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2018

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

Dream Castle

Rudi Benade

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Chapter 1 - Load

Architecture is an addiction that kills slower than a cigarette. If there was a gateway drug for Brody, it was the first taste as a six year old; the day he accumulated all the world's woodblock and Lego, constructed the infinite tower and the one vast ziggurat to end all ziggurats, the day he stood over the completed thing like a toddler god and tore it down again, all over the course of one afternoon.

So inevitably he was drawn to study it - five years in the university print lab - instant coffee at four in the morning - cursing the first tweeting of the early birds. Five years of watching an A1 size sheet of paper stutter out of a plotter. Five years of black bagged eyes and sticky fingers; wiping blood and glue off the edge of a craft blade. Half a decade of squinting at trusses; complaining at the quality of pen nibs.

There was a time in Johannesburg when it was thought architects could save the world. They really believed that - design making grand changes to people's lives - and for a while he also did. Hillbrow Modernism seemed like the weapon of revolution. This was in the sixties. There remained a small romance around the profession; people pictured rolls of drawings, a pair of black-framed spectacles; every so often someone would read *The Fountainhead* and so on.

However, four months after graduation, desperate for work, his faith had been shaken. He had sent out CV's and portfolios, first to the top firms who he believed were doing *important* work, then when those failed to return any interviews, he inquired at firms he thought produced unexciting work, but which were run well and which he thought might consider making him a partner eventually, and when those attempts also failed he finally cluster-bombed every firm in the national registry. His wife, Merina, wasn't even looking for work, having received a massive inheritance after the death of her mother. Brody wasn't allowed to know the exact number but Merina made it clear that they could almost live off the interest, were it not for their six-year old son and the kind of upbringing she wanted for him.

He did have one reply at the beginning of the year, from his absolute favourite, a firm called Load that had won international awards and had been a sort of stepping stone to other great firms for anyone who had worked there. Just as he decided that he would settle for any eight to five that paid, an offer for an interview came through.

It's already May when he pushes open the glass doors of the Load Studios reception. A secretary smiles from behind a steel reception counter, or probably she does - he can't be sure because his eyes are pulled up to the central atrium. Has to be the first time he's ever been inside something that looks this much like a sand fort; someone has upended a big bucket of sand, hollowed it out and furnished the interior. Apparently either Leendert Overzicht or Alessandra D'Emidio or both had also done time in the nursery school sandpit.

He pulls out his notebook. Starts to sketch the hall. "I'm starting here today,"

"We're not expecting you. But it's eight-thirty and you're late," the secretary's voice already weary.

"If you haven't been expecting me it's impossible to be late."

"It's not only possible it's a certainty. We start at eight. It's eight-thirty. You're late. I have to call Alessandra." She raps fingers on the phone and after a moment says: "*Hi, it's Elize…Did you hire someone?…There's a guy here…I don't know, brownish hair…sort of exactly average height…no glasses, no beard, slight stubble I guess…hold on, I'm asking…"* She holds her hand over the receiver. "Who are you?"

"Brody Collyer."

Speaks into the phone again but keeps her eyes on Brody: "*…says his name is Brody Collie…uh huh, okay…"* and then to him again: "When can you come for an interview?"

"I've already been for an interview."

"*…says he's already been for an interview…alright…"* Then to him again: "How did it go?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did the interview go?"

"I'm not sure? It went well? I think? She offered me a job?"

"*…says it went well and you… offered him a job……right…okay…okay…will do…okay bye."*

"She says congratulations. Can you start now?"

"Yes. Yes. I'm here to start, now."

"Excellent follow me," she leads him into the hall to a cluster of desks. Nods to people sitting at the stations and stops behind an empty one. "That's Marco, Nox, Lewis, and… this is your desk. You get an Organo-cloud," she wiggles the backrest. "I'm so excited for you."

Brody plonks himself into the chair and bounces slightly. "Seems nice."

"Much more than nice. Organoclouds have all kinds of technological innovations, the latest, you know, in ergonomic centred design and anthropometric bio-mechanic innovations. They reduce incidences of tendinitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, Rubik's wrist, trigger finger, garner's thumb and Emac's pinkie, which is a real thing I've suffered from. Of course it can't prevent every repetitive strain injury because you are sitting in excess of eight hours a day."

"And I am basically human."

"Right, exactly. That's the main thing they look for when they're hiring here. Basically human."

"Well. Thanks." He plays with the adjustment lever.

"Just don't get too attached to the chair. All our chairs are samples from sales reps. We get them for maybe six weeks before they collect them again."

"Okay." He laughs. One of his awkward ones. "Not really though."

"Yes really though. We have the orange plastic ones as backup but you really don't want one of those. Trust me."

Brody suffers a small internal blow. He's seen all his friends start new jobs in strategy or accounting or strategic accounting whatever and one after another their lives seemed to shed the carapace of student poverty. Shinier cars, new clothes, new apartments in nicer areas where people walked their new dogs. They even picked up new conversations, suddenly started to refer to Economics as if it were a friend of a friend, started to experiment with the having of opinions.

He'd convinced himself that he would, reluctantly, become one of them when he started working, of course. But underneath this thought an expectation that his studies in the arts and design will make him a more nuanced kind of creature, capable of more interesting conversations, a more intimate knowledge of Economics and simply better opinions, except that underneath that thought in turn is the suspicion that studies in the arts and design will only access dull little second-hand cars, worn clothes and shared cottages in areas where old dogs are left to walk themselves.

He has only sat in this chair for a minute and has already developed an affection for it. Because it is *his* chair. *His* desk. *His* computer Goddamit. To be told that these things would be taken away, it offends his pride, his sense of ownership and even some larger notion of balance in the universe but more than that it wakes that suspicion that has lain dormant underneath all his thoughts. He has already begun to hate the chair.

"So," He twists in the chair and feels a thrust of lumbar pain, "when they take it away I need to convince a different rep to loan me a sample?"

"That's what we do. We cycle through Organocloud, OscarMiller, CedrikHearse, Granny Smith and then back to Organocloud again. You can usually do two or three loops before they stop answering your emails. Ask Admin for an email address now because it will take up to three months to get activated, don't forget to fill in the time sheets that no one ever fills in and check that your copy of HyperCAD is updated to at least the 1998 version."

"What's HyperCAD?"

"You've never heard of Happy-Draw HyperCAD? Who let this man past security?" Elize feigns outrage.

"I know how to use twelve different applications but HyperCAD isn't one of them."

She smirks. "No one told you about this place, did they?"

"Hey Elize, don't crush the kid's life first day on the job," the man identified as Marco says. Dark hair, overlong stubble. "There's still hope in him."

"It's unsupported piece-of-shit software from an obscure and now-defunct software company. We use the free version. All our software is free. Our chairs are free. Lewis the intern over there is free," a young guy perks up at the mention of his name, pulls out his earphones and waves. "We love free. Welcome to Load."

"That's a… Load… of B.S. ha!" Brody says with a wink and schmaltzy finger-point.

To which Elize responds with the driest of sighs: "Marco, if you're going to keep him you have to promise to clean up his poop?"

…..

By the following week Marco has commandeered him to help out with his project.

"You give me an impression positive," Marco's accent has disappeared but his phrasing reveals a complex history of citizenship. "You are a Team Player and a Good Worker, I see this." Though he nods and his tone is sincere, Brody can hear capital letters and knows that this tone means he has failed somehow. Insults hide behind those words like spies wearing Groucho masks.

It is Monday, 9 a.m. He copies a few more bricks and pastes along a gridline. HyperCAD '98 displays drawings as white lines on a black background to reduce eye strain, which he appreciates because he thinks they make his buildings look like zodiac signs - spectral figures on a dark and infinite expanse. He pans and zooms through the orthogonal galaxy, daydreaming through whole sections of the afternoon; interrupted only by Marco's probing: "How Are Things Going?" or "Anything You Don't Understand?"

In the last week the zoom-panning has also infected his dreams at night. While he sleeps he pans past the moments in his life, what he imagines of his conception, to his birth, to the first time he drew a house, to his first year of varsity, to the current day in which he is sitting at his desk, clicking and drawing this wall, until he zooms out, condensing his entire life into a scene which fits into the 20

inches of his LCD screen. Finally, if he zooms out slightly further he sees himself also sitting in front of this display still drawing that same boundary wall.

He doesn't mind the dreams. He minds the waking and realising he's spent eight hours on a virtual day. Not having made progress. So he rushes to work early to catch up on his own perceived lateness. Sometimes when he has these dreams, he draws as fast as he can till about ten o'clock, gets up to make a cup of tea only to discover that he has not woken up at all, has not yet actually left the apartment, still has to get up, still has to dress, still has to drive to the office, has not yet started any work at all.

So he gets on with it. Keeps the filter coffee brewing. Black with off-label sweetener. Braces himself for each day. Eventually grows to like the work. There is a lovely tactile quality to the rattling of his fingers on the keyboard. The deftness itself is satisfying. He is like a qwerty pianist, performing a sonata of shortcut keys. In his head he enunciates the corresponding commands like a beat poem: Hatch Extend Line Polyline Matchprop Extrude Objectsnap Rotate Ellipse New Draworder Merge Exit.

Chapter 2 - In the Middle

The search for a nook consumes his days. Concrete retaining blocks make for good footholds and the grey fleece of his blanket is convincing camouflage, he imagines, from the viewpoint of a car window. The Ya-heys, he calls them. More concerned with the phones or the steering wheels in their hands. Barely anyone ever looks up to see him clinging to the soffit. When that happens he feels super invisible, moves like teleportation. That's when Shadowjack is good at fading into the background.

It's a good nook, the one under the onramp bridge. The ledges are narrow, yes, and it isn't unheard of for someone to roll off, yelping and cursing into the night. But at least you can trust everyone else to play nice. Except the mice and the bugs of course, who will eat your skin right off you. Jack laughed; they are also pickers! And Jack is their meal.

In the mornings, he starts first thing. He sees some of the others under the bridge sleeping late. Just the warping of air rising from the hot road, the hypnotic glint of alloys rolling to a halt, exhaust notes, tire noise and whine of an electric window motor, the driving force of what's called Making A Living, passing by makeshift pillows. Or lying in, elbows propping their heads up like madams, while dreaming of shopping for the things in the Makro pull-out. Doesn't know how lazybones make their money. The only way he gets by is from working while the Ya-Hey's are still in their pyjamas. Gets shouted at if he meets a Ya-Hey face to face, so he picks next-door and lets them roll out their bins for him. When the gate closes he swoops in. That's his kind of shopping.

He hates that he shares his earnings with the sleepers. Can't help it. Some were born into much worse than this and were on their way up, if you can believe it. Some others, like him, fell from higher up. He used to be very knowledgeable. They called him Prof, didn't they? He knew for instance, that he thought that he thought and thought that he therefore probably was. He knew that something was imperative, and categorically so, although he had trouble remembering what that thing was. He knew that life was salty, poor, nashing, brutal and shortish.

It is an average in a way, this nook, like a sump pit for all the things that fall through the grates, both people and things. Him and his raggedy suitcase filled with its personal belongings, everything he owns.

They resent the umakhi, the guys down on the ground who build their shelters out in the open. He thinks it's a stupid idea to build poly-carb and iron roofs. That is a lot of food if you recycle it. They draw attention. And anyway where did they get the hundred rand that buys you a spot? Thinks maybe the Metro will come, but it's much worse. Last night the Tough Guys moved in. Took anything worth taking. Kicked him so hard he felt it in his dreams. Woke up to a foot in the face and a new ache. Tough Guy fucking with his shit. And for what? There's nothing he has that means anything to anyone but him. Tough Guy almost gets angry at him for wasting his time. Says *What is this kak?* Paper is valuable to pickers but Jack's more interested in the ink. The bits of newspapers, the magazines, the books he reads and the books he writes - Tough Guy scatters them onto the tar.

"Fuck off now, professor," Tough Guy says. Another kick.

Tough Guys are the reason they are here in the first place. No one goes to the homes and the shelters any more. Better to stuff your things in a dry manhole. Hustle out here with your feet and your hands, scrape away at the hard edges of people. Seems the surfaces are getting harder. You need better, stronger tools.

Jack remembers when he had those tools; the night they tried to pull apart the headgear in City Deep. Biggest score ever it was going to be. A skeleton of iron. Ten metres tall, just like that. Him and a crew of two dozen hustlers cut away at the rig till the early hours of a Tuesday. One of the guys got hold of some oxy-torches off a building site. They made the job look professional too so security wouldn't get curious; same overalls and hardhats for all of them, except only two or three had visors, and so a few of them took turns to cut while the rest turned their backs on the white light of the

torch. Shit-hot lasers. Like you were holding lightning in your hands. Jack remembers, it was TK and a guy called Jik cutting when it happened. He saw the whole thing played out in shadow puppets. Their own figures, weird and jumping like tokoloshes against the side of the big, yellow mine dump; and there was the brightness and the heat and the sound of the iron screaming. It looked so beautiful, when the bones of the tower first started to fall.

Jik never said anything. They said paramedics never found the top or the bottom of him, head and legs chopped right off. Two clean sweeps, here and there.

He thinks about that a lot. How they had to come the next day to dig him out. They came with speciality equipment; forklifts and cranes. And those forklifts were built by someone using metal that some other mine and some headgear had dug up. And someone had built that headgear and someone had dug up the metal to build that headgear before that. All those cranes and forklifts and headgears and all that metal to dig Jik out, just so that someone could dig a different hole somewhere else and put him back in the ground.

You only get two kinds of citizens in Joburg, he decides. Builders and diggers. Builders make. Diggers break. No one knows what else to do with themselves. They both start in the middle but half work their way up and half work their way down. Funny thing is they all think they're going forward. That's what happens when you try to build a city by digging for gold. Everything gets confused. Down looks a lot like up.

Chapter 3 - Hands

In the midst of a competition entry, three months into the job, Brody begins to dissociate from his limbs; a phenomenon he hasn't experienced since the early days of varsity but quite common among the deadline crowd - the particular frequency of a dying fluorescent in dissonance with the refresh rate of his screen, stimulating a sudden hyperawareness of, but also an emotional boredom with, his body. He twiddles his fingertips and laughs: those, it turns out, belong to him. The hands rub the face. *His* hands. *His* face, he reminds the brain. A face reflected in the glass of the window. The eyes of the face track the hands moving side to side. *His* eyes. The glass of the window feels as cold as the night on the other side. Undoubtedly the lack of sleep is a factor. He believes the [Home] key has stopped working.

"Go home, Brody," Nox says, which is when he snaps out of it.

"Just need to finish this."

"Ah man. I know what this is. You think working late will get a bonus or a raise or a promotion or really anything other than nothing. Time we had the conversation."

"What conversation?"

"Firm's called Load and Partners, right? Twenty years; never been any partners. No one stays here long. Two to three years and then they tell you to ship out."

"You've been here longer. Four times longer."

"Ya. But. Put it this way. What's your full name?"

"Brody Collyer."

"No middle name. No nothing?"

"Just Brody Collyer."

"That's unfortunate."

"Is it?"

"Let me tell you something about this firm, or this country, possibly the world. My name, my full name, is Nokwanda Siphephelo Zondlile Cebile Xuma. So, five years ago, I'm at this exhibition right, at one of those boutique galleries on Jan Smuts."

"What was the exhibition?"

"Something to do with vaginas."

"Doesn't really narrow it down."

"Art exhibitions aren't really about the art."

"Okay."

"They're more like dinner parties where you don't get to sit but you do get to look thoughtful when you run out of things to say. Anyway Leendert was behind me eavesdropping on my conversation with this guy, because I'm talking, jokingly of course, of my connections with the ruling party, because, you know, my surname; and suddenly he's asking me uh, uh, nonchalantly, you know, what do you do. And I'm like, I'm an architect and he's like oh I am too I have this little firm and where do you work or are you studying or whatever he asks. So I'm like no, I just finished my masters

and before I can shit myself, metaphorically, he's saying do you want a job? But now the damn curator is starting to talk and I don't really get to answer properly and I figure I'll probably just call and mail my CV to info at studio. And never hear from him ever, ever again."

"Oh! To that abyss that is the info dot studio at Load dot see oh dot zed aye. A large sad portion of my soul is trapped in that unread inbox."

"Or whatever exactly. And so I proceed to prepare myself for a life of mediocrity at a firm that does residential developments on a budget and, I don't know, malls or some shit by drinking Rosé by the box and bonding with that guy I was with over our shared hatred of black and white photographs of black and white lesbians when suddenly he says to me, do you want to go to the restroom with me?"

"You've known him how long."

"Right! And he's giving me this re*ally* knowing look and whispering something in my ear, which I only hear half of but now I'm looking at him and thinking you know he's not actually that Jewish and fuck it, so I'm like yeah, let's do this; so we go into this tiny stall and he's putting down the seat because it's wet like," she gulps her coffee, "Just. Everywhere. So I'm reaching up my skirt to pull my panties down but not *all* the way down and…"

"Right because you don't know what that water is."

"And the next thing I know he's totally freaking out and scrabbling up the walls."

"Wait, why is he…?"

"He says what the fuck are you doing? And he's holding a little baggy of white stuff and putting it on the seat and I realise this guy has like zero desire to see my ikati. So I'm like oh *that* kind of blow and *that* kind of party and he's totally like – you know…"

"That's messed up."

"What's messed up?"

"Not his being gay obviously. The crack cocaine I mean…"

"Crack fucking cocaine man! But I'm so repressed *I'm* the one backing out of the stall apologising and trying to pull my – you know, trying to reassemble myself into something approaching a 'lady' and I bump into of course Leendert who – I'm running the possible explanations through my head from his viewpoint and it's either I made all that wetness on the floor or I was gonna, you know, with that guy or I mean, the other thing with that guy and it's just all the awfullest of awfullest things so I just bolt and leave him to deal with it."

"Shit."

"Shit is right. Anyway as I'm leaving my idiot brain is still thinking of ways to potentially still call him the next day and convince him I was merely pooping when, as I'm about to walk out the door he, Leendert grabs my arm and says: "So we'll see you on Monday, right?" And it turns out that I single-handedly bring the BEE, you know what I mean? Seriously. I could literally take a massive dump right here on the printer-scanner, photocopy it and forward everyone a meeting request to come and look at it and I wouldn't lose my job, but I cannot, absolutely CANNOT let anyone find out that my surname is actually spelt with an X and not with a Z."

"You mean you're not related?"

“At this point I’m probably closer related to you. But it doesn’t matter because I can pretend I am. It’s like having the super power to access government tenders. But ya. You’re pretty screwed. You’re gonna have to succeed based on your merits, sorry for you.”

At ten at night, Brody has an altercation with the plotter. The Wabisabi plotter has apparently been falling apart for years. Each month it gains another fault and sings it with languid boredom on its way to complete disintegration. As the inkjets clog and misalign, it has begun to lose the ability to accurately reproduce the drawings it is instructed to print – or, considered in another way, it has gained the ability to interpret the general import of these drawings and express it in its own strange impressionism. Onto never-ending rolls of crisp cartridge paper the Wabisabi smears the black lines of concrete walls and foundations, but the lines occasionally warp and separate into multiples of all colours as the machine breathes. Other times it stretches a portion of a building elevation as if its brain has become stuck in time while the paper carries on without it, until it lurches suddenly and attempts to catch up by compressing the rest or by deleting chunks of brickwork it deems irrelevant.

“One time, when the firm still had a sense of humour,” says Nox as Brody looks at his A0 print with apprehension, “we had a really short-notice deadline, much more urgent than this, it was on a competition proposal, and it printed the building we’d designed fine up until a point, but then for a bit it switched over to another project we hadn’t worked on for months but in vivid colours like coral and eggplant, like it was having an acid flashback, and then it just switched back suddenly like nothing had happened. When Alessandra saw it she thought we’d meant to do like a postmodern thing and she loved it. Loved it! And because there wasn’t any time to reprint it we just went with it.” Nox tied up her hair with an elastic band, scrutinised his drawing for a few seconds. “We call that her Schizo Architecture period.”

It isn’t a good night for technical difficulties.

“Looks like you’re going have to go old school,” Nox says. “Pen and paper. Anyway, I’m out. Do you have keys to the office?”

By the time Marco walks in the next morning, Brody has produced a stack of sketches, drawings, renderings, reference photos and even a small conceptual model.

“Hmm.” says Marco. Brody’s jaw clenching. At that moment Leendert Overzicht wanders past, casting a wary eye over the office. Interns and juniors diligently opening and closing the same files again and again or finding stray bits of paper to fold.

“Hmm,” he says as well.

“Hmm,” Marco replies.

“Hmm,” Leendert says one more time, then turns and walks away.

Nox pats Brody’s shoulder. “That was harsh, guy.”

“Was it?”

“Oh fuck yes.”

“You mean he wasn’t blown away and is reconsidering making me partner?”

“Man. Don’t take it personally, hey, he does that sometimes. It might have nothing to do with you.” She sits down at her desk and carries on working. “Just, you know, don’t fuck up ever again.”

He slumps onto his chair, which despite a myriad adjustment knobs and levers feels rigid and cruel. In his mind he conceives of a new chair with a career dissatisfaction response feature. Call it the Organoplus Guillotine XX. He presses [Del] and falls into the black depths of his empty screen.

“Leendert wants to see you in his office,” Marco says suddenly.

To get to the directors’ office he has to take the elevator to the box hovering over the atrium. Slit windows in the black slate shell of the box prevent any underlings below from seeing anything more than a leering eyeball. On the other hand, from that vantage point the eyeball can see nearly every corner of the office interior. This is known as a panopticon - a common feature in correctional services architecture.

The elevator pings and the doors, satin chrome like a toaster, slide open. They pop Brody out at the top floor and he shuffles two small steps toward the suspended steel bridge that leads to Leendert’s office. Hands grip the cold steel handrail; knuckles whitening. The bridge, creaking and swaying side to side slightly, makes him utterly aware of his own mass; feels heavy, so heavy he thinks his footsteps might dent the floorboards. He presses his hand against the glass door; it mists up right away and he wipes the sweat of it on the back of his pants before opening the door.

Leendert is smoking a long and thin cigar. The effect would be formidable, shrouded in a villainous haze, were it not for Leendert’s pink socks peaking out between his trousers and shoes.

“I smoke,” he says. “Do you mind?”

Interesting that he flips the sentence structure around like that but it still has all the hallmarks of being a question. “No, not at all.”

“This is a Toscano. An Italian cigar invented by Ferdinand the Third in 1818. I like them because they are imperfect. In fact, in many ways they are very shit. Historically, they were an accident - the original batch was caught in the rain and judged of insufficient quality for cigarettes - but seeing an opportunity, Ferdinand rolled the muck in his hands and called it a penny cigar. Pawned it off on peasants. The shape is irregular, the surface is lumpy the texture is crusty; but it has a charm.”

Brody doesn't find the cigar a charming affectation. From where he stands it has offensive visual connotations, but Leendert clutches the flaming turd and plucks it from his lips.

“The work you presented this morning was not impressive.”

“I know,” Brody says. “I’m sorry.”

“However, your sketches are not so bad,” he puffs and the lit end of the cigar flares. “And like the Grand Duke Ferdinand I am good at seeing promise. I’d like you to work on a proposal for me.”

Brody only just contains himself.

“The project is on the site of the Old Park Station in Newtown.”

“I see. Okay.” Each year at least one student proposed a hypothetical scheme to fit into the carcass of the old station as part of a thesis dissertation. He didn’t think anything would ever be built, except in theory. “That’s in…”

“A controversial project certainly. We are to design a gallery, museum, visitors’ centre, some shops and so on.”

“Everyone knows Old Park Station. I actually did a proposal for it in my third year.”

“This is not just some student project.”

“No, of course…”

"If I wanted a student proposal I would have hired a student. No more talk of student work."

"No sir."

"We need to build a model of the station. Please commission one of the existing station from Lazlo. You'll need to meet him tomorrow. I like to work in the physical. Really sense the materiality. It makes it easier to see the becoming of a haecceity."

It's not uncommon for directors of firms to communicate in the esoteric pseudo-poetry of 'Archispeak'. Even after all his years of training he finds it strange that people like Leendert need a special word - 'the physical' - to refer to that thing which most people simply knew as the reality.

"A note. If I may. My partner has a history with this project. Burnt bridges. The client has expressly stated that they prefer not to deal with her. Initially they actually refused to work with us again and it took quite some doing to win them back. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Perhaps this is what Brody's parents' divorce had been preparation for all along - to be the middle man in a dysfunctional relationship. *Please tell your mother* and so on.

"Do you? You will need to keep my partner away from the project entirely. She will want to design it with you so I advise you tell her as little about it as possible."

"Oh I see. That may be difficult. I don't want to lie to her."

"I never said you should lie."

"No sir."

"Some diplomacy."

"Yes sir."

"You make me suddenly concerned. Perhaps you are not the right person for this project."

"I only meant…"

"I will allow you use of my sketchbooks as guidance. They are here in this cabinet," he points to an ebony credenza at his knee, "and they are not to leave the office. You will be my hands."

"No problem. I wanted to talk to you about upgrading our soft…"

"Hands do not speak. I don't care about whether my hands are happy or unhappy, busy or unbusy. I give them a task and they perform the task, regardless of whether it is easy or difficult." At this he grips the remaining third of the cigar in his fist and drives it into the ashtray. "I have many hands and If my hands disobey me I will cut them off and simply get new hands."

Chapter 4 - Turani Atok

For a long time all Brody had known of the city consisted of the stretch of Jan Smuts Avenue from the university to the malls of Killarney, Rosebank and Sandton. That was Johannesburg. Around that route some key locations were dotted, his home in the Parks, his friends' homes in the Parks, his son's nursery school in the Parks, and as he learnt to connect the dots the edges of his perception crawled slowly outward. His knowledge of the surrounding districts - Hillbrow, Yeoville, Brixton and so on - was limited to the understanding that one wouldn't want to live there.

