It's still got a sporting chance. And it sorts the men from the boys."

Rory shook his head, thinking about Carl galloping after the zebra herd, firing into it.

"And then again, some people will never get it." Carl sighed. "Listen boet, let me give you some advice from your older brother. You make things so much harder for yourself than you need to. You think you're helping mom, but have you thought about how maybe you're just making it harder for her?"

"Since when have you become mom's supporter?"

"Look where all your support got her."

A hot and giddy anger pushed Rory between the shoulder blades and rushed him forward into the room. The kind of mad fury that led people to do really suicidal things. It felt like jumping in front of a train. But Carl just laughed at his upraised fists and pushed them away, hard enough to spin Rory around and land him on the bed. The humiliation of being so powerless took him straight back to the age of five and to the temper he'd forgotten he'd once had. It made him lose himself completely, and he picked up the nearest thing which was the gun in its padded bag, and ran at Carl again, raising the gun without any idea of what he wanted to do with it; yelling without being able to form words at all, even if he'd had the first

idea what he wanted those words to be. Suddenly action had totally outrun thoughts, words, plans, arguments, but it didn't run for long, crumpled into a brick wall again, and without him knowing how, he was up against the bedroom wall with Carl pinning him there by the neck till Rory's vision blurred, and speaking in a low yet pounding voice. As he panted, he started to hear the words that matched Carl's working face.

"Shut up. Shut up, okay? She's just on the other side of the passage. Listen to me. I am not going to bother to speak to you again. I've been away for a while and I can see what's really going on. You are causing all the shit in this family. You should be supporting dad. You should be making some decisions about how to live your life. Some adult decisions, you're old enough. You can't be a spoiled mommy's boy all your life, always whining."

He gestured with his free hand towards the window. "If this place ran the way you think it should, what would be left of it? You probably think we should take down the fences and let it all go back to the wild. How would we live then, hmm? As it is, how wild do you really think it is over there? Other than anthrax, and feral animals, all you're going to find in there are the traps of the wardens who just want exclusive access to the hunting."

Rory saw fence posts toppling, wire wrapping itself up and snarling into big tangles. He saw the line beneath the fence, the grass cut and watered on the one side, patchy and leggy on the other.

"And if that horse is carrying that zebra's foal, what do you think it'll do to dad's reputation to produce a bastard? He hasn't decided what to do yet, but he's still hoping she was already pregnant when she was mated. But if worst comes to worst, imagine what kind of monstrosity could be born. A mule, stripy and sterile at the same time. He'll be laughed out of town. He'll always be the guy who bred the quagga. The dead end."

Carl's thumb under his ear was making the blood pound. Rory felt like he was in a dream. A quagga. He remembered seeing a picture of one in a museum.

“You think you’re some kind of tragic hero, sticking to your principles,” Carl said, with one last shove before he let Rory go. “All you’re doing is going down the plug hole. Dad needs someone with common sense. He needs that. I can’t be here, I can’t go down with this ship.”

He slung the gun bag over his shoulder like a backpack and walked towards the door.

“You never know, I might go farming myself, one day, if I don’t go into sports marketing. But ---”

He looked around the room and then outside, towards the screen -

“Not like this.”

He left without bothering to slam the door, or even close it. Rory sat on the messed up bed and rubbed his neck, and stared out of the window.

The quagga had been a sad little donkey-like thing with cream and brown stripes and a ragged scar all around the base of her neck. The shape of the hacked line was like a necklace drooping into cleavage, suggesting that her head had once been a trophy, decapitated and staring out from a wall in some rich man’s hall. And yet she had not looked amusing or monstrous. She did not even have the noble look of the extinct species that you see in encyclopaedias. There was no Shakespearian tragedy about her, nothing righteous or accusing. Her expression was patient and a little anxious, like a pony waiting for the bit and the bridle.

She stood there, gazing solemnly out of her glass box against a flat painted diorama labelled ‘the African veldt’. This was a hazy approximation as seen by European eyes – vague and blurry, a landscape that went awry without tracks, hedges and farms. Perhaps feeling this, the artist had taken the liberty of anchoring it with domestic looking copses of trees where of course there would have been none, then dotting the plains with sketchy background antelope spaced wrong.

She had her back to this, and was looking out, perhaps for home.

When he saw this picture, Rory had felt that she was just a familiar, sad ghost. But now, he felt another kick of anger in his back at the thought. Why did that quagga docilely accept her fate? Why had she not at least gone down fighting? Like the zebra stallion would have? He would never have ended up in a glass tomb. He would never have stared out from a wooden collar as an English version of Carl swaggered past. He would have kicked his brains out first, or taken half a dozen trophy-disfiguring bullets trying.

Rory jumped up from the bed and, full of a new energy, headed out the door, going he didn't know where, or for what purpose, not yet. His mother called his name as he passed her door. For the first time in his life, he pretended not to hear her.

***

Perhaps it was the flower in the vase that did it. The tray was otherwise the same as all the other ones she'd never touched. But this time, there was a cosmos flower. She stroked a petal, nudging it so that it was pushed back on its stem. With the back of her finger, the way you'd stroke a baby's cheek.

By the time she spoke, Rory was kneeling next to her, head buried in the blankets, waiting for her touch on her way back from the tray.

"The cosmos is out already."

He nodded.

"Please go back to school. You've missed too much already. I'll be alright."

He was never going to believe those words again.

"Rory, you have to leave sometime."

Still he said nothing.

"Please, live your life. If only for me."

It was pale pink cosmos, the kind that was growing in great pillowy banks on the verge at the gate. Looking dense and solid all together like that, but spidery, frail, when you looked at a single stem closely. The flowers wide spaced, miles of thready stem between each trembly head.

***

Rory came into the living room next morning, trying to smooth the wrinkles out of his school shirt. The table was crowded with dirty mugs and plates and papers. Charles's muddy boots on top.

Charles sat in his evening armchair with his slippers on and his goals notebook open on his lap, and the lamp was on as if it was still night. The rifle, very clean and polished, leaned against the arm.

As Rory walked past, treading for a moment in the circle soaked with old yellow lamplight, Charles said:

"Don't think I've forgotten about that zebra".

Rory stood for a moment, then walked out of the front door.

***

There had been an accident on the road outside town, the road that went past Monsanto and then the township. The class was discussing whether, if you drive drunk, you should go to jail for murder. Or should you get a lesser sentence because you didn't actually intend to do harm?

Li glanced over at Rory who was staring out the window. He didn't appear to be listening, but she saw his lips whiten, and she jumped in.

"Or say someone steals food because he's starving, is that different to stealing out of greed?"

"What?" shouted George in delight. "Someone managed to steal from you eagle-eyed Chinese?"

She stuck her chin out and waded back in. "Yes! And even with my best kung fu I couldn't stop them!"

George was out of his chair now, doing kung fu "Haaya ha!" to appreciative whooping and yelling, and in the middle of the chaos Li glanced over at Rory. He met her eyes without a smile, then looked back out of the window.

***

When he walked down the steps towards the gate, she was watching for him, and though she tried not to hurry, she had to run to catch up with him before he vanished. People were watching.

"Rory, please." He stopped and turned to face her.

"How is your mom?"

He shrugged. Li took a deep breath. It must mean that she was kind of okay.

"So why won't you talk to me? Is it me?"

"No."

"Your dad?"

"No," he said, turning wearily for the gate, "it's me".

She touched his arm, trying to hold him for a moment. "You should stay away from me." He said.

She pulled her hand away and stepped backwards. "No," he said, "I didn't mean –" He shook his head again, turned and walked away.

***

Next day she didn't try to talk to him, but she watched from the steps, sheltered from the rain, as he walked past Ouboet's car. The old man stepped out and stopped him. Gestured to him to climb into the passenger seat, out of the rain. After that she saw nothing through the blurry windscreen.

***

From inside Ouboet's car, parked on the verge next to a black palisade fence, the stripes of the fence looked wobbly. They crawled over the glass, flexing, twitching as the raindrops swam down.