So it is driving to the model-maker in the south of the city that he is surprised, in a very dull way, by the persistence of people. Do people really live this far away from where things were *happening*? Possibly they live even further. Zimbabwe and Namibia, what was the other country on the border? Was Kenya close or did it only feel that way because it's more frequently mentioned than say the DAR. Democratic African… No. Democratic Republic of Congo. Central Africa… CAR. Car. Rattled whenever he changed gears. The word sabotage comes from the French workers who, fearing they would be made obsolete by machines, used to throw their wooden shoes ('sabots') into the cogs. Sommelier is the French word for a trained wine professional. Where is Somalia exactly?

He doesn't know if Southdale was dangerous or not and was therefore unsure of how much he ought to be on guard and so he chooses to be 'quite'. He parks in front of the house and as he walks up the path of gravel and leaves he hears orchestral noises he determines has to be music.

The music is strange, not melodic at all, more like an auditory mirror of his movements, as if he has suddenly stepped into a cartoon. A flute sings the upward swing of his arm then pauses as his hand hovers over the door handle and when he pushes open the door a violin horror-tweaks. Whatever he does the music becomes a soundtrack to it, like it is narrating him in a language he doesn't fully understand. He feels as if two people, the strings and the woodwinds, are discussing him in unflattering terms. He tests the suspicion by unstepping the last two steps, retreading, then rocking back and forth, but always the orchestra seems to match him.

"Brody good to meet…" A body is in front of him, opening the door and holding out a hand to shake.

"Good to meet you, Lazlo," Brody contemplates the hand wrapped around his. The veins and hairs are roots of a tree, rough and petrified by years of labour. He has of late dropped too easily into daydreaming and he catches himself thinking of the one small callous on his otherwise marshmallow-soft palm, generated by resting his wrist on the table and clicking all day. "You got the drawings I sent for the station?"

"No problem. We can talk material. I will show here."

Rhythms of the piano so accurately convey the footfall pattern of someone walking hunched over or shuffling with their backs against the wall that Brody feels his skin itch with the sensation of being snuck up on. "Listen, Lazlo, can we turn down this music? What is it I mean…"

"You know Messaien? Quartet for End of Time."

"No. But can we, I'm sorry, can we turn it down?"

"Also it is no problem."

In the centre of the room a thing like an enormous mop lies sleeping. Brody nudges it with a foot. "What is…?"

"He is Komondor," says Lazlo.

"And what is Komondor?"

"That is what Komondor is. He is Komondor."

"Right but… what sort of thing is Komondor?"

"Komondor is breed. Name is Ivan."

Brody stares at the mass, warily places a hand on it and runs his fingers through the tassles. "Wait. This is a dog?"

There is a model of a house on the floor, obviously too big to fit on plywood shelves adjacent and the creature's snout is aimed at it as it sleeps. When it sighs a gust of wind bursts from its nostrils and forces a cotton-wool tree the size of a toothpick to quiver. Then, as if summoned, the mass rises. The threads of the mopped animal lurch inward and upward, like a gnarled and tussled carpet pulled up by one invisible hand. From its movements it is possible to distinguish the fore from the aft and by the black maw bearing in his direction it is clear, the creature is contemplating Brody, as Brody contemplates it.

It is a lugubrious thing, like a willow or a limp hand, and all of it seems to exist only for drooping. Why is this animal bred to be so weighted, so thick with woollen gloom? For the winters of eastern Europe of course. The realisation of it suddenly infects him with a slavic dreariness, filling his head with images of sombre men humming umlauts through moustaches, marching in formation, past brutalist grey mass-housing, rooms racked and stacked to double as crematoria, concrete upon concrete upon concrete.

The Komondor wanders over to Brody and sniffs his boot, then turns and withdraws, threading past and through the carcasses of failed and broken models, to the cold corner of the workshop, under the shelves which hold the discarded models previous clients had failed to collect or pay for, then collapses with a groan and thud which shakes the perspex windows loose from their tiny frames.

"Ivan is cursed."

"Why do you say that?"

"Ivan he is cursed. My father was cursed. All Hungarians are cursed with *turani atok."*

*"*What does the curse do?"

"*Virágos fák alatt utam az utolsó.* Curse makes you sing of death and then do it."

"Makes you kill yourself?"

"Yes. It is Hungarian to kill yourself. Prince Rudolf shot mistress and himself in head," he says this with a bored blinking of the eyes. "Reszo Seress, composer, he jumped off building. Elmyr De Hory, art forger, took sleeping pills, but maybe faked death. Dolly sisters, twin dancers, Jenny hanged herself, Rosie only attempted. Attila Joszef, poet, crushed by train. Zoltan Latinovitz, actor, also train. Sandor Kocsis, football player, first cancer then jumped off building. Pal Teleki, he was Prime Minister, shot himself in head. Sandor Marai, writer, shot himself in head. Istvan Szechenyi, politician, writer, eyebrows like this, we call him Greatest Hungarian, shot himself in head."

"That's quite a few…"

*"*Hungarians die best. They have been cursed since perhaps a thousand years ago. They are getting good at it. My father, he is Wend, or you say Wendish - which is like Slovene, but he is at same time Hungarian, and now I am South Africa also. So I am only half Hungarian. Maybe only half-cursed. Which is pity because it is good for country to have traditions."

"We certainly have traditions as well."

"Yes but I prefer traditions of my father. Hungarians die famously, South Africa traditions is to die in secret."

On the wall hangs a large black and white photograph of several cruciform towers seen from above as a comparatively large hand extends from a shirt cuff and reaches toward the buildings. It is the same gesture as that of God in Michaelangelo's Creation of Adam. The photo is familiar to all architects as the hand of Le Corbusier, gesturing at his proposal for The Radiant City - an urban master plan which proposed to bring order and reason to France by levelling the centre of Paris. In the place of the historic buildings and boulevards Corbusier proposed to build identical superblocks surrounded by parking lots.

"Are you a fan of Corb?"

"No my father, he built that."

"You're father built the model for the Ville Radieuse?"

"Hold on. *Apa!"* he calls and marches into a back room, from which a frustrated-sounding exchange follows in magyar. "*Igen*, yes. He says they never built the real thing."

"No I know. Paris is still there. But little bits if it, the ideas, were built in other places… You ever been to Hillbrow?"

"When I was younger we live there, yes. But we don't go anymore."

They work through the details of the model to be built for the Damsel, agree on a delivery date, and when Brody turns to leave Lazlo and his father walk him to his car. Ivan heaves himself up and follows.

"Here, take this," Lazlo says, handing Brody a small white block. Brody rolls it over in his hands, sees the cross of the plan, then realises the import of it.

"This isn't one from the…?"

"My father, he want to give this to you."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure sure. It is nothing to me."

"Okay thank you."

Ivan sits down and a cloud of dust puffs up around him.

"Can I see what he looks like underneath this?" Brody says, parting the dreads in front of Ivan's face. Two watery eyes stare back at him and blink. Then he licks his nose and snorts.

"He is miserable idiot but he thinks you are okay," Lazlo says.

"How can you tell?"

"He is not killing you. Maybe he is thinking you are cursed as well."

The office parking lot is a mess of flashing lights when he returns, late in the afternoon. It's too surreal, the ambulance backed right up into the glass door of the reception as if it's docking. Brody's mind takes a while to understand. He doesn't hear anything, like the scene is playing out in a vacuum. Dazzling, the reflections in the glass. Something Space Odyssey about it.

A glimpse of Leendert's pink socks as the stretcher is loaded into the ambulance.

He falls in behind the crowd of his colleagues. Finds himself behind Nox.

“Some sort of heart condition,” she says.

“Oh. Okay. I was kinda expecting…”

“Expecting?”

“I don’t know Nox, it’s… a bit sudden.”

“We’ve known about it for a while. A rare syndrome. He also smoked. Chain smoked. Didn’t eat well. Drank too. Not his fault, obviously, we all do those things, but he had the heart thing.”

“He gonna be okay?”

“I’m a doctor?”

“I need a drink.”

“A drink and a smoke.”

Brody remembers the last time he saw Leendert and the spectral way the smoke from the Toscana rose to the ceiling. “Maybe I shouldn’t do either, considering.”

“Maybe you should do both especially, while you still have time.”

He doesn't know what to feel. He barely knows the man and the last conversation they had… what did he say? ‘*If my hands disobey me I will get new hands.’* Maybe Leendert was on to something there. All he needed to do was to keep getting new hands, new lungs, new hearts. He could go on living forever.

The ambulances set off, followed by the drawling sound of sirens driving further away and there is nothing to do for the rest of them but to sigh and shake their heads at each other for a while and take the rest of the day off. At five to five they all receive an email from Alessandra.

From: Alessandra D'Emidio

To: All

Subject: Re Death

Dear All,

You may have heard that Leendert is in critical condition. This is only partly true.

Leendert Overzicht is South Africa's greatest architect and most visionary human I have ever met. He has changed the perceptions of millions of citizens and has single-handedly altered the course of this coutnry. So you will believe me when I insist he did not suffer from a heart attack as was claimed but that his body simply could no longer contain him. He is on the verge of completing his masterpiece and his passion and commitment to the project transcends the capabilities of bones and meat. I mean this with absolute conviction and sincerity.

I suppose some are wondering what will come of this firm Whether we will close. will wesimply become AD architects. something similarly reduced and feeble. Allow me to reassure you. nothing changes. I first worked for Leendert when he was sole-practitioner working out of his home in Westdene A stonewalled basement little more than a cave. For almost two years we were neanderthals pinning our pencilled floorplans onto the walls. The first project we won was the Heritage Ministry and the SMHHAA award from it set us up as the premiere heritage and memorial specialists in the country. The second project was this building that has become our offices

In those days Leendert used to say: "That thing which you call 'I' can be anything you care for or control". At the outset we set out to design this firm, its envelope and it's mechanisms, with a single purpose: to create an I that is larger than our bodies and endures as our structures do, long after we have rotted

At any given moment you are each working on four or five projects. You do this for a few months and then we shuffle the projects around. WE do this intentionally because some are suited to different projects and some are better at say, design than project management and so onbut we also do it for you to understand that in this office there are no projects by Nokwanda Xuma, or Elize van der Walt or Marco Vovonelli. We do not train you or promote. There was a time before you and there will come a time after you. I think two or three years is more than enough time for any of you to learn something and then you move on and do whatever you think is best. In the meantime you are our hands and our mouths. In return you are allowed to be the fingertips moulding the cultural touchstones of an entire nation and your contributions to history linger longer than they would had you worked on your own. You may make suggestions and these suggestions are not always discarded . But you are not us, or even yourselves. You are like ghost writers or spoeks who design.

In the last twenty years we have evolved into a firm of world renown and the name the world knows us by is Leendert Overzicht and Alessandra D'Emidio Architects and it will continue to know us as LOAD. Leendert Overzicht is a superman. A god. He never dies. Nothing ever ends

See you all on monday

Alessandra

Chapter 5 – Catacomb

The catacombs of the South African Transport Services still remember the 1950's - advertisements for South African Airways push illustrations of pert stewardesses disembarking, tipping their caps and smiling beatifically while an art deco springbok leaps into the Aryan future. Posters paint the white beachfront apartments of Durban 5 Margate in a *wish you were here* kind of way; Solly Kramer's boasts being the largest liquor store in the world but peels away to reveal another poster underneath, The Rand Easter Show held at Milner Park, April 4 to 14 1960 - that year a chartered accountant with *grandiose delusions of the political saviour type* attempted to kill Verwoerd. In Johannesburg, the layers of the past are often only a few microns thick.

The Catacombs remember and so does Jack. He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out something too valuable to think of keeping it in the suitcase. After all these years still in good condition. The paper a little browned. The photo looks like him, and the dompas declares him '*manlik*' and '*Zulu*', but it's missing most of his names. His name is Jackson Nkosi, but he calls himself Shadowjack. He draws a black pen from the same pocket and, matching the handwriting, adds in the rest: Light-Bringer, Son of the Dawn, Morning Star, Halicephalobus Mephisto and He Who Loves Not The Light.

Shafts of daylight cast down into the underground, below the streets of Eloff and Commissioner. He's so tired he falls to his knees there. Looks like he's praying, and a beam of light makes the sweat on his cheeks glisten.

His new pass will let him go anywhere, past Ya-Hey, Tough Guy and umakhi. It will lead him to something he can call a home.

"Dear pickers, diggers and detritivores! This is a call to arms!" he says to no one except the crowd he imagines. Thinks about how the mail used to run back and forth here, station to post office. Probably in trolleys, a lot like mine carts.

"It is time for rebirth - from security guards to demagogues, underdogs to demigods." He's practising for something. Even he isn't sure what. "Be the worms crawling out from the pores of the earth, toward the heavens! Forewarned is forearmed, bring your weapons!"

Now getting up, marching deeper into the tunnel.

"Self-enrichment through illegal constructs, improper conduct, generally corrupt relationships, counterfeit battleships, ill-begotten squadrons, frigates forgotten. In the state of darkie Denmark, something is rotten. Shabir Shaik-Spear of the Nation! Little Brett Murray points, paints the taint, plagues the saints, says 'Our sacred monarch is naked!' And who crowned Jay Zed's shower head? Who anointed the fly in the ointment? Not me, not you or you. Cadre deployment."

In the dark, he almost forgets what kind of thing he is. Hands groping at nothing he walks in what he assumes is a straight line. The walls of the tunnel disagree. Stubs a toe. Starts singing to feel the edges of the surfaces. He's echolocating now.

"Azania's windpipes, sway and scream like banshees; sounds of schoolchild genocide, ghosts of June Sixteenth. White minority capital punishment. Souls of the dead slaves alongside arrays of born frees; when we expropriate Fridays and nationalise the sea!"

Surfaces from the tunnels briefly to find himself at the corner of Albertina Sisulu and Rissik before descending again into the interconnected city block basements under corporate Johannesburg. He passes right under City Hall and his rambling gathers a legislative scent.

"So I'm the dissident because I don't consent to this present figment of a president. I never did, I presi-didn't. Elected? I reject it. Show the shower head the exit. Send this household appliance

into retirement, singing like the choir went: *Thina Sizwe*, the children of Afrika cry, mollify them with lulla-lies, Ha ha ha this guy! You can't handwave us away like jedi. these are not the negroids you are looking for, goodbye!"

Now moving from Doornfontein to Marshalltown. It's a trek through philosophy. He turns right at socialism, carries on past existentialism, left now into Black Consciousness and Biko. Liberalism is a place which lies somewhere north of the city. Some of them, his future followers, would be from there. The city is laced with memories, so he's making a mnemonic out of its streets. He will never forget how to get from genocide to parliament, or from Hamlet to Soweto.

"Offers up scape goats. Stitch them up like Scotch tape on a bank note. Quote "why should I pay for something I did not ask for". *Umshini wam!* Ask what the machine guns brought us, jobs for sons and daughters, thirty five caskets for a CAR task force, parole on a medical golf course, forty four, say it with me, forty four! No living wage, send marksmen on a rampage. Marikana! compared to twelve and a half thousand, forty four murdered miners are a bargain brah!"

Each new space he enters introduces a different topic. Sometimes the rooms he moves through are the chambers of his mind. Theories fall like footsteps, concepts like breadcrumbs. Left, right, left, right, if, then, if, then. Thoughts as real and present as the concrete pavers under his feet. Brain waves like rivers.

"Khoi and San, first decimated and smithereened by white disease and Dutch East enemies, evicted from off the gilded soil of the motherland, tooled and moved by ebony hands, imperial thieves then swept from underneath."

He and his people are the subterranean peristalsis of a nation's abdomen. The chewing gum stuck in the bowel for twenty years. He could be perceived, only just, as the kind of rumbling those above ground might dismiss as stomach cramps, a vague hunger for something.

"You see 'Black' is not contingent on pigment, as defined by bigots and slavers, its hue is an attitude: refusing to be screwed by History, demanding to savour the fruits of our labours. "Ityala aliboli molato ha o bole." A debt does not rot. We can't forgive what can't be forgot."

At the newly restored Potato Sheds of Newtown he crawls out of a service duct and emerges from the parking lot. A massive development of retail and commercial properties opened only a few months before and amongst all the fresh faced brickwork cowers a small victorian bathhouse. Its roof is a patchwork of replicas amongst the crumbling terracotta tiles, discernible by the bright optimism of their fresh red clay. Inside there is a boutique coffee shop, still with the old timber board cladding the walls. The cafe shows the tarnished copper plumbing of what used to be urinals. It's a little building that wears the past like a vintage outfit.

Shadowjack marches up the street, singing and pumping his fists in the air.

*"*Azania former occupied colony of nobodies, through weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, wakes from nights of long knives unsheathed, when we expropriate Fridays and nationalise the sea!"

He imagines his flock filled out into the field in front of it. The truck drivers test driving will stop and feel themselves compelled out of their trucks. Curious pedestrians will slow at first, then stand still and gawk. Fuel jockies at the petrol station across the road will feel drawn to the field, they'll edge as close to the pavement as they can without acknowledging that they've deserted their posts. All will feel an urge to join. Some will try, scoffing at the gullible idiots, to flatter themselves that they were too seasoned and discerning to be drawn into such aberrant things. But as more and more bystanders pile through the gate, trickling through holes in the fence, they will begin to feel more deviant in their resistance than in their acquiescence. All will join.

Shadowjack sweeps his arms open, holds his hands up to the steel shell of the station.

“This is our land, blighted by the boer, eaten like a maggot parasite, 40 000 white farmers with an appetite caught cookie-jar handed. Sing with me the manifesto of gumboots and overalls! We are heading to the polls to depose a government of so-called heroes and haloed politicos! Walk with me, O rats of Hamelin. This country wants a heart transplant, leave your scalpel, bring your sickle and a hammering. Our piper is an Enfant terreebal going medieval on Parliamentary arse. Brada leader Chairman Mau Mau-lema. Em, Ay, You. Mwafrika Apate Uhuru. Juju, the thorn in the side, an itchy, scratchy, bolshevik prick but we all knows: a rose’s name is Red, and violence is overdue.”

And so he strolls over the steel footing of the Old Park Station and climbs onto the upper platform.

“Political power grows from the barrel of a gun! We will take it back pointblank. Azania rises to its feet from a life on its knees, washed by crimson tides, devotees baptised, when we expropriate Fridays and nationalise the sea. The sea, the sea, when we nationalise the sea!”

Chapter 6 – Damsel

There is a grass embankment next to the bridge to town. It swells to a small hill and the concourse of the Old Park Station stands on top of it. The concrete arches at its base are stained with rain and the steel above is only slightly rusted. Up in the clerestory a few birds squawk like stifled trumpets and a freed tin can ambles by itself on the ground.

The sky is mostly clear, though a few clouds sail through it. The clouds are backlit by a sun that glows with a woolly benevolence. The ambient sounds: the barking of dogs and the thrum of cars passing - which would sound cold at midnight or in the low light of the evening - are coloured happy and enthusiastic by the sun.

In front of the station is an field and a fence wraps around it. The fence serves only to mark the boundaries of the field, not to protect it. In the week the field is used as a testing ground for trainees applying for truck driver licences. On the weekend it is the site where Brody meets Ernie Fraser from Heritage to discuss the Damsel.

"No, hey, I don't see how you're going to do it." Ernie is a tall man with a moustache that twiddles when he sniffs. He is pale for someone in the construction industry. It is entirely possible, thinks Brody, that this is due to Ernie, an otherwise pragmatic man clad in the khaki spectrum, allowing himself the one vanity of sun block, but it is far more likely that his complexion is due to his spending the majority of his time indoors writing emails about some architect's design making use of the entirely wrong set of cornices or the entirely wrong slate floor tiles or the entirely wrong approach to everything, everything. "You see," he carries on, "I don't think you can actually add a railing to the edge of the platform because there never was one because of course that was where you got onto the train."

"Alright Ernie," Brody tries to affect the dry monotone of contractors stating the inevitable that's-just-the-way-it-is-ness of life, "the thing is, council needs it for their regulations, so either we have the railing or I get Keith Etheridge from Joburg planning here and let you guys sort it out amongst yourselves."

Those who spend enough time around construction sites come to know the pernicious consequences of verbal agreements. An insignificant matter of a handshake or an acquiescent grunt stirs the minute-taking processes, becomes a follow-up in writing, spawns instructions whose costs are calculated, budgeted and paid, and soon the compactors, excavators, scrapers and dozers are waking up to shift the earth. One has to be wary of small concessions.

Brody feels a tug on his pants leg. "I want to do an arkolojeekal dig," says Superkid, his hand clasping the seam. "I can do it myself."

"We'll go just now," says Brody. With a 'just' he is sometimes able to compress the perception of an obstacle into a bite-size chunk. "Just let me finish here. We'll be done in just a minute."

"No, not just now, now now."

"Just wait. Dad's busy."

"Okay fine," he says, "just one minute," and he folds his arms and harrumphs onto the ground.

"I know Keith," says Ernie. "He's a good guy."

"Right. He is. So he'll tell you the same thing I'm telling you," Brody says, consciously trying to align himself with 'the good guys.'

"You can't have a railing there, end of story."

"We just need the railing there," said Brody. "So we're just going to have to put the railing there, because we just have to have a railing there, okay?"

"No hey -"

Meanwhile the kid is growing visibly distressed. "Minute's up!" he finally shouts, face red and rumpled. "Time for excavayshun!"

"I don't see how you're going to do it."

"Dad, you said! You said just" –

"Here!" says Brody handing him the keys in frustration. "You know which button it is?" Superkid stares at the keys and nods. "Go fetch your equipment." He pads off to where the car is parked as Brody shouts: "Remember to lock!" Then to Ernie he says: "It's a burden, that head of his."

"I'm sure he'll grow into it. I wouldn't worry."

"What? No I mean, there's much going on in there."

"Oh," Ernie squints. "Ya."

At the edge of the field the car turns into a casino slot machine as Superkid cycles through all the buttons on the keyless entry system. The headlights flash, the hooter honks, the side mirrors rotate; then unrotate, the mechanised tailgate flapping up and down, the indicator lights indicating everything and nothing.

Grunting, Superkid pulls on his wellingtons and collects his digging equipment (a hand-spade, and a roll of red and white hazard tape). From the back of the car he drags a hessian bag dimpled with anonymous contents and, like a miner, slings it over his shoulder.

Then he stomps back over the field past Brody and Ernie toward the concrete core of the station where he thinks he might set up his base of operations.

"Hey!" calls Brody, "keys!" at which Superkid stomps back to deposit the keys into the stern hand of his father before heading off toward the station again.

The kid never needs to dig very deep. Of course he hopes to find a Deinonychus claw or a T-Rex tooth, or some days, imagines finding all sorts of magic paraphernalia: wands, invisibility cloaks, flying carpets, a heavy tome covered in an unintelligible script which would then need to be translated by an expert who, ideally, refuses to tell him what the words mean for fear of invoking the terrors lurking inside the pages. Mostly he finds broken bits of crockery and small glass jars. Afterwards, his fingernails black with grime, he has to sit in the back of the car. When he arrives home he has to carry the dusty sacks full of keepsakes up to the guest bathroom, padding mud into the carpets all the way. He will brush and rinse the objects meticulously and lay them out on strips of toilet paper on the bathroom counter, as if preparing for an embalming. Paying great attention to any inscriptions he discovers, he will make notes in an A6 Croxley notebook, cataloguing objects by age or condition, material, purpose and origin. For example, a small teardrop-shaped vial receives the comments: '*round bottle - old, maybe very old, glass, perfum, france?*' While a fairly well preserved saucer is recorded as: '*plate (blue art) - definnitly anshient but chipped, porselan, for eating, probably <u>China</u>'* (underlined). The array will remain there for most of the weekend while Superkid fantasises about using the better containers for preserving organs and foetuses in formaldehyde. Then he'll get bored and throw everything into the bin.

On this particular day he has found, so far:

Eight bronze coins (about eighteen cents).

A glass soda bottle (good condition)

Four fragments of four different porcelain plates (disappointing).

A brass mechanism from a watch (fascinating).

A pair of wrought-iron keys (mysterious).

In the distance Brody finally shakes hands with Ernie and walks towards Superkid.

At the edge of Superkid's dig site he sighs and says "Okay, I want to help."

Superkid shrugs. "Ok you can help dig but be careful where you stand don't squash the valuble artefaks."

"What can I do?"

"Em, okay, maybe you can secure the parimitter with the tape," he says, handing him the tape which Brody begins tying to rocks or any upright sticks he can find and running it about an inch or two from the ground like he imagines archaeologists do.

As he does so he watches Superkid score the gravelly earth with the fork and clear a small divot of soil, just big enough for his tiny fist. Then he sees Superkid gingerly take an object *out* of the bag, a lesser-loved matchbox car, hold it aloft before shoving it into the hole.

"What's that?"

"I'm planting evidence."

Brody ties off another corner.

"Wait, you're burying things here? I thought you were excavating?"

"Right, I take some things out and I put some other things back in."

"What sort of things?"

"Just things I found."

"You know if you plant that evidence it will sprout and grow into a tree."

"What kind of tree?"

"I don't know. An evidence tree."

Superkid stops dead. His eyes bulge wide as he considers this.

"Why are you planting evidence, buddy?"

"One day, when I am a great man, and peeple come looking for when I was young, they'll find these artefaks and they'll say – a great little boy lived here."

"Which people?"

"Payleentolojists."

"Palaeontologists?" The kid has started to learn the power of terminology. Thoughts which are ridiculous gain validity with the right word.

"Where did you learn…"

"You ask too many kweschuns."

Over the course of an hour or two Superkid has dug a hole big enough for himself to fit in and has buried his defunct toys one by one, coating each with a layer of soil. The boy, Brody realises, is creating a fossil record. He imagines some future civilisation reading the story of his life in the strata: the prepubescent sediment of squeaky toys and the moraine of wax-crayons; the cotton-waste dregs of adolescence; the dross of adulthood - newspaper clippings and bifocals - the cinders of old age.