"Did you ever ask your father about Robbie?"

"I tried."

"There's something I should have told you a long time ago. If I'd known what was going to happen, I would have spoken. I was wrong not to."

The raindrops were black tadpoles as they swam into a palisade stripe, grey as they swam out again.

"You needed to know about Robbie and his death."

"It was a long time ago." Ouboet was chilled by the tired old man voice. He leaned over and picked up a big reel of film lying on the back seat.

"A few minutes after that stuff you saw, with your father and his brother at the agricultural show, something happened that's not on the film. Nobody saw it. Only Charles was there."

Rory finally looked at him.

"Everyone understood why he didn't go into the pen himself to try and get his brother out when he fell. Not with that bull right on top of Robbie. But what nobody could understand was why your father didn't run for help."

The wobbly stripes flinched and shuddered as if taking an unheard gunshot in the gut. Then the whole windscreen seemed to warp and wave in front of his eyes, falling in on him like a collapsing animal, a felled horse going over hard. That moment when you realize that for all their grace and co-ordination, when life goes out of them they are just a ton of deadweight, a falling tree in a forest, and you are about to be crushed.

"There were people not far away. But by the time they heard the screams over the music –"

"Stop. Please stop."

“I’m sorry to tell you this at such a time. But things are worse than I thought. You have to know.”

Rory did not look at him. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. We are worried about you.”

The stripes lurched again, the death throes of a racehorse on the course with a broken leg who still tries to get up and stand on a leg that has snapped through. The next thing, a bakkie arrives, towing a horsebox. By then sometimes the horse is up, even standing on the stump, not feeling it, and grazing. And then they put the screens up around it. And when they pack the screens away again and leave, there is nothing to be seen but a stain on the turf.

“Nothing was ever proven and of course he was just a boy, but that’s when your grandparents left town and pretty much vanished. The Gibbons family, gone for thirty years, nobody heard a word, until you turned up where we would least expect you – back here.”

Just a stain on the turf. He’d seen horses die so many times. Rearing and falling from a lethal injection after a failed colic operation. Trying to get up after a heart attack, the rowing of their legs slowly faltering and stilling. So many ways to die, and all of them a horror. Followed by butchery. A snapped leg, a ruptured gut, a gun to the head and a meat wagon. And you couldn’t make it better.

The windscreen twitched, it looked like life but it was just a reflex.

The horse was beyond help. Any improvements were things like screens and greater efficiency, better cleaning up. Things to shield those who had to see it. To help them forget.

Was that better or worse? Rory felt in him the damage of all that witnessing. What was the point of making people watch?

But shouldn’t there be witnesses? Shouldn’t people feel the truth of it, heavy as a horse and shocking as its collapse? Not leave it to a hardened abattoir team?

Shouldn't there be a price, shouldn't there be a reckoning? Shouldn't there be less forgetting?

"Give me the reel." Said Rory, opening the door to climb out.

***

It had taken him only a few minutes to thread it all through properly and get it ready to roll. There were no misfeeds, no twisted bits, he'd checked. Now he sat and looked out the window. And he thought of the film Mrs. Malan was going to show the class next double period. He'd seen it before, at movie club. Max's choice, of course. What an old woman he was.

Laurence Olivier in *Hamlet*. 1948. Jean Simmons as his girlfriend Ophelia, Eileen Herlie as his mother Gertrude. Fuzzy black and white, the white bits blown out and overexposed, the black deep pits, solid, without definition. Hamlet rushing around all the time, making long speeches and upsetting people.

That stagey battlement scene which should have looked like an eyrie above a wet, wild, churning world but really just looked like a bad set.

Swirling mists, the shrouded ghost. Look, my lord, it comes!

***

Deep in the silent glare of mid afternoon, in the heart of the nature reserve, the bakkie pulled up alongside Charles and the two wardens got out, and asked him, politely, to get off his horse and hand over his gun, and to come with them, please. After some argument, the senior

warden said the junior warden would walk the horse home. The tubby junior warden looked reluctant, but said nothing.