It's just the two of them now and the sun is lowering, simmering on the edge of the treetops and casting wiry shadows over the bristles of the grass on the western facing slope of the hill that leads down to the unkempt portion where Superkid isn't allowed to go. To the kid, outside in the light, darkening skies are the harbingers of boredom. He sees the sun slipping through the lower leaves and feels the creeping prospect of The Packing Up, The Leaving, The Bathing before The Eating of Supper and The Brushing of The Teeth, followed inevitably by The Sleeping, again. "Just a few more minuts!" he cries, pre-emptively.

"Alright," Brody says. "Finish up filling in the hole. I'll take this to the car in the meantime," he gathers a stack of drawings in his arms, "and when I get back we'll pack up your tools and then we go, okay?" Superkid abandons his meticulous layering of objects and simply dumps whatever remains in his bag into the ground and scoops soil over it.

As the sound of his father's footsteps trails off, the field falls quiet, though the branches of the tree still creak from the wind that whips through them.

The events that follow come to him with the logic of a fever-dream. From behind a concrete column steps one leg then a second, as if a figure is coalescing out of carbon particles hanging in the air. It is a being, not necessarily a man, wrapped in cloth. What little skin shows is pitch-black and glossed like charcoal and it speaks to him with the voice of things that crawl amongst dead leaves.

"It is very bad for you to be alone here," the being says, reaching out with a hand. The words are carried on trails of yellow breath and the fine hairs in his nostrils are singed from the smell of it.

"-", Superkid tries to say but his tongue turns cold and hard like a rock sinking deep into the base of his throat. He loosens his tongue with saliva and says: "Are you… Are you a devil?"

The man laughs. "Small child undefiled, my name is Shadowjack."

"Where did you come from?"

"Where do I come from!" he snaps. "Me and mine have lived on this land for many hundreds of years through many millions of tears. I come from anywhere and everywhere, from bedsit to cesspit, in ditches under bridges, in vacant basements or pavements for vagrants whereever payment is waived. The question should be where do *you* come from?"

"This is your house?"

The figure unwraps the cloth and reveals a grinning face.

"My little sweetmeat, our homes are the catacombs underneath the streets. If you were to sink a well very deep, right down to hell, you would see the keep I built next-door and as I was saying, it is very bad for you to roam so unchaperoned. For you see," says Shadowjack, as another figure edges up behind Superkid, "if we are indeed homeless, then we must also be neighbourly-less and some of those who live here are dangerous men."

"Dad!" Superkid shouts.

"Though they likes little boys and are full of ploys to put toys in their corduroys, and I wouldn't get too close to their fingers and toes because," he leans forward and in a stage whisper says: "Ra? They wants to mistreat you. Put you in their mouth-holes and eat you."

When Brody climbs in the car he looks back. What he sees isn't some otherworldly figment, just some beggar harassing his kid for money. He floors the accelerator, driving over ridges and through trenches, almost wrecking the car to get there.

"Hey!" jumping out of the car and and slamming the door. "Get away from him!" Superkid flees to him and clings to his legs, never to be detached. Brody and Merina have tried to hide from the boy all knowledge of poverty, to deny the existence of crime, at least for a while. It was as if this beggar is the corpse of reality exhumed. Brody can barely speak.

"Boss, I apologise if we gave the child a fright, we were only singing the plight of our appetites. You are right to think me a hobo but despite my appearance you will see I am an erudite gentleman and a genuine benevolent specimen - I would never be so callous as to harm a child. Of course we harbour you no malice but, begging your pardon for the invasion, the summation of my narrative is that we are forsaken without vocation and merely request from you or him, if we may, a donation?"

Chapter 7 – Mole People

Smells of curry lace the air of the small apartment and the voweled arguments of neighbours can be heard through the walls. While Brody and Sherman drink red wine and play chess they hear Merina clattering in the rooms like a poltergeist - drawers opening and sliding shut; plates or utensils clinking. Occasionally she appears in one of the three doorways of the lounge and demands that the two of them assess their allegiances and declare them accurately: *Would you say that you are morally opposed to coconut or simply allergic to it? Does your opposition to the crustacean extend to the religious or is it merely gustatory? Do you consider eggs meat?* Brody and Sherman in turn talk of the minutiae of dinner as if this reveals fundamental truths about their character - *I have nothing against the coconut, per se but I can't stand carrots. I don't follow Kashrut law so I am allowed pork but I am a pescetarian, except I just don't like the idea of using an animal's body as a bowl to eat it out of so no prawn, crab or lobster and I don't think I would ever really eat a shark.* At most of these statements Merina merely nods in quiet judgment and then disappears again.

"We were robbed today. I think." Brody says, filling up Sherman's glass and arranging the crude wooden pieces of the chessboard.

"You're not sure?" says Sherman.

"This is the first I'm hearing of it," says Merina, crossing her arms in the doorway.

"I'm sort of only realising it now."

"What happened?"

"Remember I told you about the Damsel?

"The Damsel?"

"The old station renovation project in Newtown. For the moment we call it The Damsel, it's a working title. So we were on site earlier – I took the kid along to get him out of the house for a bit – and there was this beggar. He was harassing him but it turns out he's very well spoken, very polite. And it was like he was…"

"What do you mean they were harassing him?" asks Merina, now from another doorway.

"Just wait," Brody says. "Do you know, when a beggar…"

"No tell me now."

"I'll tell you later. When a beggar says 'Hello' I can't stop myself from replying: How are you? I'm fine thanks, and yourself? I know what he wants. I know the whole story. But now he's initiated the social etiquette protocol in my brain and I have to let him complete the sequence. I felt like my mind was being hacked. I gave him everything. I was very politely robbed."

"You could have just said no."

"He was very persuasive. He warmed me up having me say yes to simple questions; complimented me until I felt I owed himself something in return. He started to say thank you before I even made the decision to give him something. And it all works because I am governed by these rules of decorum. If I didn't give him five rand I would have felt crap to the value of twenty. It's not fair."

"So you want him to play by your rules, but then he…"

"Uses those rules against me."

"And so you think…"

"It's not fair. It's not sportsman-like."

Superkid enters wearing dinosaur pyjamas and carrying a bowl of peppermint ice cream. The ice cream he eats by scooping big delicious chunks with a spoon and then repeatedly sculpting the same spoonful into a smaller and smaller lump with his lips.

"No dessert before dinner!" scolds Brody.

Ignoring him, Superkid installs himself behind Sherman's shoulder, his eyes - a hint of mischief there - locking onto Brody.

"Don't help him," Brody warns.

"I'll play the winner," says the boy.

"No you won't."

Superkid scowls, thinks for a moment then, with a sticky finger, points and instructs Sherman: "Put the bishup there."

"Don't."

"I'm allowed to consult," Sherman insists. "If I put it there," he says to Superkid, "it's check, but then he takes the bishop."

"I know, but then you can take his qween with your roo..." he says, swallowing the word alongside a blob of ice cream.

Sherman swipes the bishop across the board. "Check."

"That's cheating."

"This isn't cheating."

"Two heads are better than one."

"Maybe the kid plus me equals you."

"No, he's better than both of us."

"But how much better? You'd have to quantify it."

"He's better than the both of us together."

"So you should let me play," says Superkid, dropping the bowl next to the board so carelessly that it topples the black king. "Oops."

"You have English homework to do!" shouts Merina from somewhere.

"Listen to your mother. Go do your homework," Brody fixes the king.

"You just don't want me to win," says Superkid. "Push the pawn up to here."

"Us to win," Sherman corrects him, pushing the pawn. "What are you eating there?"

"Ice cream."

"Oh I approve."

“I don’t,” says Brody.

“Mom said I could. You said I should listen to her.”

“This kid has life sorted out. Pyjamas, ice cream, chain of command. I wish I was as...”

“Ask Sherman if he wants some ice cream.”

“Do you want ice cream?”

“Mmm. Yes but hurry back.”

“Now ask me.”

“Do you want ice”-

“No thank you.”

Superkid tramples off and Brody blushes: “Ask you a question?”

Sherman’s eyes are fixed on the board. “Mmm-hmm” he says from behind the hand cupping his chin.

“Do you think it’s too big? His head?”

“It’s… His head? Not too big, no.”

“Big though?”

“It’s just large. Large-ish.”

“Large-ish. But not big?”

“It contains multitudes.”

Now Brody mmm-hmming: “That’s what I think.”

“Kids start with big heads. Don’t they.”

“He’s very smart.”

In the kitchen Superkid sees Merina open a tray of pills and tablets on the counter, multicoloured and in various shapes and sizes. Superkid has learnt to accept that his mother’s administration of her body is out of bounds for questioning. The vanity cabinet of the bathroom contains two sides, one for his father and himself and the other for his mother. Their side is ordinary, toothbrushes, dental floss, his father’s shaving kit. Her side is an alien cache of ointments, powders, inks, small indeterminate implements, kits for removal of some kinds of hair and dyes and treatments for the expansion of others. The top shelf, just out of his reach, holds a mini sweet store of pills and tablets: Smarties, All-Sorts, Jube-Jubes.

He has only rarely caught sight of his mother after her daily maintenance of makeup removal and pharmacology and he hazards a conclusion that his mother, underneath it all, looks identical to his father, and that gender is largely a matter of application.

“Don’t take the knight!” Superkid shouts, returning with a bowl of ice cream for Sherman. “It’s a trap.”

Sherman’s hand hovers over the knight’s head. A finger twitches as he comes to a realisation.

"Ah, you see now," Brody says. "Bringing food to the chess table. Superkid tell Sherman about the 1978 World Chess Championships."

"Korchnoi versus Karpov," without hesitation.

"Victor Korchnoi challenging Anatoly Karpov for the title."

"The one with the yogurt.." says Superkid.

"Right. I mention it because it's another instance of food and undue influence around a chessboard," Brody smirking. "It was during the height of the Cold War and Korchnoi had just defected from the Soviet Union but his family were still being held by the KGB. And so he was trying to cultivate international pressure on the USSR by winning the match. The whole political saga was playing out on and around the chessboard. Meanwhile Karpov…"

"They gave Karpov yogurt."

"Yogurt?" Sherman asks, dancing a spoon around the bowl.

"Korchnoi was utterly paranoid. Thought he was being followed by men in trench coats and so on. At the beginning of the match he heard buzzing and demanded that Karpov's chair be dismantled and x-rayed for bugs."

"And they found bugs."

"No. Well yes. They found two dead flies…"

"But, so tell me about the yogurt."

"At some point someone brought Karpov blueberry yogurt and Korchnoi insisted that Karpov was receiving coded messages" –

"In the yogurt?"

"Thought the yogurt *was* the message. Maybe different flavours meant different openings. Blueberry meant he should play, I don't know, the Italian opening for instance, strawberry meant the Spanish. Maybe for muesli, that would have meant some unorthodox opening, like the Bird or whatever."

"That's a very inefficient way to cheat. Did it work? And what does peppermint mean?"

Shaking his head: "Just a mind game. During one of the twelve games Karpov shows up with some KGB heavies and a renowned hypnotist, Dr Zutkar, Zukhar, something like that, who takes a seat in the front row and proceeds to stare at Korchnoi for the next three months. Eventually Korchnoi, who never showed any weakness his whole career, he gets up, and asks that Zukhar be removed, saying he can hear in his head: '*You should not fight Karpov. You are a traitor to the Soviet Union. You must lose now*.' It fried him psychologically."

"The hypnosis worked?"

"Certainly Korchnoi thought it did, which is just as effective. So Karpov won. Korchnoi competed for the title three times and never took it. KGB," says Brody, gesturing to Superkid. "Karpov," he says, pointing to Sherman.

"But that's not cheating. Why I love chess, more than say Tennis or Cricket, is because there is no question of physical skill. You take out physical skill, all that remains is strategy and tactics. Intimidation, psychological manipulation, influence, these things are part of the game. You just want to achieve an asymmetry: that's chess, that's business, that's politics."

"But there are guidelines and laws."

"Mostly arbitrary. The only thing that is unfair is that which deconstructs the rules of the game. Without rules the structure of the game collapses and there is no point to playing anymore. If Superkid consults we can keep playing. If I start moving pieces like checkers we can't."

Superkid cups his hand to Sherman's ear and whispers. Sherman smiles and moves a knight.

"Superkid if you don't stop… no ice cream for a month."

"Ha! Who is unduly influencing whom now?"

"That's not cheating. That's parenting."

"And so you also have an advantage over Superkid."

"We agree that some advantages are fair, and some aren't."

"I don't know. You have an advantage before we even begin. You are better than I am, is that fair? And if that beggar from today was here now you'd have to give him a B.E.E. affirmative action handicap. What if the game itself is unfair? Then you have to refuse to play according to those rules and make up your own. I've decided I'm not going to pay my annual credit card fee anymore, for instance."

"What do you mean? The annual fee? You have to pay it."

"No," he says. "They make us think we do. But that fee has nothing to do with anything. I phoned my personal banker. Told him I bring this much money in every year, that much in interest. I'm not paying it."

Suddenly, like an apparition, Merina hovers behind Brody.

"What are you still doing here?" she says to Superkid. "I said go do your homework."

"Thank you. The final arbitrator," Brody says.

"I want to stay till they finish."

"Merina, the boy and I have an understanding."

"Sherman, you're coming to my birthday dinner, aren't you?

"The Weeping! Yes you have to come," says Brody.

"Weeping?"

"Don't call it that," she says to Brody. "It belittles it."

"You're joking."

"I'm only half joking."

"Merina has exactly one good cry a year," Brody says. "My parents passed away a week before her birthday three years ago so we went to the funeral and she couldn't stop crying. I'd organised a birthday dinner for her, just a small thing considering no one on my side was very keen to celebrate and she was still crying by the time people arrived in party hats carrying presents. I think the cake made it worse."

"There can be something so depressing about depleted candles," Sherman agrees.

"So ever since she weeps for a week starting on the 4th of May. Last year we had the Grosskopffs over and she wept into the Gluwein."

"That was not a good year. But I don't know what it is. I cried about everything and nothing at all and then afterwards I felt really good and refreshed. I'm starting to look forward to it. I may do it every year."

"It's your ritual," Sherman nodding. "I respect this."

"I think this year is going to be an even bigger cry than before. I've been saving things to cry about. There is my mother, obviously, but I have a list. I feel full to the brim. Brody, of course, doesn't approve."

"I respect it," says Sherman.

"You want to make all our family and friends, removed and extended, come to our house just to watch you weep."

"I respect it. There is comfort in repetition. Traditions are a way for everyone to know what to do when something unusual happens. An elder says, 'you are going through immense pain, you are suffering from great loss, turn around three times, eat only seeds, wear this hat' and somehow you feel better."

"Sherman how can you approve of this?" asks Brody.

"The Jewish mourning ritual is similar. To know that there is a procedure suggests that others have been through the same thing and survived. Sometimes rules are good."

"So pay your annual fee."

"Sometimes rules are not good."

Brody throws up his hands in despair. "I can't win."

"I respect it. What do I bring? Flowers? When someone sits Shiva friends and family bring food so the mourners don't have to leave the house."

"Sherman, flowers are for deaths and Mother's days," Brody mocks. "This is a Weeping."

"A bucket then. And to drink? You will need to stay hydrated, I'm sure."

"Why are you encouraging her?"

"I haven't quite worked out the details yet. Last year we had the Gluwein but…

"Too Christmas?"

"People were giggling. No alcohol this year. I was thinking something you have to hold with two hands so that it forces a sense of reverence. You know, as if you're praying."

"Mmm…"

"This isn't right."

"Brody just think of it as a themed party. Halloween or whatever."

"Soup maybe?"

"As a starter! In cups. Maybe that'll work."

"The event isn't the only problem. The problem is she's been taking medication for it."

"To help me cry better, I don't see what..."

"It's inauthentic. You want to cry, so cry."

"If people are going to come out for this I don't want to disappoint."

"No I understand it, Merina. It's like you're performing. Brody, it's a performance."

"So she's taking performance enhancing drugs. She is the Lance Armstrong of crying."

"I'm not a junkie, Brody."

"Didn't say that at all."

Sherman grabs the wine bottle by the neck and starts sloshing what remains inside into their three glasses. "What pills are you taking?"

"I have three!" Merina, brightening. "The first is a constrictor called Het-ra-dex-o…" she separates the syllables, "eth-a-lo-cy-cla-thene. Trade name Dryclonel. It stops me from lacrimating prematurely."

"Please don't use that word."

"The second is a hyper-lachrymator," Merina continues, "which is actually for contact lens wearers with dry eyes, called ReStat and is really just cyclosporine. Together they produce more tears and increase my ability to store them. And then on the night, I drop a double-dose of Lacrimax, this makes me really emotional and releases it all at once. I've forgotten the chemical name. It's very experimental still."

"We don't even know what – it's still in human trials – it could be anything. In the meantime her mother passes away and she can't shed so much as a single drop."

"I want to do it justice, I'm storing it up. Right now, I can feel I'm still only maybe a third full. I want to be fit to burst. We're going to get everyone round in a few weeks and then…"

"Après vous le deluge."

"Whoosh!"

"Do you own a pair of Wellingtons, Sherman?" Brody asks.

After Sherman has left Brody pours himself a whiskey and sits down at the dinner table with the photocopied pages from Leendert's journal and begins scan-reading.

"Dad, why was that man at the excavation today?" asks Superkid, standing next to him, now sipping juice from a carton.

"That man was…"

"I haven't forgotten about this!" shouts Merina. The next moment she is back in the dining room with a mouth full of toothpaste. "He cug haf goggen hurg."

"You told me to take him along! How is this my fault?"

She spits into the prep bowl. "You have to watch him more carefully. So now you can explain to him why the man was digging in the garbage."

"I'm working, Merina."

"Go on. Explain to him."

Brody turns to the kid in a snap. "Have I ever told you about the Mole People?"

Superkid knows he is onto something whenever his parents flash each other warning looks, but he tries to stay nonchalant and keeps sipping. "What Mole People?"

"The Mole People who live under Joburg."

"Brody, that's not what I mean."

Superkid sees a glinting of truth in the dirt of euphemism. "How do they live under…"

"Sewers, tunnels, super basements, underground parking lots."

"Brody, I'm serious, don't…"

"There are probably some mole people living right below us, if you go deep enough."

Superkid's mouth drops open and the straw falls off his tongue.

"There is a tribe of Mole People called The Feet and everything they do is upside down. You remember when we had that power cut last week? That's because The Feet steal light bulbs and power cables. Then, when they stick the light bulbs into the ground, the whole place lights up like the stars – which is good because it's always dark underground and they're afraid of sunlight - they only come up to the surface at night. You should see them; they hang from the ceiling of their cave like bats."

"Don't tell him this. Superkid! Time for bed!"

"There is another Johannesburg. Do you know this? Before there was a city here, buildings and streets, there was the gold reef, a thousand metres underground, and all the miners who came to Joburg wanted to be close to the gold, right on top of it in fact, and when they started mining, they sank shafts all the way down through the crust of the earth until they mined so deep they were right next door…"

"You're going to give him nightmares."

"… to Hell. In the dark and the heat they burrowed tunnels left and right and the people on the surface sank more shafts and followed them. So the reason Main Reef road is where it is, is because it followed the miners. It's too hot down there and too dark so the when the gold was gone they came back up. But not all of them. Some stayed behind and started living there, and they're living there still, only coming up for supplies. They come up through the drainpipes and the sewers and they collect things."

"Gddmnt, Brody," she muffles her curse words in front of the boy. "You tell him this story and the next thing he's crawling down a storm water drain headfirst looking for the *fckng* ninja turtles."

"I guess it's a bit like they're excavating. Only they're not collecting artefacts."

"What do they collect?"

"Glass bottles, cans, plastic things. Anything they can find really. Just like you."

"Are they payleen…?"

“No. They’re building something.”

“What?”

“Okay that’s enough. I’m putting my foot down. Go get dressed for bed.”

“What are they building!”

“Something very, very important.”

“What is it!”

“Off to bed RIGHT NOW!”

“What is it what is it what is it what is it what -!”

Chapter 8 - The Memoir of Leendert Lukas Overzicht - On Childhood

I remember our house, in the ramshackle west of Johannesburg. It had the brownest face brick walls and a dry useless garden. There was a rusty swing set left there by previous owners. When we moved in the putty was still fresh on a pane of glass that had just been replaced and my first act of christening this house was to push a divot into it. I'm sure my thumb print is still there today.

Mother's mission was to make something of that garden. All she thought of, after the man who called himself my father left, was the garden. She planted beetroot and some herbs. Eventually potatoes. She used to drive us around the suburb so that we could source flowers from the neighbours. We cased the neighbourhood for days and learnt everything about the people who lived there - what time they left for work, what time they came home from work, which wives had visitors during the day and so on. She kept the engine running like she was Bonnie and I hopped over the wall - all the houses had low walls back then - and pulled up a good handful of the brightest. Then we'd drive back while I cradled the roots and the soil fell into my lap.

Mother never considered this stealing. She was a devout christian. *Thou Shalt Not Steal,* the Bible said. *Thou shalt not covet that which belongs to your neighbour.* But flowers were of the earth. They belonged to no one but God - we were simply moving them around.

She held a similar opinion of the food we borrowed from our neighbours. She had a way of cultivating trust, not just toward herself, but amongst the families in the vicinity. I remember how, on one Spring day, she baked a raspberry cheesecake - the ingredients of course we couldn't afford - covered it in her best doily and carried it to Mevrou Hannekie's house. Hannekie was so taken aback by the magnanimity of her gift, and the beauty of her craft, that she demanded Mother take something in return. In her refrigerator was a *herder's pastei* covered in tin foil and the woman hurried to thrust it into Mother's arms, taking her hands in hers and wrapping them around the container in a pleading gesture. But in a flourish of genius, Mother insisted that Hannekie pass it onto her own neighbour instead. The Willemses were an elderly couple, the husband respired in the sitting room, so deaf we all had to shout in his good ear while the wife, a dumpling of a woman, opened up all her cupboards and spilled out the contents while we drank her tea and ate our own cheesecake. Thereafter Mother led a sortie down the street, gathering followers, each desperate to be seen as more selfless than the next by buying their way in with raw fillet steaks, eggs, carrots and beetroot from their gardens. At the end of the block Mother sought the highest point, a boulder only the size of a large tortoise. While I worked my way through the open pantries and deep freezes she delivered a sermon, Matthew 25, about the seven loaves of bread and a few small fish feeding the multitude.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

The neighbours sat in quiet attention, like school children. Her words echoed as Mrs Willemse shouted everything Mother said for her husband. I remember how patient her pacing was. She waited until they could not stand the silence any longer.

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

When she stepped down from her mount she waved goodbye to cheers and great applause, every member of the community filled with the kind of emotion that surprises and becomes self-perpetuating. While borrowing sugar from the house of Meneer Harmse I heard him clapping with fat hands and laughing. I saw Mevrou Hannekie sobbing into her blouse, the du Toits kissing at the back

while Mr Roelofse lifted his son up onto his shoulders to see over their heads. Even Mr and Mrs Schiller, the perpetual frowners, softened their brows, while I stocked up on their peas.

That night Mother and I feasted on all the food in the world.

Though we were as poor as church mice, we always lived well, and with dignity. My church clothes were washed and folded, as carefully as if they were the shroud of Jesus. Mother was a miracle worker with thread, and any hole or scuff was mended so perfectly as to be invisible. She was particular about shoe horns. She never let me hang a blazer on a chair back. She hated for me to carry a heavy load in one hand, fearing a crooked spine, and insisted I trolley my schoolbag around. She gave me all of the little that we had and saved only the bare minimum she needed to sustain herself. She called me the Prince of Jerusalem, and her messiah.

One day, you will stitch the world together like this needle, your work will be like this thread, you will show the people of this world what greatness looks like, and make decisions not only by what your eyes see and your ears hear.

That all changed around my tenth birthday, Mother inherited a twenty-year-old sourdough levain from her mother, my grandmother. It was one of only two significant items in Grandmother's will and she had named it Abraham. The other item was her wedding ring, which Mother took to wearing on her ring finger, even though she was no longer married.

Grandmother had come to Johannesburg from Drie Riviere, a small suburb in Vereeniging. She was born into a family of Doppers, the Afrikaner Calvinist community which was opposed to singing hymns in church, cups of communion wine and nearly everything else. Though she left the Doppers, thinking them too puritanical, she remained a strict woman. Whenever she disapproved of something - my uncombed hair, my idle hands, my laughter - she clenched her lips whitely together and rapped the back of my hand with a strip of off-cut carpet.

During one of her visits Mother complained to Grandmother of the lack of a man in the house, to which Grandmother slammed her bony fist on the kitchen table and told her *he does not need a father, he is twice the man his father was;* which was true, even then, and I began to admire Grandmother for her wisdom and her disdain for dewy-eyed sap. Mother hung her head in shame, I didn't enjoy that, but it was right for Grandmother to remind her. *That's not what I meant,* she said, at which Grandmother explained that men were not to be enjoyed - that God intended the entire sequence, from conception to childbirth, to be painful, as reminder for our original sin. Then Grandmother told her of how she lay in bed, brave, arms at her sides, staring at the ceiling, suffering my breathless, grunting grandfather and the necessary evil of his seed.

Grandmother would have cursed us in Bible verse for putting Abraham in the freezer.

I remember a Sunday morning, after the funeral service, Mother sifted one cup of flour onto him, a little heap in the centre of the bowl. Then she dribbled a cup of water around him. She also added a dollop of yoghurt on top, for the lactobacilli, and the whole process had been so delicate up to that point, so deft, that it was disturbing when next she thrust the wooden spoon into the bowl, mashing and grunting the mix into the thickening paste with a grip that was all knuckles.

Then she left it on the stoop to gather wild yeast from the air, the particular species of which would give the levain its unique regional taste. As the mixture rose and receded, the yeast and the bacteria reached an equilibrium. As the marriage aged, it developed an immune system of sorts, it became more durable, more resilient to foreign particulars.

Once Abraham stabilised he had to be fed twice a day with a mixture of flour and water. Occasionally we could add some sugar or honey for the yeast, but never more than a teaspoon - Mother insisted. Any more than a teaspoon of honey could kill him.