***

Sometime that afternoon the phone rang in the house and Rory heard Sarah answer it.

He waited on. It got darker. Which was good. Film is far more effective at night.

***

Much later, Snyman's bakkie approached from the town side. It slowed and stopped at the gate, but did not turn in. Headlights on and indicator still flashing right, it idled impatiently in the driveway as Charles climbed out, leaned in at the open window to talk for a moment, then waved and walked in. The bakkie reversed briskly out into the road and then roared off, the passenger window snapping closed as it did.

My hour is almost come.

Rory hit the switch and checked that the film ran true. The frames, and the gaps between each section, tuk tukked in orderly fashion, marching through the crevasses, the yawning canyons and kloofs. Then he walked out of the door and down the stairs.

"Rory?" He heard his mother call out behind him. She was on her feet again, but had not come downstairs yet.

"Stay in your room" he said to her, but he did not go in.

"What?"

He did not reply.

***

It was almost completely dark and Charles was grateful for it. Just lightning flickering overhead. Very close, but where was the noise of the thunder? He looked up into the dark sky and saw a river of light coming from the house, suspended above his head. He looked over his shoulder and saw the light hitting the screen and running. He stopped and stared.

Rory leaped the last four steps in one and ran out of the door, and didn't stop until he was standing in front of Charles.

Charles glanced at him. Robbie was standing in front of him at the same time as he swayed on that high pole above the bull's pen. He tried to shove him aside and launch himself towards the house.

"Stop the film!"

"No! You will watch!" Charles knew how much strength it took to push Rory over, but tonight he seemed planted in the earth like a concrete pylon. He stared at him in shock. There was only a moment, Rory knew, before Charles calculated how much more force he needed to use tonight.

"Do you remember this day, dad?" Charles glanced at the screen and met his own expression thirty years ago on the screen. And Robbie, still intact, still arrogant, still the perfect son.

"Nobody saw, but there were people who would have heard. Why didn't you call for help, dad?"

"Stop the film!"

"No."

"Then I will!"

Rory braced himself again but Charles spun and ran for the tractor shed and when Rory caught up with him he was already reversing the tractor and Rory had to jump aside or be run over. Charles roared out towards the screen. Over his head, a family strolled with ice creams. As he rammed into the steel legs of the screen, the little boy in the picture dropped his cone and started to cry. As the screen groaned and leaned out over the stables, trying to regain the balance it was losing, the boy's father laughed at his crying son, then spoke to him sharply. The camera closed in on the little boy's grubby face as he fought for control, fought for strength, fought not to care. Then the screen folded over onto the stable roof with a screech that was answered by the crumpling roof and the screaming horses beneath.

Rory ran for the horses, joining Paulus as he heaved at twisted torn galvanized iron sheets out of the way. The last image he'd seen before the screen fell and the light ran out into the darkness all the way into space, stayed with him as he worked.

The mother, patting the little boy's shoulder and smiling, but vaguely, and not quite at him.

***

Max had a rather valuable classic movie poster for the 1936 version of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. In the foreground it had a couple dancing, Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland. In the distance behind them soldiers galloped on horses in a haze of dust. The line "The reckless lancers sweep on and on - so that a woman's heart might not be broken!"

Once the reckless lancers and the cameras had swept on, what did they leave behind them? Something like what Rory was looking at now? Rounded lumps like big ant heaps amongst the wreckage, some of them still moving.

He went inside for the humane killer. The kitchen was silent, the padlocked freezers pale in the darkness. Apparently so many horses died for real in *The Charge of the Light Brigade* that laws had to be passed so that it would never happen again.

It looked like a pistol but it shot a bolt into a horse's brain, between the eyes. Usually that was enough, if you positioned it carefully. Apparently it was used in abattoirs. As a horseowner, you didn't need it often, hopefully never, but when you needed it, you really needed it.

Okay, so that movie was known to be untrue to what really happened. But their history teacher Mr. van der Walt, the one who was tightlipped about the things going on today, had taken them to the local museum which had photos and guns and leather water bottles from a Boer War battle in 1902.

This time it was Methuen and de la Rey, not Flynn and de Havilland. The Boer commandos charged from the East. Methuen was wounded when his horse was shot from under him, and de la Rey sent him to Lichtenburg hospital in his personal sprung wagon. More comfortable, Rory supposed. And gentlemanly. Taking the edge off history.

Paulus met him as he came back, and led him to the ones that had to be helped first. One of Eeufees's mares, due to foal next. As Paulus turned her head so that Rory could look her in the eyes and then between the eyes, he saw her congested pain. He tried not to look at her belly as they laid her head back down again, her body relaxing.

To Mr. van der Walt's pride, 68 British were killed and only 8 Boers.

But how many horses?

The next mare had a splintered leg and was still trying to stand up on it. Rory was quick, because Paulus was struggling to keep her rowing movements from throwing out his aim.

Nandi was amongst a few who only had a few cuts, though she was trembling and blowing. If she was pregnant, she might miscarry if she stayed this stressed. She needed to get

away. Rory took her to the farthest paddock, upwind, next to the reserve, and she seemed calmer there. Then he came back to the others.

They give you their strength and their power in return for your care. Stables need cleaning. Meals need to be regular. Teff mustn't be moldy. Blankets must be on before dusk to keep off the horse sickness muggies. Routine, all routine. And in return they will let you lead them off to war. They will let you spur them into a gallop down the muzzles of the Russian cannons.

The hardest was Gandhi. It was unlike him, not to be trying to get up and run. Rory spoke to him gently first, to calm him, and Gandhi's ears flickered in response. But he kept his real feelings to himself, because, right now, it was all about the horse. Paulus, on his knees, held Gandhi's head and Rory was very careful.

Then he let himself fall next to him and he hugged his neck where the wasted muscles had been slowly growing again because, after all, seven was not old. What made him think he could protect him? Whatever overgrazed bit of veld he had been put into and then forgotten about, it was better than here.

There was more to be done, and after a moment, Paulus and Rory got up and did it. Stroking their necks, humming to them. And all the time, rising not like panic but more like a certainty, came nausea. A shot in the gut-disgust for history.

When the need was finally stilled, still holding the humane killer, Rory stood up and looked around him at the battlefield.

Paulus touched him on the arm. "Rory, you must go."

Rory shook his head. "I'm not leaving. What about the foal?"

"It's time now Rory. For you and for me."

Rory looked at Paulus, at how tired and grim this man looked, at those dry worn hands that were so good with horses. He thought about the final task of horsekeeping they had had

to perform, and how they had not shaken, in case they frightened the suffering horses further. How they'd stroked on even as the horses stopped feeling his touch.

How hard it must be to stop your hands trembling with anger for more than twenty years, how hard not to occasionally fumble when bandaging the wounds that impatience and greed made. And then, when you lit a cigarette behind the stables, how hard to keep the match steady, in your own frustration somehow never forgetting that these horses were more indentured than you, that they could not imagine a road that led away and would not bring them back for supper and grooming.

Rory remembered those hands on his shoulders as a small boy, showing him how to handle a frightened horse, a new arrival, still a baby, grieving its mother, grieving its friends.

He thought about what it meant that all those years Paulus had never before said these words. Through everything that had happened.

And that he said them now.

Rory looked at Paulus. "I will miss you."

"You must go too!"

"No. Not me."

He turned towards the house.

"Him."

8

The foal

He walked in the door holding the humane killer and he had blood on his arms, blood on his face, blood on his clothes. He had finally let the control go and the whirling and the terror and the fury all came out as he shouted for his father. Charles came out of his bedroom and stood looking down on him from the stairs.

He had his reading glasses on.

It had occurred to him to put his glasses on.

Rory fell silent. Where were the words that could say what now needed saying?

He looked at this man who was his father. The family man at rest, after a good, or at least necessary, day's work. Doing what a man's gotta do.

There were no words for this.