Between feedings he would double in size and Mother had to bake daily or cleave off large chunks and throw them into the bin. She couldn't stand the waste so we always had freshly baked bread and, on birthdays, a sourdough cake.

Provided they are fed regularly, levains can live, theoretically, forever. Indeed they are considered the same being, even though an old levain is unlikely to contain a single particle that was present at its birth. This was the first I knew of the concept of immortality and I remember daydreaming about the idea of becoming sourdough, tearing bits of flesh off my body and having them grow into young, fresh copies of myself. Perhaps, I thought, I could donate some of me to other families; I could mail my bits by post and suddenly there would be another Leendert living in Cape Town, Durban, even overseas. I laughed to myself thinking these things, giddy at the thought of a whole roomful of me, having wonderful conversations about things I'm interested in, never short of friends.

When Grandmother died, it was as if the weight of her had slipped off the family unit, the central gravity of her presence loosened, and Mother drifted off like a mylar balloon.

Abraham quickly became her obsession. There was a hollow, and Abraham bubbled and foamed happily to fill it. Mother sat him at the head of the table and he had dinner with us. She doted on him, spoke to him, included him in her prayers, *Dear Lord, please keep Abraham in good health,* and so on. For months all she spoke about was him - the comfort of his beery scent, his lactobacilli and how lovely they were, bustling along blah blah. At night she placed him on her bedside table and read to him from Psalms. At least once I caught her sleeping with her hand in him.

And the feeding. All honey, yogurt and sugar in the house were poured into his greedy stomach, while Mother and I ate only unsalted potatoes and drank only unsweetened tea. Everything we had, which was never very much, was now being consumed by this dough and I soon lost the taste for bread altogether. The lunch Mother packed me for school was always bread and butter, maybe some marmalade from the bitter oranges that happened to fall onto our property from our neighbour's trees. I traded what I could or else simply threw it into the dirt. Though Mother was able to barter the bread she had baked with the Willemses for necessities, soap and toothpaste, we were struggling to maintain our dignity. Our clothes were falling apart and ourselves inside them.

I was in the bath one night, stewing in my hatred for Abraham, when Mother called through the door telling not to empty the bath after I got out. The bathroom was the only room in the house where I could escape the clammy reek and I hated to be disturbed in there because I had been fantasising about ways to end the dough. That was always something about me, I could be calm and still on the outside, but my mind was always thinking, always working, planning inside.

I was thinking how I hated him, and also her for loving him more; I remember the exact moment, my fingers swirling a contrail of soap around on the surface of the water, when Mother knocked on the door and the next thing she was suddenly standing next to me.

I told her that I wasn't done yet and I was so indignant at the interruption I just lay there without bothering to cover up. She was wearing that same sundress she always wore; fuscias printed on it; colour bled into the white until all of it was a dull pinkish brown. The rag must have been on its last wash. She wouldn't leave until I got out of the bath. Abraham was growing bigger and thirstier, so in order to conserve water, she wanted to use mine while it was still warm.

Of course, I wasn't going anywhere, least of all for that stupid dough.

So she reached behind her back and pulled down her zip, pinched her dress straps between her finger and thumb and slipped them off, one by one. The rag fell to the ground. Then she slid down her underwear and I remember one pale leg stepping into the bath, then the other, and the dark flash of fur in between as she sat down.

Well in retrospect I realise that was a moment when it all changed. I remember thinking there were all these body parts of which I didn't yet know the names. The outer curves of her ears, the *pinna*, the crisp straight line of her *septum,* the divot between her nose and lips, the *philtrum*. In a daze I lingered on her clavicle, the flat of her sternum, the definition of her intercostal muscles and ribs as she breathed. She twisted her hips to slide deeper into the bath and I stared at the small mound of her hip bone rising under her skin, the dimples in her knee and her ankles, the way she twiddled her naked toes against the heat. This was just a human, just a being like myself, respiring, decomposing - trying to survive.

From the moment I decided to do it, I had to be careful not to reveal my disgust for the dough in front of Mother. Whenever I smelt his stench, I could taste the salty spit that always precedes a good vomit. If I flashed him a hateful eye, grimaced in his direction, Mother would know what I was planning and I would lose her. In some ways, she had already noticed my behaviour was shifting.

That night she called me to feed Abraham and I was counting the ways. But how to destroy him in a way that wouldn't raise her suspicions? Abraham couldn't simply disappear - she would have known that I had thrown him away. I couldn't just corrupt him in the time it took her to go to the bathroom, it was all too obvious - and anyway she had of late been taking him in there with her. I needed a pernicious poison, surreptitiously delivered:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 2 Peter, chapter three, verse ten.

So I remembered the honey. Never more than a teaspoon, Mother had said. To feed him a little was expected, the glucose fed the yeast, gave it an extra vigour, but too much would activate it too much, the bacteria wouldn't keep up, opening up a niche for other, less amicable strains. The invaders would consume the yeast, it would begin to rot, the dough would foul from the inside. I would bring to Abraham a sweet death and I would remain, on the surface at least, guiltless.

For an entire month, I deposited a droplet of honey in Abraham every chance I got: when Mother dug around in the pantry for a forgotten potato - honey - when she fell asleep in her chair with Abraham in her lap - honey - whenever she took a call, or greeted someone at the door - honey. The change in him was subtle at first, the way a marriage first turns sour. There was a sense of deflation to him; he was no longer burbling with the same enthusiasm. At the end of the third week, it became clear he had turned, took the complexion of pus, smelt rank. Mother cried then. I think there were maybe five droplets after that. Then he went all black and gurgling. He died on a Sunday.

What I had hoped for, was a full recovery of her love for me. I imagined we would become even closer; that I would take my place at the head of the table again; that we would continue bathing together and that we might go redistribute the flowers again, but after the levain died she was forever altered.

At another dinner of potatoes she stared dreamily at the cabinet on top of which the dough used to rest. She told me that she was grateful. Grateful for the time she had with him. I must have had the strangest expression when she said that; A frown and a pursed mouth, all pretend, trying to hide a smile. A laugh can sound like crying if you cover your face, so I folded my arms and burrowed into the nook of my elbow.

She saw through my arms though. Right through my face to the real thoughts behind. Pulled my arms away and flashed a white hot look of accusation at me. I scratched around the plate, avoiding her eyes. But she surprised me by softening. Her tone became maternal and meek; said she forgave me as she collapsed back into her chair, the wood of it creaking as if it too was also exhausted. Said she knew I would be a great man and she didn't want to hold me back.

The lump of potato I'd skewered and placed into my mouth suddenly gave me the feeling one gets at the first taste of sour milk or unwholesome eggs. Potatoes don't rot like eggs or milk, but I still remember that taste. Mouldy, doughy potatoes.

Then she turned cruel again. Called me an evil little boy. Said I treated her like a worm and that she knew I wanted to leave her. She didn't understand that I did it to have her all to myself. It was the opposite of a betrayal. I swallowed the potato and it smeared its starch all down my throat.

That was the first night that she woke up with the Furies. That's what I called her episodes: 'The Furies'. In the middle of the night she would jump out of bed from a dream so vivid it took her almost half an hour to realise that whatever terrible thing had woken her hadn't really happened. Mostly she came into my room, face white and taut, asking something like: "Did I hear you speaking to the Devil?"

At which I would say no, I wasn't speaking with anyone, and, with gentle hands on her shoulders, lead her back to bed. This was usually enough to loosen her expression, some soft confusion lingering on it. Almost always she would say she must have heard her stomach rumbling. Back in her room she would simply crawl back into the bed and go back to sleep. Leaving me to deal with the memory of it all.

While mildly disconcerting, the Furies never caused me any real concern for her or my safety. It was only the night of the anniversary of Abraham's death that everything turned.

It was June, so it would have been cold. I am almost certain that the window was closed when I went to bed. The curtains also, would have been drawn shut for the cold, but they were flimsy and the light of an almost full moon, what I've since learnt they call gibbous, slipped through. I had had trouble falling asleep, dipping in and out. While I was sleeping I felt another presence in the room, like a crawling sensation at the edge of consciousness. When I opened my eyes, slightly sticky from sleep, it was light enough to see the folds of the curtains swaying from the breeze feeding in through the now half-open window. I felt a pressure change, a shift in the air that chilled my face, and I saw then that there was a figure at the edge of my bed. It drifted over to the side and I parsed its features apart from the mottled folds of the curtain. Her knotted hair hung over Mother's face.

I asked her if she was having the dreams again. She didn't say anything at first, just swayed slowly side to side, movements becoming more viscous, curdling. Finally she said she'd wanted to wake me up. I glanced past her and saw a jar in her right hand. She told me it was a jar of honey, almost as surprised as I was. Held it up to her nose and sniffed.

Thought about it for a while and realised she'd wanted to wake me using the honey.

After that night I went to live with the Harmses for a while.

Chapter 9 - Agenda

Nox and Brody wait in the glass-walled meeting room while Marshall 'Ten-Percent' Mkhize makes small-talk. Brody recognises that pre-meeting small talk is a necessary skill that maintains good working relationships and develops potential future business opportunities, but struggles to get so much as a word out. The quiet makes him feel uncomfortable in his skin - he scratches itches he finds himself pretending to have.

"You were in Cape Town last week?" asks Ten-Percent.

Nox isn't much help today. "Mmm, "she says.

"And tell me, do you fly round-trip?"

"We should wait for everyone to arrive," she says. "We'll start the meeting in a moment."

"Of course," he fiddles with one of the bottles of water. "I like to round-trip. You can shave and do your dry-cleaning and you come back and you are happy."

"I don't travel so much. It's more the higher ups."

"You must try. I've just come back from Paris. The food is very satisfying. In the cafes, I like the way they slice the salami so that it's very thin. It's there but you almost don't notice it. Of course I have no idea how they make those salami sausages, there must be something very good in them! And the champagne! It was special. Real French champagne has a biscuit taste. It really is like… do you know Dom Perignon.. it really is like they put the *stars in a bottle*. Very powerful, the French. They certainly keep their lights on. When I was there all the lights on the Eiffel Tower were shining brightly. Not like here with our Eskom. Hopefully we can learn something from them."

Fifteen minutes later, eight men and a woman are sitting around the table in the Bambata conference room, sighing and shuffling papers. A video-conferencing station is pasted to the table. In Cape Town, Saunders Skhoji clears his throat again, calling order. They turn to the screen. Then he speaks brusquely to Nox, who listens and nods, a pen poised over her notebook.

The meeting is deliverables, deadlines, policies, the same musts and oughts, but Brody always finds it fascinating. There is a simple elegance in the forward propulsion of a well-run project. Irrational beings with emotions and disparate desires, coordinating themselves like an assembly of parts, clicking into place through the four-stroke protocol - programmes, agendas, meetings, minutes - and a project manager at the front, keeping time. This is how Things Got Done.

Ernie Fraser sitting to his left squeaks his chair intermittently as he disagrees with whatever is being said. Keith Etheridge scans Skhoji's face as Nox responds, looking for confirmation that he shares his own opinions of her.

The engineers manhandle their papers in the Cape Town boardroom and it sounds like a riot through the speakers. Ten-Percent tells them that the [redacted] wants practical completion before the end of the year. Otherwise the fate of The Damsel Project is endangered. (And he won't get his performance bonus).

Ernie Fraser mentions Heritage Council has expressed its concern. Then there is [redacted] and some affiliated [redacted], which somebody said opposed the project outright. Saunders Skhoji says the Damsel is technically less than fifty years old, on account of being moved and rebuilt in Newtown in the late eighties. So that opens up prospects.

Etheridge says [redacted] can be [redacted] or diverted maybe to another outrage. Shouldn't be a problem. There is also the issue of homeless people who have moved onto the site, he said.

“Yes. I’ve met them.” Brody speaks up.

“They will need a notice of eviction. I believe this process is lengthy. If you can establish how long they have been living there then… They may need up to three notices, each with a month allowed for responses. All this is in the bylaws.”

Skhoji says, “please stop shuffling those papers.” A coffee cup overturns in Cape Town spills onto the laptop and the printed drawings. Then Ten-Percent mentions Brody. How he said last week that they needed more resources and seniority during design development, and that it is good to have Nokwanda on board.

Skhoji agrees. It’s recorded in the minutes.

The tea-lady comes in with a cloth for the spill. Skhoji takes it and wipes the laptop and Johannesburg loses the feed. Someone sniffs as the screen times out. That seems to end the meeting.

As they are leaving the building, Ten-Percent calls Nox back with a delicate but decisive pull on her elbow. “Ms Xuma, I was looking at your fees and I’m concerned.”

“I’m not in a position to discuss any discounts.”

“No! Haha. I didn’t mean discounts. I think you must just remember this is an accelerated build programme. Things will presumably inflate. You must cover all your bases.”

“We run a tight ship.”

“Sure, sure. But I’m talking generally. You may need more resources. You will be compensated if your operational costs run higher.”

“I think we’ll manage.”

“But there is urgency. Good. We must insist final completion by April.”

“That’s very soon.”

“That is why I am saying more resources.”

“Even so.”

“Just think of it as like *cramming* for an exam. By March maybe I think is possible.”

“I’ll discuss it with the directors.”

“February next year if you work hard.”

“Maybe.”

“Absolutely. Let’s do it.” His tone upbeat. Gung-ho.

“Mmm.”

“Okay guys.”

Driving back to the office Nox frowns and white-knuckles the steering wheel. “We’re so fucked,” she says as they pass over Nelson Mandela Bridge.

“Yeah, it’s gonna be really tight if he wants us to finish the thing by Feb.”

“Well ya, that’s also fucked, but I was talking more about the whole project is bullshit and corrupt.”

"Why? They want us to lower our fees?"

"Worse, they want us to raise them."

"What do you mean?"

"They want to use us as tumble-dryers. They're going to claim we invoiced them for, I don't know, 17 million rand, which they will pay and expect us to subtract what we are really owed and transfer the rest into someone's private account."

"You gathered all that from this meeting?"

"No, not the stuff they said in the meeting, that's on the record. I mean everything before that and after that."

"You mean all that small-talk about sandwiches?"

"You're adorable."

"I don't understand."

"You really don't hey? All those oblique references to *cramming* for an exam, and *shaving*, *drycleaning?* That's when you take *dirty* money and make it *clean* money. He's talking about money *laundering."*

"Oh wow." It's as though Brody has just been told up is down.

"*Round-tripping* is also some finance jargon but it doesn't really make sense in the context - he may really have been asking if I fly round-trip. Difficult to tell."

"And all that stuff about salami?"

"He was talking about salamis and how people don't always know how the sausage is made. Salami-slicing is when you deposit illegally obtained funds in such small amounts that they fall under the threshold where the bank would have to report them to SARS. It's also called 'smurfing' but that's harder to work into a casual conversation."

"Smurfing, like the little blue…"

"Communists. Ya."

"Wait. What?"

"I need a coffee." She pulls the car over at the top of Braamfontein. Steps into a small coffee shop on Ameshoff where the manager seems to recognise her. "Flat white, let me educate you." She says it just like that. For a moment he thinks she's given him a nickname. "Not about the Smurfs, I was kidding about that, I mean about the other thing. Here's a thought experiment. Suppose a member of a political party or some other government entity wants to steal a fuck-load of money. They find something expensive, an office space rental, security upgrades to an important national landmark, for instance, maybe a website. They ask for a quote which, just for a round number, let's say, is 100 million. They tell the architect, which in this totally made-up scenario would be us, that okay your fees are this but we are going to pay you this plus that. You transfer that out immediately to that account and you get to keep the rest. So from their side it looks like they spent maybe a little too much, maybe *a lot* too much, maybe 155 million, for the sake of argument, too much, but SARS or some SIU or the Public Protector can't audit our books so easily."

Brody has to close his eyes. "I'm… I mean.. I don't even know what to…"

“Why is everyone always so surprised when I tell them this? There's no such thing as a being hundred and fifty percent over budget. That's not ‘scope creep’ or ‘mismanagement’. That's just fraud.” She tilts her head in mock sympathy. “Oh no! Look at your little face. You still put your teeth under your pillow, metaphorically you do, don’t you? I’ve ruined the nice thing. You poor chicken.”

“But…”

“This is why I prefer for our national heritage to be in the hands of private enterprise, you know, Casinos and theme parks, like it was in Ubuntu Park. It’s all funded by sin and vice but at least its transparent sin and vice. At least it’s legal.”

“Shit. Okay and what was all that stuff about stars in a bottle?”

“No sugar. As I understand it, someone in government, I expect the whomever they call [redacted], was bribed to award a contract to build a nuclear power plant to a French contractor and they’re funnelling the bribe through the Damsel. Something like that.”

“Jesus. There is so much that happens under the radar. I had no idea.”

“It explains the sudden surge in our budget. And why they are so eager to get it done before April. What do you want?”

“How do you mean?”

“He’ll have a latte,” this she says to the barista. “They don’t think they’ll still be minister of whatever after the elections. So they need to get paid before then.”

“And when someone blows a whistle, or the dung beetle comes knocking?”

“Then when the shit hits the fan the parade starts, the pretence of a investigation. The moment the government I imagined earlier, by way of example, the moment that speculative government gets caught they turn around and point the finger to the architect.”

“So the architect becomes a scapegoat.”

“Yes but even the scapegoating is a farce. The architect gets told listen we're gonna say it was all your idea but don't worry we'll pay for all your legal fees, we’ll even provide you with one of our go-to guys who, and this is just conjecture, once administered one of the government’s trusts. And if you ever somehow go to jail we can get you out with, oh I don’t know, medical parole. All you have to do, they say to this totally fake and fictional architect, is fight it in court. Drag it out as much as possible. Delay, appeal, et cetera, et cetera and by the time anything happens we own that thing that decides what to do about it.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“That, my friend, is architecture. Hypothetically.”

Chapter 10 – Strata

On the simple pine dressing table in the corner of the bedroom there is a small flying saucer-shaped object about the size and shape of an upturned breakfast cereal bowl. The shell of it is clear and it is packed full of multicoloured gum-ball looking things. The device squawks at a predetermined time like any other alarm clock but then goes a step further and ensures it wakes Merina up by opening up like an oyster and launching the gum balls off into the room in random directions. It will only shut up once Merina has found every single ball and replaced them into the clock's mouth. It works by calculating the exact weight of the balls, or by some sensor maybe. It isn't clear.

Every morning Merina tears herself apart into two distinct personalities. There is the *she* that is well-intentioned, stern, noble, and who exists only in the hour before bed and after a day which feels wasted or too short. Then there is another *she* who, in the warm fluff of sleep, believes that all that is sure and good in this world is one's own pleasure and that even a few seconds more of it is better than any sense of duty or righteousness. By correspondence the two halves wage their war for dominance over her psyche. Evening Merina places alarm clocks and cell phones further and further away from the bed, or hides them. Morning Merina pulls a pillow over her ears, snoozes, convinces herself it was possible to go back to sleep, snoozes again, lies awake in bed out of spite.

It's 6:30 am when the clock sings - "*Whow!"* - with the voice of James Brown. But Morning Merina is immune. She does *not* feel good. She did *not* know that she would. Instead she crawls out of bed, picks up the alarm - "*Get on Up-ah!"* - drops it into the toilet bowl then slips off her panama pants and panties in one motion and sits down. Her elbows rests on her knees; blood ceases to course through her toes and she feels numb and nice - immune to stimulus. Soothed by the sound of the trickling stream, she closes her eyes again.

The U-Bend of the small shared bathroom contains the most innovative technologies yet devised for enabling the self-flagellating quixoticism of late-sleepers. It is a graveyard of patents which represent the failure of ingenuity to overcome sloth.

They wake her, or try to, by requiring of her, with great capricious and labyrinthine procedural prefix (suffered with devotion of saint in prayer; through sleep-caked blindness padding at plastic) to solve a puzzle, rotating a lever or by - roundaboutedly - pointing a laser at a target.

Another donates her money, each press of the snooze button, to a charity invested in the pro-bono cloning of second-tier-pets for bereaved owners; goldfish and parakeets, that sort of thing. Escapist clocks, shaped like anenomes and porcupines, scuttle and roll away on wheels, shake violently, turn into flying drones and drop eggs to be collected throughout the apartment. They are made from a blend of polycarbonate and acrylonitrile butadiene styrene; capable of resurrecting its original form after enduring intense heat or impact.

These become stuck, most of them, somewhere in the bowels of the apartment; each day, sounding off at odd intervals as their timers desynchronise and their silicon brains addle from fading batteries awash in sewerage.

The waste of a house contains the collected intimacies of everyone in it. If she wants to know if her son is healthy, what he eats when he isn't there; if she wonders if her husband is balding and anxious about it, if he is taking medication for it, the evidence is circulating through the plumbing in the walls, and decomposing in the black bin liners. All she needs is to gaze through a viewfinder which could be installed in the joints of the waste pipes, or she could simply snap on a pair of rubber gloves and rifle through the rubbish.

"*Hreh!"* - Merina shivers with relief as the last drop leaves her. She flushes the toilet and - "*like sugar and spice"* - sends the clock down to join the others. As he is getting dressed Brody hears its dying wail emanating from the bathroom.

"Who have you invited to the Weeping?"

"Sherman, Lili, Eric. Sherman's bringing a date," she says, now resembling Merina proper.

"Which one is Lili again?"

"Grosskoppf."

"Who?"

"You have no memory."

"With the glasses?"

"How old are you?"

"Which one am I again?"

Merina crawls back under the duvet and pulls it up to her neck.

"I think your son is pretending to be sick. Will you speak to him?" She takes a container from the bedside table, cracks up the lid and tips the contents out onto her palm.

"I'm going to be late for work. Just tell him it's not up for discussion."

"Everything is up for discussion."

"Why are you still taking those?"

"These," she slams her palm to her mouth and the capsules rocket to the back of her throat, "are different to what I was taking before. Mmm.. Hand me that water. There are three kinds of tears. I've been doing my homework. Basal tears are just what your tear ducts produce all the time to lubricate your eye. They have enzymes which dissolve the cell walls of bacteria and help prevent infection. Then there are reflex tears which you get when your eyes are irritated - dust, onion vapours, whatever. But what I actually want are the psychic tears which you get in response to intense emotional stress. They're chemically different to the other ones in that they contain more protein-based hormones, including an analgesic."

"A natural pain-killer?"

"Right. That's why crying makes you feel better. You should try it. I'm concerned that you haven't been crying. You really ought to cry more. Do you want some of these green ones?"

"What do I have to cry about?"

"I'll make you a list."

"That's depressing."

"Good!"

"Good?"

"Things get worse before they get better. What goes down must come up. How's your book?" she asks, changing the subject.

"It's a journal. Or rather, a photocopy of a journal."

"How's your photo…"

"He writes an awful lot about Nietszche. Not a promising start. Have you ever read Nietszche?"

"You can't ask me questions like that before breakfast."

"God is dead, said Nietszche. Nietszche is dead, said God. That's the joke, right?"

“This conversation is dead, said I.” She pecks him on the lips. “Have a nice day now.”

In Superkid’s room, expecting an argument about school, she finds him at his chessboard, reenacting a game. She bites her lip whenever he plays - a habit of scraping the skin against her teeth and chewing the epithelium off.

She’s bought him a cricket bat and football boots - he prefers rehearsing past chess games by himself at home.

And she recognises the game, nicknamed ‘Fischer’s Brilliancy’. She knows very little except what she’s learnt by osmosis - through his arguments with Sherman about whether it is more humiliating for an opponent to be mated by a pawn or two queens; more demoralising to lose in the opening or through a drawn-out end-game, and so on.

Superkid admires Fischer’s Brilliancy for being the most insidious - ‘like ninja chess’ he says. On the fifteenth move, Fischer sacrifices a knight and seems hopelessly lost until seven moves later when his opponent suddenly resigns. Some have called it more witchcraft than chess.

Then there is the problem of his all-time favourite. The Game of the Century. The one he rehearses at least once a week before school: Donald Byrne slaughtered by a then-prepubescent Bobby Fischer. At the eleventh move Fischer forces Byrne to choose between a deadly pin or a decimated pawn structure, on the incredible seventeenth move Fischer sacrifices his queen and looks to smother the white king; on the eighteenth he initiates the Windmill. Then he finishes him off by tightening a mating net.

She hates it most when he uses the Windmill, a devastating manoeuvre that forces opponents to watch on as half their pieces disappear from the board. When he does play chess at nursery school, teachers report that he makes several of the smaller kids cry. He’ll laugh as they beg him to let them take their moves back.

Where are the noble virtues? Where is sportsmanship, discipline, team-work? This is a game that rewards mercilessness and cruelty and offends every sense of herself as a compassionate human being, as if he is tearing a little piece of skin from her mouth whenever he captures a pawn. But always, just before reaching over him to fold the board in half and ban him from playing it forever, she remembers that it will be these very qualities that will make him a successful businessman or respected advocate one day. That if bullying is inevitable in the world she would rather he be the bully than the bullied. So she buys eucalyptus lip-balm and signs him up to local championships.

She places a bowl of cereal next to the board and leaves him to it. “Time to get ready for school,” she says.

“I’m sick,” Superkid replies.

“Are you really?”

“Very sick.”

“Next year it’s big school and then you can’t just say you’re sick when you don’t want to go.”

He doesn't like the threat but can hear an implied acceptance from her. That’s next year and this is now.

“Mmm.”

“Fine. But if dad asks you had leprosy, okay?”

The kid nods.

The truth is she has scheduled an interview by video call. There will be time to drive him to school and back but it will be tight and if she lets him bunk today then she can prepare more.

She buttons on a white shirt, which she has read is good to wear to interviews because it encourages trust. Then she wraps a black silk scarf around her neck like a tie; black suggesting confidence, apparently. Her hair she pulls back into a professional-looking pony-tail with minimalist make-up. She spots a slight wrinkle in the collar so she feels compelled to take it off and bring out the

ironing board. Afterwards, crisp and neat, she sits down at the dinner table and checks the lighting and setting.

Curiously she keeps her pyjama pants on. The webcam frames her ‘at the T’s’ as they say in film, the title safe portion of the frame cutting her off just under her breasts. So she knows she can get away with having her notes in front of her on the table, and she doesn't even think of changing into pants.

She dangles a slipper off a big toe and reads over her talking points, and so, split in two, comfortable from the waist down, she answers the call coming from her laptop.

“Hello, can you see me?” A face drifts into view like a moon eclipsing. She can see all the way to the furries inside the nostrils of Mr Benny Bachelle.

The name is at least partially engineered and adjusted. Those who have referred her to the prospect of his employ simply refer to him as ‘Mr B’. Supposedly, the one hundred and second wealthiest man in the country, the rumours insist that he himself downgrades his net-wealth annually so as to avoid the unwanted attention of ‘top 100 richest South Africans’ lists; and indeed that he can both be and not be a South African as need has it, having collected the citizenships of such arcane sovereigns as Andorra, St Kitts & Nevis, Nauru and Anguilla. These vast and complex conspiracies of anonymity are said to be so effective, and his ability to slip through the customs and control of all ports and thresholds so profound that not even his own mother has heard of him.

“You need to be further away, I think.” She tries to avoid hedging. Better to sound decisive. “You definitely need to be further away,” she says.

A pair of yellow sclera fill the frame. Mr B squints, like he’s trying to discern the microscopic workings of the aperture with his naked eyes. Then, him pulling back, Merina notices the other woman in the room, who Mr B introduces with the words ‘Lady’, ‘Oltcit’ and ‘Fox’ all in quick succession. The name leaves Merina confused as to whether ‘Lady’ is a title or first name, Oltcit a first name or the first half of a double-barrel surname or even some obscure qualifier for the title of Lady. She gives Merina a lean and hungry look from her small black eyes set above a prominent nasal bridge. Strikes her as altogether a bird of a woman. Which is why Merina settles on the mnemonic Lady Bird for her.

“Alright, so… maybe you can start with, you know, who you are exactly?” Mr B says fumbling for something he seems to think must be down near his ankles.

“Mr B requests that you provide a history of your employment and a summary of your biography,” says the Lady Bird.

Merina, to her credit, hesitates not at all and details her 2 years of formal work experience as a project manager before going it on her own as an events coordinator, arranging everything from corporate end-of-years to batmitzvahs, 21sts and weddings (sometimes all at once), before shutting the enterprise down to become a full-time mother.

“And so, now you’re wanting to, to, to… get back into…”

“Mr B requests clarification of your availability and commitment capacity.”

It’s not the first time Merina has had to communicate through a translator, but the first time that the translation is both to and from English. She addresses her answers to Mr B directly and explains that she’s looking for a half-day administration position, with flexibility to work from a distance, as she is given to understand is a possibility.

“Good great. When can you start? Pending… …”

“Mr B would like to offer you a temporary contract to commence immediately, with expectation of permanence pending a trial period assessment.”

Merina explains that she can start placing orders and making arrangements on his behalf immediately, since she will largely be appointed by correspondence.

“Excellent, but your first job is I have to go buy a TV and would like you to come along.” Mr B says. “Will you book for her?” this directed to the Lady Bird.

“Mr B requests you accompany him on an upcoming acquisition and will arrange transport. Details of your travel arrangements have been delivered,” says the Bird. “Please confirm receipt.”

A notification pings on the upper right corner of Merina’s screen. She nods.

“Please pack for an extended transit. Check in must be completed three hours before boarding as standard practice in international flights.”

Chapter 11 – Overzichtian

At 8:30 on the Monday morning after Leendert Overzicht took ill the workmen start to arrive at the office. None of the staff think much about the strangers in baseball caps. They barely see the buckets and the brushes. Those who at least feel their faceless presence passing by their table, greet them with a whispered 'hey' but never really take their eyes off the screens in front of them. The workmen fade into the ambient activity of the office like occupational white noise. In the northern suburbs of Johannesburg a blue overall might as well be an invisibility cloak.

It's only when they start smearing black sheets of vinyl onto the windows that they are promoted to the status of *something that is happening.*

Marco swivels around in his chair and observes them for a while. He leans his chin into his hand and strokes the stubble where his blade missed that morning. "Excuse me, what are you doing?"

The eldest of the workers, a bald man with the kind of languid eyes it's easy to feel sorry for, looks around, caught in the middle of unraveling a roll of PVC: "Tinting the windows?"

"Does anyone know anything about this?" He asks around, throwing his hands up into the air in hyperbolic frustration.

Nox wanders over to a window and pushes it open, or tries to. When it doesn't move, she frowns, perplexed, then shoves harder. "Stuck."

Marco also inspects the window. "It seems we find ourselves in a terrarium." He lifts his head to the looming office box and squints.

As the workers push the last air bubble out from underneath the PVC and move on to the next it seems as though night has fallen on one side of the office only. Marco storms off in a huff toward the lift and takes it up to the director's office.

After he few minutes he emerges again and shouts from on high: "Doesn't know anything about it!"

It's one of many unexplained occurrences over several days. At ten in the morning, the client on the Paleo Centre shows up for a meeting. Alessandra has to sign an appointment letter on his behalf to ensure that the company gets paid. At twelve thirty catering delivers lunch as usual, except there are salads instead of paninis, in keeping with Leendert's recent instruction that the entire office switch to a no-carb diet to prevent reduced blood sugar levels (he had been concerned about what he termed 'eleven o' clock lethargy' and threatened an intern with legal action for consuming a cheese bun). Around two the office manager logs onto his computer and in so doing accidentally initiates the send / receive mail protocol - consultants and clients receive vitriolic correspondence (signed *Regards, Overzicht)*. At the same time the staff receive a mailer from Leendert about the new "Earphones in One Ear Only Policy." And so it goes the whole day, latent instructions from the subconscious mind of the director. What no one yet realises is the extent of Leendert's influence. A junior architect he hired will arrive in another three weeks to work on a project no one knows anything about. Another draughtsman with twenty years experience has already given notice at his firm and is due in a month; he will probably dither around in the staff kitchen for a few days before Marco finds him something to do. It will only be in the second half of the second month that Elize, looking in his filing cabinet for a receipt, will discover a letter addressed to her for the termination of her employment. It will surprise even Elize that she will fold it in half, then in a quarter and then, for safety, into an eighth, before idly dropping it into the kitchen bin. But it won't surprise Leendert.

Then there is the matter of his architecture. Some of the structures which his pen has sired will stand for at least another fifty years, even if his heart monitor stops beeping. Others will continue to persist through multiple renovations and restorations, albeit partially and although some will be utterly destroyed, the demolitions will always first be protested by a few passionate students who will have never even met him. Thereafter his name will periodically resurface, about every ten years, as younger generations of architecture students discharge the lessons of their tutors, allowing study of

his work to surge into the public consciousness of academia again just long enough for someone to describe something as ‘Overzichtian’.

As textbook references to him become increasingly obscure, as the spaces between the echoes of his actions expand, and as saprotrophs deconstruct and disseminate the cells of his body into the surrounding soil, only then can he more certainly be said to be dead than alive. Over time the percentage of his existence will approach zero, though never quite reach it.

When Brody arrives home on Monday he walks through the door of the apartment and drops his shoulder bag onto the floor without caring where it falls.

“Speak to your son,” Merina said.

“What’s the problem?”

“There was an accident at school today.”

“What kind of accident?”

“He won’t tell me the details. Says it’s a boy thing.”

“Why am I only finding out about this now?”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“Will you see if you can get him to talk to you?”

“Okay just let me sit for a second.”

“Brody. Seriously?”

“Can you at least tell me what happened?”

“His teacher thinks he wet himself.”

“He peed himself?”

“With the whole class laughing at him, that’s what she thinks.”

“She’s not sure?”

“She wasn’t there. She stepped out to get something. So no.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Will you please just talk to your son?”

Superkid is sitting on the floor at the edge of the bed, flicking through the pages of a dinosaur book with violent jerks of his wrist. Flick. Brody surveys the room as he closes the door behind him. Flick. The room is a mess of toys and the duvet is curled up in a lump on the bed.

“Hey buddy. Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Flick.

Looking at the bookcase, Brody sees a few books have been pulled out and this is not the only book he has punished like this. His chess pieces are scattered on the short wooden table and a knight has fallen to the ground.

"Wanna play chess?"

Fli…

"I'm not playing chess ever again."

"Mom said something happened at school."

"I don't wanna talk about it."

…ick.

"Mom said you…" How to phrase it. How to talk about something without talking about it. "…Were leaking? A little bit?"

Flick..

"Were they teasing you about your head because I don't…"

"No dad. It wasn't about heds. I was… playing chess."

"Oh." Inbetween turning the pages the boy's hands claw at the edge of the paper, slightly fraying the pulp apart. Brody squashes a desire to pull his hands away to preserve the books condition. "Was it because you were worried that your friend would cheat if you left to go the bathroom? Because I'm sure your friend wouldn't…"

"I don't have any friends," he says. It's as if the room feels cold. He says it in such a matter of fact way that Brody can only conclude that he has failed as a parent somehow. Is he supposed to cultivate friends for him? How would he go about that exactly? Would he first have to make friends with the parents of his son's peers? Suddenly he is filled with apprehension at having to make friends with people he has no interest in meeting and with whom he has nothing in common except their children.

Flick.

"I'm sure you have friends. What about, what's his name… Billy?"

"He's just in my class. Everyone hates me. They think I'm weird. They call me Smegmasaurus."

"What?"

Flick. Superkid turns the last page of his book. When he realises he has reached the end he closes the book, turns it over and begins turning pages again from the front.

"It's not even a real dinosaur."

"Right no, I know." For Brody, his home, his family is the only reliable thing in his life. It is his solid ground. To hold your ground, is to hold off an attack. To be on one's own ground, means you knew what you were doing; to know something from the ground up, means you know it completely. When you need shelter, you go to ground. His whole existence is predicated on the assumption that he is someone who has both his feet firmly on the ground and the ground is firm and constant, yet here it is, being cut away from under him. He has no idea what to say.

"Don't worry," Brody begins. "Everything is going to be…"

"Don't say it."

"…Okay."

“You always say that, but this time it’s not. Sometimes you can’t make it okay.”

Maybe the kid is right. That he doesn't want to play chess is especially worrying. It occupies his mind enough for Brody to slip past his defences and get to the crux of the problem. There has never been an argument or hurt that can *not* be resolved over a game of chess. Until now. Then Brody remembers something important. And as a staff member at Load he has special access.

“I think there is one thing that might work. Come with me tomorrow. I’ll show you what a real dinosaur looks like.”

Chapter 12 - Origins

'The Vault' is what they call it, and it contains all humans - for a given value of human. Bag-washed brick walls - a bit dank - plywood shelves; it doesn't look like much; about a hundred crates just there on the floor. It's a repository of grandparents (The Taung Skull may have spent some time on shelf H1), eventually to be cleaned, digitally scanned, catalogued, 3D printed; not in the basement for any practical reason, though some HOD did suggest sunlight might alter molecules, force decomposition and so on, but the real reason was a cognitive discomfort. It just seems wrong for human bones to be above ground, even after all this time. Most of the time the doors are left wide open.

Brody wants Superkid to see this. On any other day, excavating in the park for instance, a skull would be 'a real keeper' as he says, but Brody has promised the kid a dinosaur and that's the only thing that will do it.

Directly above the vault is a triple volume space where the university has installed a climbing wall. A few pigeons, which have found their way in, flutter overhead as a tussled-hair student steps into a harness and another prepares to belay him. As the boy mounts the first foothold a thought hovers somewhere above Brody's head: the bones of ancestral apes arranged on the shelves below in such a way, were one to cut a section through the building it would read like the graph of our progress over three million years, acted out in hyper-time. The climbers themselves are only vaguely aware of it, but the upwards striving means more; the impulse to climb, to evolve, not to die, to build Babel towers and castles in the sky, a great yearning briefly to touch the face of God. But the lopsided swinging and limb-leveraging is so organic, their grasping hands so monkeyish, and the dead so close - just below their feet - that it seems the species has made hardly any progress at all. And it's not the failures - there are slippages, the rope snapping taut - but success that makes the mission seem futile. The climber reaches the top and there is nothing to do but tap the edge of the ceiling and rappel down again. The notion of progress collapses. All of history reduced to nothing but a breathless 'what now'.

Feels like there is a lesson here. To what end? Brody can't yet articulate. The thought is still only brushing at the tip of the peach fuzz of his earlobe and he has made a fair bit of headway into it but is distracted by Superkid calling from the end of the hall, pointing to a life-size fibreglass cast of a sail-back pelycosaur. This is the way Brody's observations often end, with an urgent tugging at the side of his pants or a faraway call of 'Dad!' Even standing under a tree in the middle of the park, the kid's big round head is quietly contemplating its own private mysteries, like where the sky is exactly, or why there's earthworms. Brody's revelations are difficult to untangle, like fishing gut with cold fingers, but all his intuitions about Superkid are visceral and immediate. His bowels roil daily, the sensations of an appendix bursting; of a stomach prepared to eat itself for the kid.

All this he recognises as a manipulation - his genes twiddling the insides of his brain, just as they once twiddled the insides of each of the skulls in the vault below. His love is big and clear but also hormonal and synaptic - he knows this and accepts it. Occasionally, over the last three thousand millennia there have been blips in the mechanism, certainly: other Brodys who did not feel anything for their Superkids. Brodys who did not roil or burst; Brodys who inevitably ended those Superkids, or let them be ended. Those lineages and their idle-handed genes fade from the world, only an oxytocin-induced yearning survives.

He scoops Superkid up by the armpits and lofts him onto his shoulders.

"It will be over there," Marco gestures toward the windows of the south wall, "and the idea for the extension is, it's really the new store for the rocks."

"And what's the," Brody hops his hand along an invisible floor, "you know, theme?"

"So, the archeologists, they go crazy for an arrowhead, my god! You and I, you know, we see a slightly sharpened rock, they see, I don't know, the big bang of consciousness."

Marco has a distinct patter that lifts at the end of a sentence that isn't a question. It is a tick Brody suspects he has picked up from an American girlfriend - where she sourced it, who the patient-zero of the rising cadence was, he cannot imagine, nor why it should be so contagious. It conveys the impression of seeking confirmation of understanding. It entices nods. "we thought it would make them happy to go to work (?)"

The sketch plan he pulls out and waves in front of Brody shows a kind of angular paraboloid, jutting toward Jorissen.

"Okay," Brody, suddenly over-conscious of his tone, "you made it look like an arrowhead(?)"

"So now every day is giant arrowhead day. Hurray."

"Mmm. I see."

"But. We don't just make it look like an arrowhead, kind of, but we get them to teach us how the arrowhead was made, you know, how ape-man worked the chert down to a point and then we, make it, try to do that with the form of the building. Start with a block mass and if you need a fire escape you have to chip it out. But much cleaner. Simpler lines. Subtraction. And it's all concrete. Everything. You know. No compromise."

The more Marco speaks, the more Brody becomes aware of his habits. From here onward he will avoid 'you know', make a concerted effort to omit 'kind of'. To converse with Marco is to be hewn.

"And the skulls? I wonder what the hominid would say if he saw this. Do you think they'd like their new home?"

"Sure, you know, it's like a cave, I guess."

"If he was suddenly transported to today. Missed all the steps in-between."

"So as long as he stayed inside he would be okay. But outside… the roads, cars, glass, and all the people are smooth."

"What would he say?"

"Just screaming."

"Okay, but after the screaming stopped…"

"The screaming would never stop."

From his shoulder perch Superkid stares down the cretaceous corridor. "Dad," he raises his finger, compelled by something dimly-lit in the dark.

Brody turns his head, follows the length of his arm toward the outstretched hand, lurches toward the the end of the passage, almost without thinking. Once there, the father and the elevated son see a diorama of distressing ochre light: the ceratopsian beak gawking upward and a fireball tearing across the sky. A trail of celestial buckshot, sparks squirting like countermeasures, it enters through the proscenium thermosphere where sound becomes possible and the space-dust Valkyrie sings itself incandescent.

First comes the flash, the angelic visitation, brighter than a billion Nagasakis, then a pillar of smoke blooming, the mushroom head, the ghostly radiance; discernible only by refraction, a near-invisible surface rupturing outward. The creature's rudimentary ossicles shudder, an inner-ear earthquake that even a walnut mind can comprehend as significant. There is a gunshot report at one end of a central nervous system and the spirit is discharged before the communique reaches the

temporal lobe. The force strips all flesh, rents cells apart, drawing a stream of molecules in perfect radii from the point of impact. Steam hisses as bones turn into embers. Underground even the most tangential touch from the shock mangles carbon atoms into a 3-fold symmetrical lattice and hundreds of carats are polished in an instant. Megatsunami, Superbolide, Teraton, language strains to contain the event, ultimately surrenders to a silence.

They are then joined again by Marco and another man, scruffy and bearded. “Brody, this is Simon Huxley. He is the curator of the centre.”

Brody slides Superkid off his shoulders to shake Simon’s hand.

“This display is outdated obviously.” Sauls dismisses the extinction with a backhanded wave. “But we’ve started adding the feathers to the T-Rex. And we know more about the colours now.”

Superkid’s mouth is a perfect circle. “T-Rex doesn’t have feathers!”

“Please don’t argue with me about the feathers.”

Brody often finds himself apologising for the kid, even while admiring his abandon. Looks like he’s scratched at an old scab. “Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t annoy Mr Huxley. I suppose you must get this all the…”

“I can’t have another discussion about how someone prefers their dinosaurs unfeathered.”

“No I understand…”

“Dad, he’s wrong.”

Simon frowns. “They had feathers,” he says to the six-year old. “You need to deal with it.”

“They look better without them.”

“Quiet,” Brody tries to back them out of the conversation they are having despite the desire, by all concerned, not to have it. “I suppose an extinct species doesn’t care whether I think it was pretty.”

“The moment the Habilis first smashed one rock against another to make a sharper rock, or possibly Australopithecus, the gears of technology began turning. You can’t switch Science and Invention and Progress *off*,” the capitals are audible. “You don’t get to decide where they stop - Knowledge evolves. And dinosaurs are not extinct. There,” he points to the rafters, a pigeon staring back with a wary eye, “that’s a dinosaur.”

The pigeon jerks and bobs nervously then flies away.

“Modern birds evolved from theropod dinosaurs. Times change and the subsequent generations adapt into whatever they need to be to survive. Life goes on for the pigeon.”

Superkid takes this news the hardest. Loses all strength in his shoulders, deflates like he did when he first heard the word *carrot* coupled with the word *cake*, the word *raisin* with the words *ice* and *cream*. “Can’t we just keep them dinosaurs?” he pleads. “Not pigeons.”

Suddenly Brody appreciates a tendency he’s seen in Leendert, his impulse to design all the world, the lives of others, the movement of time. He thinks he understands it now. Perhaps it’s just a way of undermining the fear of death, because it isn’t the expected pain, or even the nothingness, that makes the fear so sharp, it’s the missing out. The idea that his wife, his friends, his children, will live their lives when he’s gone: dancing, making babies of their own, getting into arguments, having good naps and then waking up again, having dinner, drinking wine together, getting stuck in queues, driving, reading, crying, making poor decisions, or thriving (which was worse), without him. If one

can't go on living forever it would be slightly more bearable if everyone else also died, instead of this eternal carrying on. Dinosaurs becoming pigeons.

"Don't go too far," Brody says as Superkid slinks off to see the rest of the exhibit. "Why is it dinosaurs, do you think?"

"Yes. Why do they resonate?" Simon runs a hand down a plaster spine. It comes away covered in dust. "Mmm. It may be the scale?"

"When I took him to the zoo, he liked the elephant, I remember him gasping when the bull flared its ears," Brody says. "He liked the trumpeting. But never this obsession."

"It's because for kids they are like dragons, I think."

"It would explain why people are resistant to the feathers…" Brody ignores the scowl from his right.

"That's an infinite regress. The question becomes why do dragons resonate. Before the fossil record is discovered."

"There must be something inside of us that latches onto the idea. I don't think it's just the reptilian look. Again I took him to the zoo, showed him crocodiles. Not interested."

"But crocodiles are just crusty logs at the zoo. He needs to see the crushing power. Show him some videos. Take him to the Limpopo."

"So you think it's a predatory.. whatever. He does like the big cats. Most of the skulls in your vault spent their lives running from equivalents. The scratches and punctures are still there."

"The way we evolved," Simon agrees. "We inherited a healthy respect for things that would eat us."

"But I don't think there is one spot in our brains. More all of it together, the size, spikes and scales, the predatory nature."

"There is one other thing. It's that they existed, we have the proof, but no one has ever seen one in the flesh. So it allows what no other living species can: a hollow between the real and the imaginary, into which you add the sound and colour of your fear."

Simon leads Brody and Marco to the shaman chamber. "I've had word from the university that we need to reduce the budget by ten percent," he says as he spreads the plans out on the first flat rock he finds in the centre of the exhibition. "We could reduce the footprint, trim the landings of the fire stairs, use smaller windows, or fewer, and I don't know what else."

"Maybe do simpler lighting," Marco suggests. "And if we shave the height down to a multiple of two point five metres, we may save a full month of concrete pouring."

Brody hates these kinds of lacerations. In architecture, the odd haircut or circumcision is normal, but if one nips too deep or too often, it begins to wound.

"These are just little edits. The end result will actually be better, stronger."

"I agree," Marco says. "You know, this is economics. A building must be the ultimate result of design, engineering but also budget. Any design that can't adapt to the requirements of time and cost is a folly, you know, like dodo architecture."

“I know that and it’s not even my project, but it still hurts. And anyway the dodo was clubbed to death by sailors; at least that was quick.” Brody stabs the plan with a finger, “this is like Chinese torture. Death by a thousand cuts.”

“Lingchi, that’s called,” Simon says. “But you must think of it rather according to its other translation, which is ‘the slow progress’, something more like ‘to ascend the mountain slowly’.”

After the project has been thoroughly vivisectioned, Brody leaves the makeshift table to find Superkid.

After a few moments the kid’s head pops up at the far end of the hall, behind the balustrade of the stairs that lead down to the vault.

“What are you doing down there, kiddo?”

“There’s bones here.”

“I know, leave them alone.”

“Why are there bones?”

“They’re old bones. Come, it’s time to go home.”

“Are they arkological?”

“Yes, they are, come, I’ll tell you all about them but first it’s time to go.”

At home, Brody is surprised not to find Merina. This is frustrating because he has no plan for dinner. He tries her on her phone but it goes straight to voicemail and his messages fail to deliver.

In the bathroom, Superkid unpacks his backpack. The teeth of the zip splaying from the overstuffing. Like he’s done so many times before, he lays the artefacts out for the cataloguing. Brings out his archeological notebook and writes:

ONE FINGER BONE.

ONE TOOL. FOR DIGGING.

ONE SKULL. PROBABLY MONKEY. VERY OLD.

Chapter 13 - The Memoir of Leendert Lukas Overzicht - On the Messiah

In the years after Mother was taken for treatment, I drifted through tenuously connected extended family, never staying with anyone for very long. I only have a handful of memories from what I call The Orphan Years but I've always enjoyed stories of the poor and little rising to great success, so I will elaborate on one of those memories here. After the Harmses, who were only ever a halfway house, I was sent to live with uncle Johan - an obscure relative who, from my initial inquiries, was an entrepreneur of great ambition. I was not altogether apprehensive of meeting him.

When Mevrou Harmse delivered me to the house at the end of Taplow Road, I was dumbstruck. The property was a vast white-walled estate, with a double, possibly triple storey house, sleeping at the top of a long driveway. If you can imagine a revivalist Victorian house with some Herbert Bakeresque influences. It was many times larger and more magnificent than Mother's house. The garden was lush and fecund, yet well-kept, with an enormous tree in the centre, perfect for a great sweeping swing. In one of the four, indeed four garages, was a sports-car of the shape and elegance typical of the fifties, chrome, leather and ivory, so on. This uncle was clearly a man of significance, and it was he who ought to have been raising me all along. So I thought.

When we rang the bell it was the gardener that came to open the gate. He looked to me like a sort of grimy apostle, holding a rake like some muddy sceptre. I brushed past him and ran to the front door and doubt I would have thought of him again, were it not for my falling at that moment and scraping my knee. The pavers had grown a fine film of moss that made them slippery because the gardener had neglected to spray the ground with a bryocide, and as the blood trickled down my shin I howled abuse at him.

Fuelled with righteous indignation, I banged the flesh of my fist on the front door, eager to meet this man who lived inside. When he answered the door the first thing I noticed was the moustache, thick, brown and neatly trimmed. He was tall, very tall indeed, over two metres, with wide shoulders to match and he wore a full suit, a brown tweed matched with polished tan brogues and a white handkerchief folded in this breast pocket. He looked to me like a general in the army. He was a formidable man.

He could be forgiven for a brusque greeting, met as he was at the door by a scruffy boy with blood over his legs. I remember his moustache bristling as he demanded to know what I wanted. I just pushed passed him without a word, into the large entrance hall.

Most of the details in the entrance hall I would later go on to make tongue-in-cheek references to over the course of my career. It was a psuedo-regal style that was distinctly out of time, which one could only employ with a sense of humour. The red carpet on the stairs, for instance, and the brass balusters topped with an oak handrail, I made a veiled reference to them when we were commissioned to refurbish the City of Johannesburg's Mayoral house in Parktown. I also made an exact replica of the grand and glistening chandelier in the hall. I had wanted to install it in my office before Alessandra objected.

But the feature I've used the most is the marble tiling. Ever since that first time at Taplow Road I've loved the way my shoes clap on marble. The sound reverberates as if one is a much larger person with far more feet, CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP.

I was still in my daze when the gardener burst through the doorway, panting. I thought him so rude the way he grabbed me with his soil covered hands and yanked me out of the house. I clawed at him like a wet cat and wailed.

The gardener apologised and apologised, not to me, but to the general, saying his sister had taken ill and he was looking after me.