Charles raised his eyebrows, waiting. But Rory could see that he was trembling. He looked glassy, as if he was drunk or in shock.

Outside, the screen would tell no more stories, and Paulus was packing his bags. All was silent and still. Rory was the last of them standing. The work was not over yet and somebody had to do it.

"You pushed him."

Charles nodded, sneering. "Daddy's little blue eyed boy."

Rory had a sudden thought of Carl and of how Charles looked at him. The way he'd always thought of himself in the family did a giddy turn.

“So you and I were in the same boat with our fathers.”

“No. You are nothing like me. You are just like Robbie.”

“I never understood why you hated me. From when I was small.”

Sarah came out from the shadows and started down the stairs. She saw the blood.

“Rory! You’re hurt!”

“No mom, I’m better now.”

The blood was dripping from his sleeve down over the humane killer and onto the floor. He watched it for a moment before raising the barrel and climbing slowly up the staircase, holding it out towards his father.

Charles took a few steps down towards him, his hand inching forward along the banister like a blind man’s.

“You put it between the eyes, dad, exactly in the middle, and you pull the trigger.”

“I know how to use it.”

Charles took it. He looked at the drying gore, and wiped it a bit with his fingers.

“Gandhi loved you no matter what you did. Like a child. Even at the end, he would have been happy, if it was you using this.”

Charles’s legs fell from under him like a racehorse felled by a heart attack. He collapsed onto a stair and slumped forward over the slimy pistol.

“Gandhi,” he said.

The humane killer drew bright red bloodstains and darker purple and grey clots on his shirt, on the stomach, above his belt. He looked eviscerated.

“My boy.”

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From the outside, the shop looked about the same as last year. The differences were slight inside, a few less Chinese things, a few more South African.

It was still early. The shop was empty except for Li's mom who stood behind the counter, going through some slips from the open till.

The bell at the door tinkled and Li's mom looked up, then smiled as Sarah walked inside. Sarah smiled back, and, looking more confident, approached the counter and stepped easily behind it. Li's mother moved aside for her in the same manner.

Sarah took a neatly folded floral housecoat from a pile behind the counter and put it on, her movements increasingly confident and routine. After buttoning it up, she stepped behind the till and Li's mother walked away towards the door to their private quarters. As she closed the door behind her, Sarah caught a glimpse of the kitchen chair with its red satin cushion.

Alone, she glanced around the shop, then straightened some things on the counter in front of her. She could have been any widow or divorcee running a tuisnywerheid or answering phones as a dentist's receptionist. A woman raising children without help on a tight budget, a woman who wore her clothes till they went at the seams and did without a hairdresser, pinning her hair up in a bun. One of those unnoticed women. But there was a difference. Instead of the tiredness, worn down by the daily struggle to make ends meet, there was a brightness. Her fingers, as she stacked boxes of matches, were light and purposeful. She placed the stack on the shelf behind her, nudged one that was out of alignment back into its place, and turned with satisfaction at this little bit of order back to her place at the till.

The bell tinkled, and Sarah looked up, smiling. In a soft voice that got stronger as she spoke, she asked "Can I help you?"

***

That evening when she walked home, torchlight was flickering around the new stable that Rory had built for Nandi as the pregnancy grew. It was in a different place. She turned aside and looked in at the door.

Nandi was lying down looking at her tail. Li was stroking her shoulder, and Rory was holding her tail out of the way and trying to see what was going on. Nandi strained and grunted. Rory spoke to her in a low voice.

Li glanced up and saw Sarah. “Hello Mrs. Gibbons.”

Rory looked up and smiled briefly at his mother. “Hi.”

“How is she doing?”

Rory’s face was tight with worry. “It seems like a big foal. Especially for her first. Maybe she’s not built right for a broodmare. Or maybe with its genes it’s too much for a thoroughbred mother.” He missed Paulus. Paulus would know.

Li stroked his arm. Sarah looked at Nandi. She thought the mare looked alright. But close.

“I don’t know about horse births -”

“Do you think we should call the vet?”