So I realised it was this man with mud stains on his knees and bits of dried leaves stuck in his hair was my uncle, and suddenly everything made sense again.

At the bottom of the garden behind the tree I thought needed a swing, was the cottage he lived in. It was a simple existence, almost meagre for its proximity to the main house: bare concrete floors

and the typical red screed porch, white bag-washed walls, and one cupboard that smelt of damp. I was so angry at him then for living like a lower class of citizen.

Of course it was only when I became older that I understood the meaning of his olive skin, his ochre eyes, his oil-black curls that would fail a pencil test.

He boiled the kettle for some tea and began to clean the other room he had been using as a store. Piled all his blankets into a makeshift bed and promised that we would go buy a mattress for me in the morning. But I flopped onto the bed in his room, tucked my arms under the pillow where the linen was nice and cool and, like the little shit I was, claimed his as my own.

Then we had an argument about the cross behind his bedroom door. A cross with a poorly rendered figure, a Christian fetish: a suffering maw under a forehead trickled with blood, a crown of thorns, a gash in the gut, a holy diaper. I remembered how Mother used to call me her messiah, her Prince of Jerusalem. Remembered her fashioning me a robe of white towels and sheets and kissing me 39 times whenever we played crucifixion. How proud I was, when she patted my head, claiming to adjust my halo. How clear it is to me now that her mind had been left to desiccate, lost in the desert sand of bible passages. I told him not to waste his time.

I lectured him about the bearded man in the sky, the ghost, the son and told him it was all just pretend. But he refused to believe it and dropped to his knees in prayer. He apologised to his god. Apologised to his god for himself and for me. He was always apologising, this gardener.

The floor was so hard and cold, just the thought of kneeling on it gave me chills all up my backside. I worried about long-term damage kneeling was doing to his kneecaps and I never liked what people looked like when they closed their eyes to pray; soft and sleepy like cows.

As the gardener crouched next to his bed, grubby hands held taut against each other, head lolling slightly, jaw muscles twitching as he mouthed silent words, vertebra popping up the back of his neck; asking forgiveness for some ancestral sin, I imagined an executioner, all in black, standing in front waiting for him to say his peace before he sliced his head off.

When he was done I told him I'd never pray again.

Why did the poor spend so much of their time praying? They, who have so little money, put what little they have in the collection bowl. It drove me utterly mad. What utility did they gain from it?

Then an idea descended on me, glorious and powerful as if I had been dropped on by the holy spirit dove itself. Here was an institution that had convinced its followers that it was virtuous to be subjugated by it, induced them to hold sacred their own unworthiness and the sin of which they were guilty before they had even been born and that they were doomed forever unless they did exactly as the institution prescribed, furthermore that this was pre-ordained and right and it was a crime to doubt it for a second, even inside one's own mind and finally, that if the meek accepted their inferior status with humility and peace, that they would ultimately be rewarded for it, not in this life of course, but in some imagined other one. As an architect, I still marvel at its ingenious structure and design.

I demanded he tell me about his business. Mevrou Harmse had said he was a businessman.

The gardener was always so slow in answering. I'd ask a question and he almost always had to boil the kettle first.

Why was I so interested in his business he asked. So I told him about my plans to be a rich businessman one day, that I wanted respect and wealth, that I wanted an office and people that worked under me.

I don't have to tell you I was disappointed. He owned a business of sorts yes; but he had no offices, no staff. He obviously wasn't very rich or respected.

He sold flowers. Flowers and the bulbs of flowers. The general allowed him live in the cottage and run a small greenhouse on the property in exchange for his maintaining of the gardens. He supplied the corner shop in Melville with fuchsias and chrysanthemums and roses and as payment he was allowed a certain amount of groceries from them, always to be haggled according to the demand

of the flowers and the value of the groceries. As far as I could tell, no money every exchanged hands between anyone.

Mother and I always borrowed flowers from the neighbours so the notion of paying for them seemed alien. I also thought it preposterous to call something that never made actual money a business. Businessmen wore suits and drove nice cars. They had secretaries. They made money and were paid in paper money or paper cheques, not plants or groceries.

I told him so. He ignored me and carried on cleaning out the store room. He picked up a dirty shovel and, noticing a scab of rust on it, fetched a can of rust remover and a scourer from the kitchen. As he sat down to work on the scoop, he told me that the shovel was his grandfather's, older than either of us. Sometimes, he said, the rust ate all the way through and then he would have to patch it up with some more steel. He pointed to a corner shinier than the rest. He'd also improved the T-piece of the handle, he said. It made it a bit easier to grip although it also meant he had to sand and seal the wood of it once a year to stop it from splintering. The shaft had actually broken three years before, a crack right down the centre, he told me with a smirk, and he thought the shovel had finally come to the end of its life. He cried about it, more than anything else he'd ever cried about. But he found someone to melt it down for him and added the metal to a new handle that was much stronger.

It sounded much sillier to me then and I asked why he didn't just throw it away if it broke all the time. Then he made a different face which I didn't understand, a curling of the lip like the question hurt him. He sipped his tea and said he'd used the shovel to bury his father, and one day someone would probably use it to bury him.

I thought less of him for not being able to afford a new shovel.

Even though I had accepted, in a literal sense, that he was my uncle, I still felt that I wasn't destined to live in the cottage. I spent the subsequent days sneaking around the house, watering plants, eager for any opportunity to peer into the windows and through slits in the curtains. I wanted to understand the general.

That was how I discovered the open window of the study. The windows were steel framed, and I saw that entering would be a simple matter of wiggling a latch loose, a latch that never locked completely. I tested the concept briefly. The ribcage and the skull were the most obstructing. I pushed all the air from my lungs, and scraped my sternum just enough to slip through. In a momentary panic, I got stuck, my body hung over the cross bar like a rag. I decided it would be better to bide my time and perfect a seamless exit.

I practised the procedure most days, seizing the opportunity whenever the general left the house. By the end of the second week, my ears were raw from the scuffing and if I looked over my shoulder my back was slashed and bruised just like that of Jesus.

The general's movements were too erratic to try it on Saturdays, so it was on a glorious Sunday, when the general left for church, that I finally slipped my whole corpus through the window. That interior I had witnessed for barely a few minutes on my first day, I could now take in in all its detail.

The marble, the red carpets, the chandeliers I've mentioned before. There were also dry landscape paintings of farms and train tracks by artists with Afrikaans surnames, which I didn't much care for. My real mission was to enter the man's bedroom, there to gather evidence of greatness. To understand how it manifested. To reverse-engineer it.

I burst up the stairs like a bolt of lightning, my hands flicking over the brass knoblets of the balusters. It was easy to find, situated at the highest high of the third storey. In his wardrobe I found such fine suits and ties, I pulled a shirt off a polished wood hanger and tried it on. His trousers as well, 100% wool, pleats down the front. I chose a tan leather belt from the rack and folded a knot of my own creation in one of his cerulean blue ties. I discovered a tin on top of his chest of drawers. The tin was painted with a British flag and inscribed with some ornate lettering on the side.

The lettering wasn't legible, so I opened the tin. And my mouth dropped open.

Lush toffee filled the tin end to end. Silken and buttery, it glistened in the sunlight. If someone had seen my face then I would have looked like a pirate unearthing a cask of butterscotch treasure.

Into my still-gasping mouth I jammed a full hand's worth of the stuff.

It was an idiotic thing to do. There was no way to eat that much all at once. But I'd lost all logical capacity. Mother would never have allowed me so much sugar, and even if she had, we would never have been able to afford such delicacies. We would never have even had the access to it; I don't know if I understood then that the toffee was imported or purchased in England by the general himself, but as I slurped my own sweetened drool back into my mouth, I knew that this was a higher level of pleasure, an entirely different class of thing. It was as if I was sucking on another life.

I planned to only take one bite but finished the whole lot. All of it except for the last handful. Suddenly sickened by so much sugar, and thirsty, I let the spittled lump drop off my tongue and onto the carpet. I may have considered picking it up, removing the tin and all evidence of my visit, considered it for a second, but ultimately simply replaced the lid and shoved it into his sock drawer. Then I sought out the bathroom for some water. The bathroom I remembered for the grand mirrors which faced each other. I had never seen anything like it - swaying side to side I could see myself, the back of my head, another me and another beyond and so on and on toward infinity. It was an emboldening effect.

A glinting from the bedroom, something above the headboard caught my attention. As I approached it I saw it was a sword. Up close I could tell the weapon's purpose was clearly ceremonial - bright gold and silver. The unlikelihood of it hanging there gave my endeavour the semblance of a purpose, like my break-in was the makings of some Arthurian legend. I was fated, obviously, to climb onto the mattress and lift the sword off its bracket. The bell guard was wrapped with filigrees and details, a crest which indicated some rank or lineage. The blade made a slithering sound as I pulled it out of the scabbard and I couldn't in all honesty say that there wasn't something onanistic in the way I had to keep sheathing and unsheathing it, raising it up into the air, this immense piercing thing. I dragged it back into the bathroom and the sight of myself wielding it in the infinite regress was almost too much to contain.

In a wild swat of the blade I somehow cut myself just below the mouth.

The blood blossomed on my chin, and on the infinite chins of the infinite mirrors of me. I never could stand the sight of my own blood and I stumbled out of the bathroom like a drunk. Perhaps it was all that sugar or the blood making me feel so lightheaded, but I had the good sense to aim for the bed. The last thing I remember before passing out was the trail of blood droplets on the duvet.

I must have lain there for a few hours before waking up to a rude tug of the ear.

The General didn't shout. Not initially. He just grumbled for a bit. Something something mongrel father. Something something shit-stained hands. I can't remember the exact words but I do recall he named me a "little hedge boy". Then he noticed the lump on the carpet.

His brow furrowed. He knelt down to investigate it. Held his nose over it and took a big whiff. I could see the realisation working its way up his neck - a bright red flushing that spread over his ears and cheeks.

He was still silent when he retrieved, from a cupboard I had not investigated, a long black sjambok. He slammed a pillow at the edge of the bed and with a gorilla grip he thrust my head into it. I dropped my knees to the floor without thinking. Well, I had been in that position enough times, whenever Grandmother disapproved of my blasphemy or whenever Mother caught me stealing without her approval. Plainly put, I knew what was coming next.

Six of the best they used to say. But before the first bitter strike could land, who should burst into the room but the gardener. His face was anguished and weepy and he himself fell to his knees, not to pray but to plead for this man not to do it. Spare him, please sir, spare him, and so on.

The General seemed to consider it for a moment and the moustache twitched. The next moment he had the gardener up by the scruff and laid him out on the bed as he had just done with me. With a quick firm snatch the gardener's trousers came down and the man of the house let him have it.

I am fairly certain it was more than six of the best. I would have to count out the rhythm of it. Whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack. Then another four, more measured as he spoke. Stay. Whack. Out. Whack. Of. Whack. My house. Whack.

Twelve. Twelve of the best.

Afterwards, in the cottage, I was thinking and planning my ambitions out. I have a particularly vivid recollection of my line of thought because the ointment that the gardener was spreading on his buttocks was so noxious.

Half in thought, I asked the Gardener. If you have a business why aren't you rich? I don't even remember his answer. I was unravelling a conclusion. You need a big house, I'd said. It's excellent. The man in the house is rich. He must be a better businessman.

The Gardener shook his head and corrected me, the man wasn't a businessman. He built buildings. But Builders weren't rich, I protested.

No, not a builder, he said. The man in the house is an architect.

I remember rolling my tongue around in my cheeks as if sucking on the word. It had a crystal quality, like light glittering off the repetition of consonants, serrated and stinging. Architect, I said nodding. Then I will be an architect.

Chapter 14 – Doors Closing

Ten-Percent looks up and laughs, watches the brown monolith of the Metro Centre loom over the city.

"What would make a man build such a wall?" he says to GTi.

His friend's stomach grumbles from the middle of his doughy self.

"I hear you," Ten-Percent nods. "Many files. Many filing cabinets. Even so. They could have spread the wall out a little."

"No I need to eat something," GTi grumbles again, from higher up this time. "Maybe there is some system. Every floor has a department."

"I see the problem now. They've built a building that looks like a filing cabinet because it has lots of filing cabinets inside it."

"Is there a shop?" GTi is intimidated by what he thinks will be a lengthy task. "Or a cafe. Let's get breakfast first. How long is this endeavour? Which floor?"

"It will be quick I think. Seventh floor."

"But first breakfast."

"This explains your belly. You need the exercise. We will take the stairs."

"At least a coffee."

"That's David's office," he says pointing to the footstool shaped office block, "over there." He means Makhura. The Premiere. "Makhura was MK. The clue is in the acronyms. He has installed secret MKs among them. MKs crawling out the AC. Hiding in the pot plants. They are all over the ninth floor, carrying on the struggle."

"And some sort of baked thing."

As Ten-Percent and GTi step through the front doors a siren comes wailing up behind them. Flashing lights of red and blue make them put their hands up instinctually. But it's only an ambulance they realise, two medics rushing past into the foyer. Security makes the medics sign in first and describe the purpose of their visit. 'Emergency' the one probably writes. The metal detector has a bad reaction and the medic gets a pat-down before they guess it must be the stethoscope around his neck. Good thing they didn't try to bring the gurney, thinks Ten-Percent. Out come the medics again carrying an old guy like they're off to throw him into the pool. He's gibbering something about the doors the doors, so Ten-Percent obliges and opens the back of the ambulance for him.

Signing in TP notices another Mkhize had signed out earlier in the day. He doesn't like the way it looks like he's doing things the wrong way around. Out before in. Already this building is badly organised.

The lift foyer of the Metro Centre is a chorus.

Ground floor. Doors opening. Doors closing.

It's the warm voice of a probably young, most likely well-educated, definitely black, woman.

Ground floor. Doors opening. Doors opening.

“Doors opening? Again?” TP realises there are six lift cars and among them it is possible for a second set of doors to open before the first has closed. Nevertheless the semantic dissonance makes his brain bleed a little. His heart comes down with a serious case of the hiccups. Systole. Diastole. Systole. Diastole. Systole, systole systole until he gets pumped up so full he wants to vomit out his aorta.

Sixth floor. Doors Opening.

*“*Then why all these sevens on the walls?” TP asks, squinting at the speaker, demanding an answer from the automated voice. Indeed there are not only sevens on the columns between the lifts, big blue perspex letters, and the red dot-matrix displays above but there are also sevens sandblasted in serif wherever a glass panel has been set into a fire escape door. The typefaces are incongruous, the colour schemes antagonistic, but all signs concur on the central question; that this is the seventh floor.

Sixth Floor. Doors closing.

“She seems adamant.” GTi says.

“But can we trust her? Even when faced with evidence to the contrary?”

“These signs are all pre-democracy. The Nats were thorough in their propaganda. No stone left unturned, no six left un-sevened. I say we go with the voice.”

“Alright, up the stairs then.”

“Oh.” GTi chews on the inside of his cheek. “Remind me which floor do we want, really?”

“Approvals is on the seventh. These signs say we’re on the seventh. We either stay here or we climb the stairs.”

“In that case, the voice is mistaken. In uncertain times I find refuge in the physical. Technology is a western thing. It can’t be trusted. This is the correct floor.”

“But the digital displays are technology and they claim this is the seventh as well.”

“Sure, there will always be a small contingent of defectors. Those displays must be neo-liberals.”

“But the arrow over there which points upward, suggesting the seventh is upstairs?”

“That arrow is counter-revolutionary.”

“Very well, left or right, you think?”

“I am a centre-leftist, as you know.”

TP tries the door to their immediate left. “Seems locked.”

“But on the other hand this way is both left and right depending on your perspective,” GTi swivels on his toes in a rapid about-turn and marches through the door at the other end of the hall.

The glass door that wasn't closed properly until he walked through it turns out to be access controlled. Suddenly it shuts and GTi finds himself trapped on the other side by himself. ‘*unwind won fun blue hemoglobin,”* is what he imagines Ten-Percent mouths from behind the soundproof barrier. Either that or *‘All blind and dumb ones who’ve spoken,”* but more likely “*I’ll find someone to open”*.

Doors closing.

The only way left is up the stairs. Light brown carpet underfoot, Ten-Percent, trawling through what must be the corridors of the seventeen storey filing cabinet, stumbles onto an interdepartmental office party. Limp balloons and streamers like for a six-year old.

"Does no one work around here? I've got plans to approve. No wonder…"

"Casual Friday, mister man," says a white lady in a loud floral pants-suit. "Relax a little. Have a drink. Try a biscuit."

He takes the drink. Eats the biscuit. Then with his mouth still partly full says "It's only Thursday."

"Code of Conduct Notice one-two-one," says Pants-suit and from all around her cheers and toots of party kazoos. They begin to cite the clause, as if in choral unison: "…MAKING PROVISION FOR DAYS SET ASIDE FOR OFFICE ENTERTAINMENT, TEAM-BUILDING AND/OR COMMUNICATION EXERCISES WHEREVER NECESSARY BEING THE LAST FRIDAY OF THE MONTH AND THAT THESE DAYS MAY BE DESIGNATED 'CASUAL FRIDAYS'.

"You guys are getting ahead of yourselves."

"You see, the author of Notice One-Two-One," she explains to more cheers and kazoos, "probably thought to set aside the last Friday of the month for such entertainments, but due to a printing error a comma was omitted between the words 'necessary' and 'being', resulting in an ambiguity which we read to mean that Casual Fridays need only fall on the last Friday of the month *wherever necessary.* We exploit this ambiguity and subsequently, whether or not this day is Thursday as you claim, we have deemed it necessary for it to also be Casual Friday."

Ten-Percent is flustered. "What corruption is this, to change words from one to another to suit yourselves? Just now you are coming and saying yesterday is actually downwards, tomorrow is the tenth floor. Whatever happened to the real life?"

"Time was never real, guy. It's made up. Do you know what a second is? Do you care about the hyperfine vibrations in a caesium atom?"

"Just now you are saying…" But he isn't sure what they are just now saying. Everyone has lost their minds; it's clear. After a few minutes (or what might already be a few days, he's not sure) maybe he's lost his as well. Maybe back on sixth and/or seventh floor.

"Why are you so worried about just now?' she laughs. 'Now' is an illusion. 'Just now' doubly so. Are you sure you've had a biscuit?"

Chapter 15 – The Weeping

Merina's decorations for the Weeping live in a place well beyond where the joke has grown tired. Table settings like towers of decorative plates - crystalline saucers atop polished silver base trays, plinths for porcelain plates rimmed with lazuli ink patterns of dragon coil and lace - certainly never to be used for food - more likely to serve as frames for the ceramic plates. These are broasting in the oven. Brody wanders into the dining room. Raises an eyebrow. He busies himself with the serviettes, which he folds the only way he knows how: diagonally in half to form a triangle.

"It's not too much is it?" Merina hugging herself with one arm and propping the other limply on top of it.

Abreast of the crockery ziggurats she has arranged forks and knives in descending scales. Forks of every conceivable size and tinage, oyster forks, snail forks, strawberry forks, fish-specific seafood forks and lobster-specific seafood forks, dessert forks including separate forks for pastries and ice cream, salad forks, fruit forks, fruit salad forks, lunch forks, dinner forks - but no oyster to be served, no lobster. He notices that the table cloth is weighed down at the corners by ornate crocodile clips, which sprout tassels, and the tassels are bejewelled and knotted and the knots themselves sprout further smaller tassels which also end in tiny knots. It is possible there are, hanging from further jewels and knots, even smaller tassels, too small to be seen by the naked eye.

"Is this really… I mean.. I don't even know where to begin."

"You eat from the outside in." She has a style, or a way of carrying herself, that he loves. Languid and distracted. Like she is never really here and now. Like she is always smoking an invisible cigarette.

"Obviously not what I meant."

Merina's hyper-decor is the collateral damage of a creative person lacking stimulation - so Brody thinks. As an event coordinator she used to shape such vast choreographies - the luring of a mess of guests into a chapel, coaxing from a stagnant crowd that slow ambling waltz of indecision, stretching their tolerance for waiting once seated, just long enough for the arrival of a bride at the chamber doors to coincide exactly with the swelling of the brass section or the organ's thrum. At her busiest her mind could hold aloft a model of the world built of the wilfully difficult psychologies of her clients - unstoppable forces - balanced against the fixed geometries and densities of venues and schedules - immovable objects.

As he surveys the silver, swaying side to side and closer, the convexities of the spoons stretch his nose, his punch-swollen lips, his stupid Dumbo ears. The faces jump when Merina leaves the room to open for the Grosskopffs, the weight of her footsteps shuddering the timber floors.

They wander into the dining room where Brody shakes Eric's hand and pecks Lili on the cheek.

"Oh wow. This is lovely," says Lili. "Merina's gone all out."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Here you go," she says, handing him a wrought iron object. He finds himself wielding this thing; a central trunk that branches and splits out into smaller stems which end in plinths each about the size of a tea-light. All told the crown of it can hold about fifty of them.

"Where do you want the other one?" asks Eric.

"The other one?"

"The other candelabra."

"South African National Standard building regulations limit us to one candelabra only."

"Do they?"

"They ought to," Brody says. "We may apply for a second but the arrangement will be subject to an inspection by a registered engineer, approved evacuation routes, fire hose reels… there will be forms to fill in."

A thought niggles. *Don't you miss doing this on a larger scale?* He is in awe of her tiptoeing diplomacy, her ability to sequence elaborate rituals (both matrimonial and corporate), her conviction, her grasp for spatial and temporal symmetry. She used to create events that were like architecture in their own way, spatial structures more complex and fine than he could ever hope to create, and also far more alive.

For a wedding or year-end function - five courses, a hundred and fifty people - a table replete with utensils might be appropriate. She has catered a dinner for eight and turned her attention to the microscopic and fractal.

Not much room to stretch that mind all day at home with the kid.

When Brody sees the tiny port glasses aside those for the red and white wine, he laughs but also feels acutely depressed.

The front door bell rings. "Darling!" Merina calls from the lounge. "The others cancelled so that'll be Sherman. Will you go open for him?"

He hates shouting across the house. "What did he say his date's name was?"

"It was going to be someone, now it's some other one. I can't keep track." she says "Don't get invested."

They have been burnt too many times. They hope for Sherman to settle down with someone they can go on vacations with. Interrogating whichever poor thing he brings to even the most casual drinks session. Become attached. Mourn, actually mourn, the ending of his relationships. *We really liked that one,* they'll say when they realise they'll never see her again. They think him cruel for leading them on in this way.

When Sherman introduces the new girl, Brody's pupils blow up. Calls herself 'Elle' or possible just 'L'. Light eyes. Very striking. Difficult to say how young, but when she speaks there isn't even the slightest asymmetrical tilt of cynicism in her smile. What she's wearing… best not to think about that too much. She skips off toward the living room to greet everyone else and Brody actually strains not to look; from the outside it must look like he is enduring a shooting pain somewhere in his spine, pushing a smile through some quiet agony of middle age, even though he's only in his late twenties.

Across the room he sees Merina extend a hand for the shaking; but the girl disarms her with the leaping hug reserved for childhood friends and long lost sisters. By the time Sherman has briefed him of the details of how they met (promo girl), her psychiatric profile (not so crazy you'd notice), her bedroom preferences (surprising) and so on, she's won over Merina completely. Apparently the two share some arcane and incomprehensible love for Friesians or Percherons or whatever. It amazes Brody how easily they could have glanced past each other's friendship - if only Elle had pointed to the picture above the fireplace and simply called it 'a horse', or even ignored the image all together. How little are the ripples in conversation that reveal the minds of others as resonant, he thinks. How fast the acceleration toward intimacy. How exponentially growing and solidifying the commitments of love. How depressed they are going to be when he breaks up with her.

At dinner he catches Elle slipping a playful condescension past Sherman, “You really need to teach me how to make that chicken” she says (Sherman’s Cajun chicken is grim; he brines it too long and it tastes of sea water) then she flashes Brody the briefest of half-smiles - like she is winking to him with her mouth and he falls in love with her for it a little bit.

“Oh it’s really easy, you just make a solution of one part salt, one part sugar to……” Their collusion warps the table, makes it seem she is sitting closer to Brody on the other side than the guests sitting right next to him. When he was younger he kissed girls while their parents were in the next room - with intensity but quietly and in the dark - as he grows older his thrills came from more abstract conspiracies.

“You have such an eye for decor, no plans to go back to event coordination?” Lili’s question rattles into his daydream.

“No, no, none of that,” Merina says.

Lili pushes a baby carrot around on her plate, suddenly bashful. “I hope I wasn’t… I didn’t mean…”

“No, Lili please, it’s not, I’m not.. you know, I don’t take it… offended. In fact, I’ve just today - Brody I haven’t told you this yet - there’s this director, and I’ve been looking for something, which I didn't want to say because maybe if I don’t get it then it’s whatever…

Brody frowns. “Director? Like do you mean with films and…?”

“No, no… God no. He’s an executive. He needs an executive assistant. So I applied for that. It’s an executive position.”

“And so?” Lili asks, tilting her wine glass in inquisition, “So you got it?”

Merina blushes. “Yes. Ya, I got it. I’m going to be his, you know, ya…”

“Executive position.” Brody adds.

“Assistant yes. It’s not a big deal. It’s like half days, so it’s easy to fit in with everything. It also pays well. Really quite very well. Which will help around here, you know, Superkid with school, all that. And there’s travel potentially.”

“Travel?”

“Travel. Potentially. Yes.”

Brody says, perhaps a bit sharply, “Why am I only hearing about all of this now?”

“Oh, I was gonna tell you, it’s just, it was a long shot.”

“And what does this director do exactly?”

“He runs a company that consults management consultants.”

“He’s a management consultant,” Lili says. “They do very well for…”

“Consultant consultant,” Merina corrects.

“I’m sorry?”

“Management consultant consultant,” she repeats to blank stares. “Management consultants advise companies on how to run more efficiently, how to cut costs, improve strategy implementation, all of that. They do very well yes, but they usually work ridiculous hours, say, 7 to midnight. Which is counterintuitive because that’s not particularly efficient, is it? So now there are enough consultancy

firms, Bain, BCG, McKinsey, and they are big enough, that there are other smaller firms consulting them on how to… consult… better. He's a management consultant *consultant*."

"Well that's great!" Sherman says, grabbing the bottle from the ice bucket and raising it into the air. "We're celebrating!" He sloshes some wine into Merina's glass, then yanks the bottle back suddenly. "Wait… so do you still want to do the Weeping? I don't know, is the Weeping for celebrating?"

"Yes of course, everyone is here now, I've, like, primed the pump."

Brody doesn't really want Merina to go into the mechanics of the Weeping. It all sounds too renal, too urinary. He looks for a segue. "So what do you do, Elle?"

"I'm a medical intern. I guess I don't officially do anything yet."

"Ah!" Merina exclaims, sitting up in her chair. "Tell me, Elle, where do you stand on the whole PVS issue?"

"PVS? …Oh. Do you mean… persistent…"

"Vegetative state, yes."

"Um, how do you mean?" asks Elle.

"Like when is it definitely okay to pull the plug?"

Oh god, Brody thinks. Sometimes Merina's obsessions have a gravity from which it is impossible to escape. "Merina, Leendert isn't vegetative, he's just sedated on a ventilator…"

"This isn't about that, necessarily. Just hypothetical. I have so many questions. Is that different to locked-in syndrome? What if they're organ donors and so on."

"Well," Elle says, a bit shy now that all the attention is on her. "PVS has lots of ethical and legal… fuzzy areas - the term persistent means different things in different countries. But brain death is very straightforward. And there's no coming back from it."

"But how do they know for sure?"

"There are certain reflexes, Vestibulo-ocular… pupils dilating, there's no activity on an EEG. I don't know, it's been a while since we did that block."

"Okay but if there is the smallest chance that's worth waiting for. And if there isn't then, well, why does it matter that they keep someone breathing and give the family a bit more time to deal with it all?"

"Please ignore her. Merina has always had strong opinions about contentious things like global warming, suicide bombers… child soldiers," Brody explains. "Opinions that would surprise you. She thinks Clive Derby-Lewis could be released on medical parole but should be forced to serve the remainder of his sentence in a display case at the Apartheid Museum."

Eric smirks. "You want Janusz Walus should be there, reenacting the shooting with a prop gun."

"Yes, there should be a little sign that says THIS IS THE MAN WHO ASSASSINATED CHRIS HANI," Sherman suggests. "For when the schoolchildren visit."

"And keep him on a ventilator if he dies," Merina continues. "He's an important cultural artefact of our country's history. He should be preserved."

"She has a point, Brody," says Eric. "Same thing with Madiba. How they filmed and photographed him, saying *look! he's smiling! he's up and about! He's fine!* The old man squinting from the camera flash. On what turned out to be his death bed."

"Then a month later he, exactly, by some reports, is in a permanent vegetative state, is for all intents and purposes dead, and yet is kept alive artificially for six months while they plan the funeral and squabble over the lucrative burial site."

"And I don't blame them. Not at all." Merina gulps from her wine glass. "The inability to bury things is a particularly South African affliction. We're diggers. We're always mining and exhuming. We like to wear our past on our fingers and watch our statues walk around on TV. I don't love what they did to Madiba but I understand the need. To a certain degree, when someone ascends to such iconic status, they kind of stop being an ordinary person. They have a duty to be a living monument. "

"I don't think you always mean these things. I think you just say them to be controversial."

"I think I'm generally sincere. I'm just not scared of honest critical analysis. I think it's important to be able to explain, from first principles, the existential justifications for normative judgements regardless of the taboo nature of the subject."

"I can't tell you how many times she's left me completely exasperated with these discussions. Why for instance, it's wrong to eat a baby or, you know, okay to have sex with a goat."

"Assuming it's consensual," Merina adds.

"I'm a vegetarian, so…" says Elle.

"Sometimes people just accept that there are some things you do or don't do to a corpse, without asking themselves really why. If you tracked all the bigoted and evil things people said and did because of tradition or religion or whatever, the root crime was almost always lazy thinking. Now," Merina rising from her chair to clear the plates. "Shall we move to the lounge for some dessert and weeping?"

Of course it begins to rain.

After a dessert of honeycomb ice cream, they light all of about two hundred candles, while Merina starts the music. Strings tickle and swell. The modest living room of their apartment becomes a small catholic cathedral. A hush falls.

Merina kneels down in the centre of her shrine and tries her hardest to cry. In her mind she lists all of her life's collected sadnesses. She thinks of the sadness of a best and only friend moving away to Canada when she was six, the sadness of going to school the next day and forgetting for a moment that she would be alone at lunchtime and then remembering it again, the sadness of actually sitting on the steps in front of art class eating alone, while all the other girls giggle at the other end of the field; the sadness of being teased about her bushy eyebrows, her birthmark, her knees - why her knees? - the sadness of realising why her knees, the sadness of hating Helena Roussouw and Mignon Nel and also her own knees, the sudden violent joy at the thought of tearing the offending kneecaps out of her legs for embarrassing her and the sadness right after, of having betrayed her own knees.

She looks around and sees the candles, their glimmering in dessert spoons covered in ice cream slag; the preposterous aptness of the rain outside, the now-comical self-seriousness of the Schubert bullshit she's decided to play; the lifetime of recoiling from the yaptrap pricks and lacerations of silly bitches and the pernicious maybe-next-time coaching of her mother - a mother she claims to be mourning but could not think of even one moment that wasn't just abuse marketed as 'top tips' from an unthinking, unfeeling, bird-beaked old hag, really; the perfect misery of the entire

experience she had designed for herself and the thought that, all things considered, she was doing pretty well for herself now.

Then there is the boiling sensation, a shaking in the viscera ascending, like a globus of air and phlegm and repressed grievances rumbling up her throat. It bursts out of her mouth and with a fat, open cackle she begins to laugh.

“Merina? Are you okay?” asks Lili, bewildered.

It’s the strangest thing. Merina doesn't want to but she laughs. Laughs as she has never laughed before, a kind of fluttering of the stomach. Startling how happy the sensation is. For a moment she revels in it, lets loose all her tensions and anxieties in a great outbursting. But it feels like there might also be an automation behind the laughter, a physiological unblocking as a result of a chemical, and it makes her unsure whether it is actually her laughing or just some seizure or spasm of the diaphragm. She tries to interrogate it by slowing it down and breathing, but failing to do so, realises the contractions are indeed involuntary and she becomes worried, hoping the condition will simply run its course.

Those around her feel a particular set of emotions in a fairly familiar sequence. First there is confusion, an inability to tell whether that hiccuping sound is laughter or crying, followed by confirmation of laughter and the sharing of a first cautious chuckle, cooled by an incomplete understanding of what is funny and the suspicion and fear that they themselves are being laughed at. Then there is the laughter at the whole situation, but when Merina’s laughter carries on past the expected half-life of laughter, at least a few of them grow angry then annoyed. Laughter surges again, at least once, before more concern and finally panic as her lips turns blue.

“I… Can’t… Stop…” she says, with the last remaining air in her lungs.

In one blur Elle leaps onto Merina and performs CPR, compressing her chest with thrusts of her palms and respirating mouth-to-mouth, then another pump, pump, pump - to which Brody can’t help singing along *another one bites the dust* - and then some more respirating; before Merina sits up and breathes slow… deep… deep… breaths.

Chapter 16 – Trip

By late morning Merina has used nearly every form of public transport. She's called a taxi to the station - a Malawian who prattles ceaselessly, follows too closely and makes her strangle the armrest; she's napped briefly on the train to the airport and taken a shuttle bus from the terminal building; now she is about to fly to George. Or Mthata, Or Wherever.

The two men in the seats behind her, junior managers who don't yet qualify for business class, have caught the earliest train to the airport, spent the morning speaking sternly in meetings, rushed back to make the lunch flight and are only now unbuttoning their jackets. "Missed the S.T.A.Y. lounge. Damnit. Half the reason I flew."

"Nice?"

"You should see the spread. Pastries, like croissants, donuts, little pies, sandwiches, salads, unlimited cappuccino, any drinks you want, all kinds of fruit, strawberries like that, like fists."

"At the airport?"

"Everything free."

"Wait. Free? Even the drinks?

"Absolutely the drinks."

"And Wifi?"

"Sure."

Merina hears him shut up and wonder about the missed opportunity before breathing out a whispered 'Jesus'.

The most public discussions of pleasure are about food. In few other topics is it acceptable to describe what the object of pleasure looked like and what it did to you, to go into detail, to explain the exact sequence of pleasure, this then this on top of that, to say oh my god how good it was, to moan, to roll the eyes. Even the businessmen, who are practically virtuosoes in polite and innocuous small-talk, are leching at the thought of lunch.

A cabin crew announcement squawks from all round: the serving of meals will be delayed. The older woman in the window seat leans over to see whether the cart is going to come from the front or the back of the aisle. She gnaws at her bottom lip. "They used to serve… what happened to Tuc?" she says and squints at Merina through thick lens spectacles as if she is personally responsible for pre-meal crackers. "Do you know that American Airlines saved, what was it, a million dollars, by cutting out one olive from their Greek salads? Maybe that's why they got rid of the Tuc."

"Was it a million?"

"At least a million rand. So…"

"In a year? Not per flight, surely."

"It was an inordinately large number."

"How much does an olive cost?"

"But it's the weight. They also made the in-flight magazine A5 size to save weight. But then they realised the ads pay for themselves so they made it thicker again. They should pip them."

"Mmm?"

"The olives I mean. You don't need the pips. If they got rid of the pips then maybe we could have Tuc again."

Elsewhere in the plane, people are clutching at their tray tables. Most deal with the hunger by sighing to each other with raised eyebrows. Some recount memorable meals they've enjoyed in the past and fantasise about excellent meals they might have in the future.

The woman cranes into Merina's field of vision again. "Tell me, do you go on the internet?" she says. It takes Merina a little while to understand what is happening.

"Mmm-Hmm, yes."

"I've been spending quite a bit of time online. My nephew, this was a couple of years ago, he showed me how to use email. Or well, I called it 'the email' at the time, but I understand now you just say email."

"You can just say mail."

"And I mean, I found the whole thing… or just mail yes.. impossible. Just impossible. So I write the email and, I can type 80 words per minute because I used to be a secretary, but then he says click on send. Just click on send. So I click on send. I ask him, alright, they get it in two or three days? And he says no, they have it now. I say now? And he says…"

"He says now."

"I mean. I just. He says 'now'. I couldn't understand it. I still don't. I don't even know where it is - the Internet."

"It's everywhere, or nowhere. It's like the universe…"

"And he, my nephew, who I mentioned earlier, he tried to… the universe?"

"Everywhere is the centre of the universe. Because it's infinite. The internet is like the universe."

"Oh I see. Or like God, omnipresent."

"Sure. If you like." Merina should leave it there but she can't help herself. "I can't say I believe in a god."

"Oh I don't either. But I believe in the Internet."

Why do airline seats face forward? There's nothing to see there. Wouldn't it be better if all the seats were directed outward ninety degrees? Then everyone would have a window seat and an aisle seat at the same time *and* you would have more leg room. You would also feel less obliged to talk to your neighbour.

"So next thing I'm Googling. And I'm Youtubing. I finally understand, you know, what an Iggy Azalea is."

"And you're verbing your nouns. Lol-ing and so on."

"And I'm even torrenting and… verbing my nouns yes… and I Facebook Brooklyn every day…"

"Brooklyn?'

"I've become addicted. Because I didn't want to be this technology dinosaur. I didn't want to miss out… Brooklyn… my youngest granddaughter. She's four years old. We're friends on Facebook. She sends me, oh I don't know, ten selfies a day. She posted her first profile photo before she was even born."

"Her parents made her a profile before she…"

"Her ultrasound."

"I see."

"She sent me, I forget what it's called, a video made up of all the selfies so far. I was worried about… vanity is a vice, but I mean it's good. It *is* good. You see, to her I was born old. I don't have many photos from when I was young and beautiful. She'll preserve her beauty better than I did because she'll be able to see it fade. I read that once a picture goes on the internet it can never disappear, even if it gets deleted. It's there forever. Is that true, do you think?"

"Sounds right. The internet is a cemetery where nothing ever grows old or dies. And at least half the graves are filled with cats."

"Oh yes. I also love cats. Do you?"

"Sure why not."

"My nephew is a nice boy. How old are you?"

"I'm actually married."

An already-wrinkled brow furrowed further. "Okay, but not so old."

"No. I suppose not."

"He really is a nice boy."

When the cabin crew finally shuffles down the aisles, chirping a sing-song routine of 'chicken or fish', Merina smiles. She can't bear to hear people talk about what they can't eat, or have to; how a carbohydrate acts on a bowel. She can't stand the word 'enteritis' or to be told that something is unhealthy, fattening, that vegetables are needed to balance a pH or fibre to scrape a colon. The subtext is an acknowledgement of the inevitable decomposition of internal organs; a highlighting of the fact that they will eventually function less efficiently; that treatment will need to be sought for incontinence, for diarrhoea, that diapers will need to be worn in old age, that they are ultimately going to die. She finds the groans of deliciousness, soothing, loving. The joy of eating is life-affirming.

And it isn't altogether obvious to her, now that she begins to feel an urge for the bathroom, why one bodily process should be so exalted while its symmetrical counterpart should be so reviled. Brody would have provided the evolutionary framework: faeces brings disease if not discreetly disposed of. But then there were the Romans - what about Romans, she would argue, who pooped socially? Turds plopping into trenches below conspiratorial buttocks: 'oh yes I know what you mean I was just saying to Cassius', plop, 'how we should verily', plop, 'kill Caesar.' And so on.

The cubicle door clicks closes behind her. Do the airlines also save weight by using partially un-pulped 1-ply? Apparently, in Nazi Germany the pages of the propaganda publication, the Volkischer Beobachter, were softer than wartime toilet paper, and their use had the added benefit of making a political statement, albeit a private one. She ought to have brought her book with her. It would have been more accommodating and, ten pages in, she wasn't yet sure Jeffrey Archer didn't deserve it. As she wipes and winces she hopes that the molecular gastronomists and foodies of the world will eventually turn their attention further down the digestive tract and design more pleasurable

ablutions: extracts of Finnegan's Wake printed on the sides of rosewater scented marshmallows for instance, Nabokov rendered somehow on the neck of a well-downed goose; Fitzgerald on lace.

"Good morning ma'am, will you be having chicken or fish?"

Merina waves her off with a twiddle of her fingers and the lightest shake of the head. Who first trained attendants in the rise and fall cadence of elevated hospitality? That strangely terraced down-drift floating up into the high rising terminal of the prosodic phrase - could it possibly be, she wonders, some deep level mental manipulation? Are all airline staff secretly saying: Certainly don't worry about this flying aluminium can staying up in the air; don't think of it falling, plummeting, crashing; even our sentences are buoyant. The uptick has become a permanent affliction, universal across all airlines, amongst stewards of all cultures and nations, like a service industry esperanto. She can remember hearing it the very first time she flew as a toddler and thinking, for a while, she might grow up to be one of them. It still has a certain hypothetical appeal - flying at 800 km/h at an altitude of 10 000 m. It's about the furthest one can get from being dead and buried in the ground.

As a teenager she wanted to be in front with all the buttons, but not as an adult. Adulthood turned out to be one long period of being responsible for others, of being preternaturally alert to risk, of being decisive in bearing and of not being able to sleep in the backseats of things. Besides her wasted sojourn as a six-year old and the bewildered naps she looked forward to as a geriatric, this, seat H8, would be the one exception.

"And could I get you anything else to drink?"

"Just the headphones please."

"Oh I'm sorry ma'am. This is quite a short flight and we won't be screening any film today. "

"Oh. Okay thank you!" she trills but silently curses her through her gritted teeth. A disproportionate amount of passengers cry on airplanes during the inflight movie. Virgin Atlantic ran a survey: 55 percent of travellers experience heightened emotions.

This is the real reason she is here.

Ever since The Weeping had been such a disaster, at least in terms of actually weeping, she has felt sort of loaded up - like there is a giant bladder behind her eyes and she needs to go. Then she collected stories of people crying to *The Notebook,* to the first ten minutes of *Up!*, to most of *The Shawshank Redemption,* but also during more standard rom-com fare, *Must Love Dogs, Serendipity,* and really anything with Kate Hudson or Katherine Heigl in it. There was one instance of someone crying to the Wilson scene in *Cast Away* even though they found the film confusing as a whole, due to the airline companies having edited out the plane crash.

She mentioned this phenomenon to her new employer and Mr B said it first happened to him when he saw an advertisement on a flight to London. Did she remember that one Sasol ad? The one with the kid playing with his red tin car and he had this teddy-bear dog. And the dog was also pushing a toy car around. He filled up the car with a little petrol pump, glug, glug, glug. And maybe it was just the music or the windows glowing with warm sunlight, or maybe, even though the kid in the ad was white, it was remembering that his own boy had grown too old to be playing with toy cars, that made him break down and weep. He never really paid attention to the ad when he saw it at home, on the ground, but now the tiny screen was filling his peripheries and he had headphones. *Pump up your performance*. He didn't want to take in the logo, because he didn't want to let them have that power over him, but he kept looking because the last time he cried like that had been over ten years earlier and he wanted to see if he could keep it going a while longer.

She thinks it might have something to do with the air - lower quality, less pressure, less oxygen. While trawling journals she found many articles on the link between hypobaric hypoxia and deep vein thrombosis but very little on crying.

On the other hand, the connection between asphyxiation and the sexual response was well established and she dwelt on some of those articles as well. It makes sense though, doesn't it, that if you breathe less when you cry those halting sobs, the pathway should work the other way around as well. Anyway, theory can only get you so far. Eventually you need to get hard-core, real-world, empirical data.

The flight to what turns out to be Windhoek is too short for movies but not too short to offer drinks or snacks. Luckily they land only about half an hour later. Once in the terminal she marches straight to the ticket desk and stamps her ticket for the connecting flight to Tuvalu, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. Thirteen hours overnight.

This she does so that Mr B could 'buy a TV' as he had said in her interview. Expecting discussions of frame rates and resolutions, she was surprised to hear that .tv was the domain name suffix of the island nation of Tuvalu. As he explained, Tuvalu owns exclusive use of the suffix and makes a tremendous profit (about ten percent of total government revenue) from its lease to companies like Dell and 9Gag. His ambition is to negotiate a deal with the Tuvalan government on behalf of his client, a domain name marketplace called Sedo, to auction off a hundred and fifteen highly valuable url's including the top three most valuable; in descending order: 'SEX.tv', 'MONEY.tv' and 'GOD.tv'.

She sends a message to Brody: "FOLLOW UP MEETING TOMORROW. STAYING OVER. MWAH MWAH MWAH."

The British Airways cabin is an altogether more luxurious place to be in for the duration. This too is architecture, Brody had said. He drawled on about the intricacies of airplane design - all the biometric requirements satisfied in miniature. Really, he said, in that sometimes patronising way of his, one can think of it as a long thin lounge that travels through the air. Individual nozzles for temperature administration; each person controlling their very own reading light and the ability to recline. What a difference 3 degrees made. Engineers anguished over seats that provide adequate fire protection and structural integrity, supplied them with power and data sockets, balanced all this against cost. No other public building allows such customisation.

This being an overnight flight, a curious intimacy sweeps over fuselage. Pupils dilate as the lights dim, bellies distend, bleary eyes stare out of portholes, passengers succumb to a cozy fellowship and fall asleep together - the cabin becomes a bedroom. Later, only the emergency aisle lights stay on. Those left awake tend to feel utterly alone, even amongst the mass of dormant bodies. The pyjama party turns sombre.

After a while Merina asks for a coffee and a set of headphones, which arrive in a crisp plastic packet. After a few taps of the tiny screen embedded in the headrest in front of her she discovers, to her joy, that this particular flight doesn't screen pre-selected movies but is equipped with an entire archive from which to choose. She almost becomes emotional looking at all at the possibilities, but holds back the tears. Doesn't want to waste a drop. Business class was definitely the right decision this time. There are all the new films one would expect, *The Fault In Our Stars, Boyhood* and some french films she has never heard of but which will almost certainly do the trick. They don't have *Marley and Me* or *Seabiscuit,* which would have been perfect - movies about dogs and / or horses are the absolute best for gushing to - but a Richard Gere film in the 'classics' section catches her eye - *Hachi: A Dog's Tale,* released about five years ago.

The story - light piano score, soft lighting - is of an Akita Inu pup, shipped to the US from Japan. The dog escapes from its cage at the station where Richard Gere finds it. He takes it home - the wife disapproves. But! Hachiko, the dog, shows surprising intelligence. Follows Gere to the station.

Waits there, on the platform, all day for Gere to return. Every day they walk to the station together in the morning and home in the afternoon; this becomes their ritual. But then, one day Richard Gere has a heart attack. Doesn't come home from work. But Hachiko waits. Keeps waiting. Day after day.

"This really is a shit movie," Merina says. To whom? Not to the Turkish aunty next to her, sleeping, mouth gaped towards the heavens like a foie gras goose. Or to the even older men behind her with the stomachs so full she can almost hear their shirt buttons strain.

She says it to herself and realises she's ready. Here it comes, the irregular fluttering through smooth muscle tissue, waves of mounting tightness in the ribcage; a rising, helplessness, that spreads outward and upward, fills her lungs, puffed up and desperate; her whole body arching, fingers clutching at armrests, as if at the edge of a precipice, just hovering, then with the merest suggestion of a nudge, her structure finally gives out, collapsed, as her heart is overcome with a great emotional spasming. The saline discharges from her eyes. Trickles rivulets down her cheeks.

She cries. She cries because the movie is shitty. Cries for the director, whom she imagines knows no better; cries for his amateurish life. Cries for the director's mother, who knows her son is a shitty director, but loves him anyway. Loves him more. Loves him with the kind of love that pities and doesn't hope.

She cries for Richard Gere. And for the circumstances that brought him to this shitty movie. She cries for his costly divorce, the alimony and the child support she assumes necessitated his taking of this shitty role. She cries because she thinks he is better than this. Cries because… what if, perhaps he isn't? She cries for Richard Gere's ex-wife and for the shitty way he treated her.

She cries for the dog, certainly. But also for every dog ever. She cries for the dog she loved so much, just a week old, the one she squeezed so hard, that it stopped breathing. She cries for the way you couldn't tell until its belly started to go cold. She cries for the way her mother looked at her when she found out.

She cries for her mother.

Cries for her husband. For her son. And if anyone were to pass by at that moment and needed some crying done, but hadn't the courage or the time, she would cried for them too.

She falls into the oxytocin haze. Passes out. Then the uncanniest sensation, to awake in the early hours amongst strangers still singing the dirge of snores and somniloquies, grown men cuddling themselves under blankets, mothers queuing alongside her with heavy-lidded eyes to pee. Seeing dreaming toes squirm inside navy blue one-size-fits-all sock bags, mouths gaping under night masks branded in the pagan symbols of corporate identity, these things always make Merina feel like a member of some sleep cult; Heaven's Gate Away-Team.

Lighting flashes outside and the windows are made dull with moisture. What no one knows is that the attendants sleep in crawlspaces hidden above the toilets and the overhead lockers. These they access via cat ladders secreted behind the drinks trolleys. Even the slightest cough or bump can disturb the passengers below, so they train themselves to sleep without making any sound at all. The tired feet of one attendant kick off the heels and sidle up next to a colleague. One shift is ending, another just beginning.

Some passengers blink themselves awake, others nap on, unaware of the storm they are flying into. The turbulence seems more earnest than any Merina has felt before, the plane bucking and swivelling on its axis, and she becomes convinced that this is it. This is how she dies.

The cabin lights switch off for the approach. The same passengers towards whom she had felt love and fraternity now laugh like maniacs at every startling jolt, like this is just some early morning amusement park roller-coaster, like there are guide rails and fail-safe brakes. When they whoop

Merina wishes that the plane would crash, just a little bit, so that they might take the prospect more seriously.

They actually clap as the tires touch down.

She feels wound up and anxious again, like she's never had her release at all. On her flight back to Johannesburg she has another go at it. Tries using *The Hunger Games* to get to that teary sweet-spot. But something has broken. It doesn't work anymore.

The train home is unwieldy - the doors in between the compartments are left open and the carriage in front heaves side to side like a drunken concertina. Steel wheels cluttering on the tracks and the brakes screeching at Rhodesfield, then Marlboro, then Sandton, then Rosebank - she keeps expecting, and also partly hoping for, a horrific derailment that she would only just survive. The boarding passes she tears in half, throwing one end in the kitchen bin and the other in the toilet. Then she books a flight to Tokyo. The Mitsui Garden Yotsuya hotel has recently introduced dedicated crying rooms for female patrons.

Chapter 17 - The Memoir of Leendert Lukas Overzicht - The Dream Castle

A body of work. I became obsessed with the phrase. I saw the edifices laid across the city like fallen women. Bare scaffolding, cranes rising. The ground opening up for the piles sinking into it. Engineering in all directions, upward, outward. Shopping malls spreadeagled, highways pulsing. It suggested the possibility of expanding the self, over the course of a long and prolific career, to include objects that would exist separate and distant from me. I could be as big and plentiful as buildings.

I couldn't wait to be an architect.

But I didn't realise how long it would take. Nor did I have in mind the end as much as I fell into the process of making. I only chased some ineffable notion of 'big', something that would negate this niggling fear I had of staying small forever.

My ambitions already began to crumble in the first month of study. It was the shelter project that started it. An annual ritual at the University. First year architects designed shelters - really glorified tents - and built them on the basketball courts to sleep in over the weekend. The test was to see if they would endure the rain and wind. During the day our discussions were rigourously academic. There was much discussion of stormwater, the best orientation for shade and breezes and so on. But as soon as the first shelter was finished and we'd drunk the first few drinks, the whole enterprise fell apart quite quickly.

The shelter I had been building with five other students was never finished.