“- but I know about other kinds of births. To me it looks normal. Shall I bring some tea?”

“Yes please. But then will you stay?”

Sarah nodded. Rory looked relieved.

Inside the house, all was quiet, expectant. She looked around her as she stepped in the door. A few things had changed. She'd been happy to see that armchair loaded into the little mover's van, and the candy twist lamp too. Her trunk was now in the place where it had been, and her doll sat upright on the crocheted bedspread that still covered it.

In the kitchen she took clean cups out of the drying rack and hunted for saucers, any saucers, even though they didn't match. Then she took a tray down to the stable and put it on an upturned bucket, and offered to hold a torch for them.

The tea was cold by the time Nandi strained one more time, from shoulders down to tail, and a dark twitching bag slithered out onto the shavings in a shower of watery fluid. Rory's fingers were there to tear it open at the tiny muzzle and the mare was sniffing and licking the little nose and his fingers all at the same time. The mouth opened and closed, and the foal took a breath, and lay there for a few moments. Rory cleared the placenta from his tiny clean hooves and then up over the wet fur, which was zigzagged with wetness and with something else. The mare was nickering soft in her throat and the little creature pricked his ears and opened his eyes to this new world, then he lifted his head and met her nose with his own, no bigger than a teacup.

Sarah went to make a new pot of tea and this time they actually drank it, watching the mare and foal, both standing, sniffing each other over. The stripes were drying now, and perhaps it was just the baby fluff, but they were blurry, the dark ones brown, the light ones cream. From the base of the tail, they widened over the rump and then, from the point of the hip they dived down like fingers curling into the hollow at the stifle. Perhaps this was the part of the pattern that helped mothers bond with their foals, he thought.

Then he clucked his tongue at his stupidity. Unlike a zebra mother, Nandi would know this foal not from subtle differences at certain points in his pattern, but from every single stripe that ran over his body. Every one of them said he was different. Like a single elaborate fingerprint in a world of smooth blank fingertips, he was marked all over by individuality. He could not help but stand out. Loud and proud and crass, maybe ugly too in all likelihood, with those long ears, but so what?

So what! Rory suddenly felt like parading him down the streets of the town, past the Land Bank and the church, the school and the chain furniture stores, calling out to the mystified townsfolk, “Look at him!” and “Yes! He’s a half caste, he’s a bastard! So what?” and punching the air.

Rory laughed out loud. They would think he was mad, of course, but then what could you expect from a Gibbons, they were all odd. Then, as the elation moved through him and out the other side, Rory thought of practicalities. What would he be good for? How would he get on in the paddock with the other horses that Rory might want to keep? Might want to buy cheap as yearlings, break in, sell on fast? It would be quicker than breeding, there was less that could go wrong. Would this foal have his father’s immunity to horse sickness? More and more horses got it every year as the vaccination lost potency.

It was all new, too new to have answers for. What on earth would become of such a creature Rory could not yet know. He had never seen anything like him. But he was sucking now, and flicking his little sheepskin of a tail, and stamping his neat little hoof. He never knew such a foal could be born and he certainly did not know what kind of horse he would grow into. But the foal glanced at him as he suckled, not losing his grip, and Rory saw for a moment the self-containment of the father, the being enough in himself, to himself, never to doubt. No need to parade. No need even to make a point. Then the foal’s glance slid away from him, onto more important things, and Rory felt dismissed. Forgotten in that instant.

He smiled. This foal was his father’s son. He was something to reckon with. Rory was happy to be brushed aside by such a foal. He could just tell he was going to have a hard time in a few months when he broke him to halter and then later, the bridle. He could not really see this foal walking obediently along behind him around the arena or the paddock. Yet funnily enough he had a sudden vision, a calm, clear one, of the two of them turning off the Coligny road and walking into Boikhutso, watched by scratching hens and men fixing cars, and women standing outside cell phone booths, and children walking back from school in dusty uniforms. He had no idea where Paulus’s place was, but he knew he would find the way. Everyone would know how to direct him to the chicken place.

THE END