We bickered over the materials. Couldn't agree on even the simplest thing; which way was north for instance, how light behaved, the basic nature of right and wrong. You've never seen a more hopeless enterprise than six architects trying to draw a line.

It's a pity too, because my design was based on the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, which was itself one of the greatest singular visions ever built. I had developed a naive interest in the work of Gerhard Moerdijk in the weeks leading up to the course. This was partly due to the fact that I shared the name Leendert with him (his second, my first) but also because it was Moerdijk who introduced me to the concept of a Dream Castle. I read the term in his initial competition proposal for the monument, which seemed to me a lofty concept. First I decided that everything I ever built would aim to be a 'dream castle', and only secondly did I want to learn what that term meant.

For a start, Dream Castle is a translation. Moerdijk, in his dutch, used the word 'lugkasteel'. Castle made of air. Can you imagine? The monument to champion the Afrikaner birthright, resembling a plastic toy for children to jump on?

It sounds religious, like an ark of the covenant or a castle in the sky, but once you understand the pagan influences, the sun, the eye, you see that he was driving towards a more fundamental human awe than one reserved for any one god.

Regardless, my shelter design stole a number of details from the monument. It was a four-fold symmetrical plan with a central atrium and an opening which referenced Moerdijk's oculus. The plan and the oculus he in turn stole from the Nazis and their Monument for the Battle of Nations, which I've always found odd; that he used that as his template.

Both monuments were built to honour some victory on the battlefield. Both nations claimed the victory as proof that god had blessed them. Both chose to use that blessing to rule over another race. Isn't that strange? Supernatural power channelled into the hands of the oppressor and always architecture in the centre.

Even to look at the two structures there is an obvious resemblance. Modern era pyramids thrusting upward out of the high ground like stone phalluses. One half expects a beam of light to shoot out of it and summon the Mother Ship. I couldn't say the same of my shelter.

It would be judged the next day and I remember at some point, spray painting the words Engine of Glory on the side of it, hoping a sense of humour would distract the jurors from its shoddy

execution. Of course it rained into the oculus in the early hours of the morning and everyone complained to me about it.

I wanted to channel something, certainly. Access that same god-given mandate. I wasn't a religious person - not after I'd seen what happened to mother - but, like Pascal, I wagered that one had little to lose from believing in life after death and everything to gain.

I learnt my lesson then. There is no such thing as democracy in design.

In my second year I became particularly interested in Henrietta Lacks, the immortal woman. Lacks died of cervical cancer, in the 1950s, but before she did, a doctor sampled a few of her cells and discovered that they would, in the right conditions survive indefinitely. Other sample cells, indeed all the cells in the body, will inevitably cease replicating as their telomeres are depleted - the details are not important. The point is only that most cells die quickly. But not the HeLa cell line. Most of Henrietta Lacks died in 1950, but there are bits of her, scattered in the labs of the Salk Institute, labs all over the world, that live on.

HeLa has been used to develop a number of vaccines, antibodies, to test chemicals. Hundreds of thousands of academic papers and studies have been produced, using the cells of Henrietta Lacks, and if you are alive and reading this, you have some of Henrietta Lacks' cells inside of you.

These kinds of theoretical immortality are never quite as good as the real thing, Is Henrietta Lacks immortal? Not in the way that matters; certainly not in the way that matters to her. Indeed, Lacks had no knowledge of the sampling, they were taken without her consent. She had no control over her cells. The continuing use of her cell line amounts more to the defiling of her corpse than to the continuation of her life.

The key then, is control.

In my third year I discovered a protozoan, the life cycle of which I find instructive: *Toxoplasma Gondii*, a small organism that lives in the gut of a cat. When the cat defecates, little invisible eggs are expelled in the faeces which is generally consumed by other animals, like rats. Toxoplasma is able to survive in most warm-blooded animals, but what it wants, what it needs to reproduce, is to be back inside a cat. This is a difficulty. How does the protozoan get a rat back into a cat?

Well it works its way through the rat's arteries, hitches a ride on red blood cells, and when it gets to the head it passes into the brain. Now, in an ingenious evolutionary adaptation, it finds the amygdala - the source of fear, aggression and sexual behaviour in the rat. It swaps some wires around, actually rewires the rat's brain - so that it becomes fearless; not only unafraid of the cat but (new studies suggest) sexually attracted to the cat. So when the rat smells that noxious scent of cat urine, it doesn't run or panic, it simply remains where it is, placid and amorous, gazing lovingly at the cat even as it is devoured. The cat eats the rat and Toxoplasma finds its home again.

When I discovered this organism, I knew, I had to find a way to do this with Architecture.

I wanted to design a structure in such a way, as to make all who live and work in it, become infected with the idea of me. It must persuade them, as *Toxoplasma* does, that they could be in service of a grander purpose, external to themselves, that it is right and beautiful for them to perpetuate a consciousness that consists of multiple beings. In short, I wanted to start a practice.

From the first day of my first year of work, I kept that goal in sight.

I can't even remember the name of the place. It was of the breed of firm that acknowledged every single partner or rising associate in the acronym. A name fit for a licence plate: TSPCMD Design or something to that effect.

I met a young architect there. She hadn't much talent for design - this is not a slight on her - there are many talents requisite for a practice and not all of us can be virtuosos with the pen. There is also a place for the administrators and managers; for the person who is efficient; who has the right mind for legalities and the dull accounting of paper and ink.

We started our first project, a concept design for an office park, while still employed at ABCDEF Design. We produced all the work on the side. Late nights and weekends, using branded stationery and company coffee. Stolen clicks during lunch hours. Our overheads were very low.

Alessandra and I couldn't believe it when the project paid out. We felt like the wealthiest architects in all of history. We kept expecting law enforcement to burst through the doors and confirm what we feared; that it was illegal to make that much money just from building plans. That it was tantamount to drawing and then printing money.

We started our firm that week. LOAD, a good name that fell off the tongue, she said. I let her handle the contracts. I would be the talent and she would do the boring stuff. Of course, she would prove all too good at legalities, as I discovered at our first falling out.

There was an intern and a lapse in judgment. Perhaps it's not yet necessary to bare everything here. Alessandra's personal assistant. She took it personally.

She'd fused us together with so many non-disclosure agreements, intellectual property laws, and non-competes, that I would have had to legally amputate a portion of my corporate personhood to be free of her. That was more than twenty years ago, and our marriage has not been utterly unhappy. This is what I tell her whenever she makes that face of regret; that we even had a child together. In a way we had a great many. They say genes are the blueprints for a human being. If so, they are broken codes. If I issue a drawing for construction, I expect a contractor to follow it more closely. Even better, I have recourse. I can insist. I can enforce penalties. If the workmanship is poor, I can condemn it. Engineered and designed, buildings make for better children.

Chapter 18 - Sadness

Alessandra manages to interrupt Brody, even via text message.

'COME TO WOOLSTON RD.' she writes him at ten on a Saturday morning. Before he can even finish writing back a perplexed where-when-why response she has followed it up with: 'NUMBER 14. NOW.'

Even Alessandra's gate is a piece of expensive detailing. He can see the lengths to which she has gone to avoid visible bolts and welding joints. She's used laser-cut perforated Cor-Ten sheet metal to wrap the housing. She's used copper to clad the brackets. She's used steel sections which do not exist in the country. It doesn't look it, but the whole thing must have cost more than he made in a year. The simple things most people take for granted, every balustrade, every tile; Load builds all of it from scratch. The most one could say of Alessandra is that she is agnostic about money; yes she supposes that there is some concept of value and cost in the universe, but it doesn't feature in her life in any meaningful way.

He buzzes the intercom. When the front door opens for him he finds himself face to face with an accusatory Alessandra. Like most architects in their fifties she wears only black. Her form is also always shrouded in hybrid garments - the loose fitting cardi-blouse and the harem pant-skirt - fabric that billows and flares when she storms in and out of doorways - like an octopus squirting ink.

"Why do we build?" she demands.

"I'm sorry?"

"Why are you sorry?"

"I mean I don't…"

"Why do we build? You're an architect. You must have some answer to this question?" She pulls him inside with a firm grip and slams the door. She turns and leaves him in the foyer of her home. He stands there for a moment inspecting her cabinets before realising she expects him to follow her inside.

Bulbous little sculptures everywhere. Bright red plastic hippopotamuses. On the walls Rubenesque women in charcoal with snub noses and curly hair on their heads and in their armpits. About half her art is about buttocks.

"I don't know…" He clocks Nox sitting in the lounge, which is a surprise. He feels the whole thing is an ambush until she waves hello.

"If you don't know… Nox, explain to him."

Brody moves to sit on the couch and Alessandra snaps a fierce look at him. "Sadness is not allowed on the furniture!"

"Oh, I'm.. I didn't realise… I'm sorry…"

Then Brody notices that her eyes are not directed at him but just to his left, where a small black labrador has curled up on the couch. He hasn't felt so much as the pressure of a paw on the cushion.

"Sadness, get away! I'm making tea. You," she says to Brody, "sit. You," she says to the dog, "out."

The dog is old and very grey. It gives Brody a sheepish look, as if begging for him to intervene. Then it slumps off the couch. Alessandra yanks it by the collar and pulls it out of the room towards the kitchen. There are some sounds of doors opening and closing, keys turning in locks, and yet the the dog is back in the lounge before Alessandra, giving Brody that pleading look.

"Sadness is a dog. Of course."

"Sadness loves Alessandra," Nox says. "Loves her more than anything. If Alessandra ever gave him so much as a pat on the head Sadness would die of happiness."

"It doesn't look like Alessandra likes Sadness."

"No, I think she does, in her own way. She's just a bit oblivious of his presence most of the time. Yes in the general she knows he exists. If you asked her about dogs she would sort of think about it for a bit and say oh yes, dogs, I have one. But he was her daughter's dog, and usually when children leave the home it's their childhood dogs that suffer the most. I come here to feed him and to take him for walks."

Alessandra brings in a tea tray with pots and cups. The spoons rattle on their saucers. Though she walks with purpose she only just makes it into the lounge before getting distracted by a book on Scarpa she's left on the dining room table. Nox rises to fetch the tray from her so that she can keep paging through the book. She slashes the pages from right to left as if the book has offended her personally. Nox hunches over the coffee table and pours a cup of tea for all three of them. She also adds in half a spoon of sugar for Alessandra with quite a bit of milk and stirs.

The dog rests its head on Brody's leg. It doesn't exactly begin to fall asleep, but it does close its eyes and sigh.

"Sadness used to be a guide dog. Alessandra is part of the Guide Dog Association's puppy raising programme and the deal is, they give you a puppy, you raise it, socialise it, house train it, teach it basic obedience, you know. Then after a year you give it back to the Association and it begins advanced training; becomes a guide dog."

"Initially that was the intention," Alessandra sits down next to Nox. "My daughter wanted a dog. I didn't. This was the compromise. A one year contract, with the option to renew. The idea appealed to me. I thought it would encourage her to accept the impermanence of things. She was the one who named it Sadness, which I was surprised to find was acceptable and within the guidelines."

Brody thinks about it. "I don't know if I could do that. Every year you lose a dog."

"She doesn't see it that way," Nox says.

"I suppose it helps that you know it's going on to do something important and noble," Nox offers. "It's less like the dog has died. The connection it is going to have with its new owner makes you feel…"

"No, no. I mean, she doesn't see it that way because each year she gets a new puppy and names that one Sadness as well."

"It's not really the same animal though, is it?"

"Depends what you mean by *really*. Sometimes Sadness is a chocolate lab, sometimes a golden retriever, sometimes male, sometimes female. One year he was a poodle. But ultimately the same dog."

"So just an eternally peeing, chewing, yelping puppy."

"Sadness was a one year old puppy for about twelve years," Nox said, nodding.

"Right."

"This is the thirteenth iteration of Sadness," Alessandra says. "I happened on the idea when I lived in Kyoto. In the neighbouring prefecture is a Shinto shrine called the *Ise Jingu.* The shrine is interesting because even though it is a timber structure and ought to rot after say, thirty years, the builders insist it has stood for over two thousand. How is that possible?"

She doesn't expect an answer from him. Brody has the sense that this is not the first time Alessandra has told this story; that it is one of those rehearsed anecdotes people tell over and over again, honing down the ums and bringing the elements that achieve the greatest effect into sharper relief.

"Well once a generation the shrine is dismantled and rebuilt using new timber, but their sense of perdurance relies on the form of the thing, its end purpose and the ritual of the building, not in the materials used to construct it. As long as the correct design is built by the correct people and in the correct way, it is considered the same building, at once new and ancient. It's a kind of immortality through continual dea…"

"There is a jellyfish, called the Immortal Jellyfish, which does the same thing," Brody says, nodding. "…a planula that swims in the waters of Japan. *Turritopsis Dohrnii*. Whenever it dies it spawns a polyp that is genetically identical, like a clone baby. It's the only organism to achieve a biological immortality." Alessandra looks at him affronted. Brody remembers and curses himself quietly. Not only has he interrupted her, but he has walked his mouth into this exact situation before. People who place great stock in their charisma don't like to be told interesting things. It's no different to reaching across the table and eating the food right off their plate.

"Well," Alessandra says, "I'd rather have one life as Alessandra D'Emidio than an eternity as a jellyfish."

For a while no one says anything. Brody reaches for the spoon on his saucer and begins stirring his empty cup. The clinking sound echoes through the house.

"Sadness is old," Brody says. Nox and Alessandra both give him a puzzled look, which he doesn't think was fair. "I'm talking about the dog again. You obviously don't get puppies every year anymore?"

"This particular Sadness passed his Guide Dog training but proved to be unreliable," Alessandra says. "He lacked the certain personality required. Not a suitable candidate."

The dog opens its eyes, meekly tucks its tail and lies down.

"He walked his owner into oncoming traffic," Nox explains. "This was years ago. The owner is fine now, they just broke a leg at the time. Sadness was retired from the programme."

"In great ignominy. So I had the option to take him back or to allow him to be put down. I have a book," Alessandra says, getting up again. "About the shrine. I will find it."

She disappears through a door on the other side of the room.

"Okay, so she must have felt something," Brody says to Nox when Alessandra was out of earshot. "To save him from the furnace. How long ago was this?"

"This would have been ten years ago," Nox says. He is now fifteen."

"He suddenly went from a one year old pup to a five year old. He changed colour and breed I assume."

Alessandra returns. Instead of the book about the Iso Shrine, she holds in her hands one about Cold-War bunkers and the Architecture of Paranoia.

"I asked you why you think it is we build."

Brody sighs. "I don't have the answer."

"In my experience there is more than one answer to this question. The answer depends on the net result of all your life's defeats and successes. If you had lived a charmed life, you would tell me that we design because we are good at it. Elize does this. She uses words like *gift* and *duty*. If, on the other hand, you have been hurt more than you have been happy, you skew your world view to the cynical. Marco sees only missed opportunities. The world disappoints him, but he says we can try to rectify some of it."

"Then I'm not sure I have a philosophy," Brody says, "for me, it's more like satisfying a low-grade addiction. There is a moment that comes when a building begins to look like a building - it feels a bit stronger than a caffeine rush, almost as intense as falling in love - that heart racing, churning stomach feeling. I guess it's the first time the structure sort of reveals the envelope. You spend so much time drawing something on a piece of paper or rotating it around on the screen that the first time you see the real scale of it, it's always bigger than you expect and it makes you feel… also bigger. I just try to chase that feeling."

"I'm also not really interested in the finality of the building," Alessandra says. "Architecture comes in stages, as you know. First there is the brief. Then there is concept. Followed by design and drawing. Finally, so we are told, there is construction. Construction which ends at practical completion, works completion, then final completion. I'm telling you there is no final completion. There is only a pen tip moving across a page."

Nox says. "We called you here to let you know…"

"We will carry on with the Damsel project. Cape Town will employ Ten-Percent as their 'client liaison project manager'. That sounds officious, doesn't it? He'll be principal agent and we'll be like any sub-contractor. We won't be held accountable for any creative accounting on their part. You can imagine why he is called Ten-Percent."

"And what about the plans that aren't approved by council yet? We're quite exposed there."

"I've sent Ten-Percent to take the SDP to the Metro Centre. Earn his keep. Maybe he knows someone. I feel I owe it to Leendert to do it right, Alessandra. And it's not just the fear of litigation. This corruption will affect everything from the mix of the concrete to the integrity of the steel. Fraud isn't a rational force… money, time, physics… It's a creature that eats rationality."

Alessandra slaps her large sketchbook onto the coffee table. With slashes from a fat marker she begins to draw. "It's a fight," she says, all the while drawing. He recognises in the angry black lines on the page a one-point perspective of a building interior. As she adds definition and detail, he can tell, even from across the lounge, that she is drawing a familiar scene.

"I don't want to fight this out for two years," Brody says, "just to pass by what is built for the rest of my life and only experience regret."

"I know you, you want to go Howard Roark on it. Fuck it. Blow the whole thing up. But it's very easy to find a reason *not* to work: it doesn't pay enough, not creative enough, too political, too greedy. If we threw away every project that came to us for the wrong reasons we'd never build anything. You look back at the end of your life and all you'd see is an endless maybe. It's far more courageous to come in every day and survive than it is to kill or die in some grand gesture. Demolition is simple. Building is…"

She stops mid sentence. It seems to Brody that the inevitable has finally happened. Alessandra has managed to interrupt herself.

"Difficult," she says, balling her fist until the knuckles whiten.

Chapter 19 – Red Tape

He suspects the cookies but it turns out some prankster has put TCP-laced butter in the mini milktarts. Plus a fun new prescription drug white-dusted over the cream horns. Giggle fits erupt near the photocopier. Those in the know exchange half-smiles and offer some to the unwary. Describe the tarts as 'really something'. Raised eyebrows nearly give the game away. The saltiest snacks go first, then spotted candy eggs.

Something is happening to Ten-Percent's mouth, but there's skepticism surrounding the punch. He's getting to know the texture of his tongue. Like sucking on a dog's red rubber chew toy. Each office he opens refuses to be a bathroom.

Instead the next door turns out to be a cupboard of beige ring-dial phones; stacked on top of beige A3 envelopes spilling out sun-yellowed paper. Old beige fishbowl TVs with defunct names are stacked below. Goldstar. Telefunken, Magnavox. The way a street still called Verwoerd seems old. Everything must become beige eventually, he thought. Anything that gets left in the sun, anything under the sun, anything… even the sun itself inevitably goes beige. This is true: if one took all 200 000 stars of our celestial agglomeration, the red giants and the white dwarves and the blue stragglers and the mid-life yellow suns, if you swirled them in a galactic teacup, because of the gradual shift from the blue big bang to the red of Ragnarok, the average colour of the universe at this exact moment in time, is beige. He read it in the Rosebank Killarney gazette. What he didn't read, but knows in his heart, is that one day all South Africans will be beige too. No longer a rainbow nation, just one more murky backwater in the great cosmic latte. His skin itches.

Once everyone is beige, there will be no beige consciousness movements, because there will be no one to be conscious to or beige at. There will be no saying 'beige like me', you'll have to say 'beige like everyone' and so there will be no point in saying it at all. You won't even see things in black and white, everything, you will have to suppose, is shades of beige. He tells himself he doesn't want to be beige and, for the most part, he enunciates these thoughts in full sentences. You can almost see his lips frame the letters. But there is another thought that hovers like a stranger behind him in the queue at Woolworths, which is that beige seems so very close to khaki.

He definitely doesn't want to be khaki.

Khaki means soil. To be khaki is to be soiled. To be dirt. To be a euphemism for excrement, but worse than that, it is the colour of the colonialists and also Terblanche and his dyslexic swastikas. Khaki is the colour of the worst kind of white people.

The moment he enters one room a huddle of people stop whatever it was they were doing to the contents of a desk drawer. There is accusation in the way they stare at him.

He does find a staff kitchenette but he thinks the smell of vomit is coming from the peddle bin, and he knows, from the way the grouting of the tiles is pulsing that it would not go well for him in there.

"…," says a woman behind him. She is wearing her office door label as a name tag on her lapel. I'm Roads."

"I need to get an SDP amended."

"Oh no. You see, now you're asking me to," she makes air quotes, "do things".

"But you're Roads Department. You have to stamp. Unless you can find some reason…"

"No, no." Roads sips something red from her paper cup. "Every time I stamp a drawing that's one more stamp that can come back to bite me in the arse. If anything were to burn or collapse

the shrapnel of blame would tear through these offices. Like stamping my own death warrant. There would be reports and reviews and… You think I want to be," she cast suspicious looks at the walls and she whispers the word like it is cursed: "probed?"

"I need a stamp!"

"And the less I do, the better I am at it. Why don't you ask Pikitup."

Pikitup is a man with tortoiseshell glasses and grey stubble, it turns out.

"I feel for you, friend. I really do. I don't want to be holding your fate in my hand like this. But I'm a hesitant man. Just get someone to go first and the rest will follow. Maybe try Power. He's a real pushover."

"Power is by appointment only," says a younger girl. Monday eight to nine. You have to wait till next week."

"Fine. How do I make the appointment?"

"You meet him. Next week. Monday. Eight to nine. Then you make an appointment to meet him. You can probably book him for the week after."

"I can just make an appointment today. I'm here now."

"Power is away on training today. If you made an appointment you'd know that."

"So I have to come back on Monday."

"If he lets you book, yes. He doesn't really like people barging in unannounced. He prefers you to make an appointment for a scheduling consultation, ideally."

"You're saying I have to make an appointment to make an appointment to get a stamp. I could just get it finish and klaar in the time it takes for him to…"

"And what about the other guy who booked the week before, captain?"

"What guy?"

"I don't know. You know. Some other guy."

"But there won't be any guy because he's off sick today so he won't have any appointment…" The city looks far away through those fixed pane windows. He can't even throw himself out of them. "What you are saying is impossible."

"The City of Johannesburg determines many impossible to determine things."

"I see what you are trying to do of course. You set the boundary lines, the building lines, you take the land and call it Erf this, Zone that. You make us make so many applications, pay so much money, for the pleasure of forgetting who the land belongs to. You make barriers out of thin air. The physical world fills in your statutory envelopes like water filling up an invisible jug. If you do that for long enough people think that the world is that way because it must be that way. I'm concerned about this spreadsheet. The one which tells me when I may see Fire. When I may see Power. You have enforced length, width and height and through this delay, delay, delay you are confining time as well. All four dimensions."

Roads cups her hands to her mouth and hollers: "We have another one, guys! Call the ambulance back!" Pikitup scrambles for a phone at the back of a desk. Punches some numbers and yells into the receiver. "Code Six And/Or Seven!"

“Let’s see,” Ten-Percent charges on. “If the rate of change in a thing is measured over time, what measures the rate of change of time? That is called relativity. And the only thing that can measure the seventh dimension, the rate of change in relativity, is The City of Johannesburg. You not only measure it, you legislate it.”

“One day we will have access to all the infinite dimensions but still there will stand this building, and you will lay restrictions onto our use of them. We will be able to travel, for instance, back to 1994, but getting a visa will be too difficult. Instead you will have to travel all the back to 1992 and wait. Or you will be allowed to visit some reality where the AWB succeeded in their putsch; but only after you have obtained signatures from all your neighbours. Bureaucracy will run rampant alongside the possibilities of multiple universes. There will be many forms to fill in.”

This must be where the trouble started. They’ve moved into the home of the Malans and Bothas. They still use the same stationery for god’s sake. Maybe this old brown box is haunted by old khaki ghosts. Their brains have gotten possessed. Apartheid spooks. A spook is a ghost. They haunt this place. It all makes sense now. It’s why nothing ever gets approved. They maintain the old order. Nothing new gets built. Each department insists you are actually a step behind where you thought you are. Before you know it you’ve moonwalked back to 1994. He wants to cry but just then the milktart kicks in and he is forced to laugh at it all. None of the warmth that spreads to the eyes after an honest chuckle, just a wheezing from a hollow mouth.

The fluorescents flicker and just like lightning it’s a full two seconds before the thunderous paranoia hits. What a horror it is, he thinks, to be trapped inside your own face. “I want to burn this place to the ground,” he says to no one exactly, while grabbing a candle from the birthday cake.

A gentleman approaches down the corridor and makes eye contact.

“In that case, you can make an appointment with me. I’m Fire. Fire and Dangerous Things. This way, boss.” He strikes Ten-Percent as well-brought up, agreeable and with good taste but more than that, there is something secretive about him. Ten-Percent nods knowingly at him, just in case.

Bad move. Fire frowns. Probably askari.

“You have a face on your something,” Fire mimes a scratch at the corner of his mouth. Ten-Percent’s paranoia takes a turn. This is some sort of brain hack. He feels around with his hands. There is an eye, and another over there and somewhere else unrelated there is a mouth. A nose somewhere in between, sure. But nothing face-like about the arrangement.

Ten-Percent tries to fend Fire off with his roll of drawings. Batting and swatting the SDP at where he thinks Fire’s head is. But that’s no good is it? That is Fire and this is paper. “You have to fight fire with fire,” Ten-Percent says and sets the candle to the plans. Flicks of purple as the flames touch ink. Scalloped embers eat away at the edges. The Damsel goes up in smoke.

Roads and Fire restrain Ten-Percent by pushing him onto the ground and wrapping him up in a patchwork rug. They know to do that because he’s not the first to get a bad reaction to the cream horns - sprinkled off-label as they are with Lacrimax. First the face-blindness making you forget who everyone is and then you get the ‘feelies’. Usually you wet yourself, from any orifice capable of doing the wetting. Strange side effects but it makes you bawl like a baby for the first time in decades and that feels good.

From the darkness inside of the sausage roll Ten-Percent knows nothing except a basic larval desire to come forth. He can’t move but squirms. Still clutching the remnants of the Damsel drawing in his right hand, nothing more than a corner of a cartridge roll, no drawing or title.

Next thing he is being unravelled into an ambulance on the ground floor, lights flashing so pretty like red giants. They fill his vision. No beige in sight. They make him sign out before the medics are allowed to take him.

Chapter 20 - Mephisto

During the day, at the Old Park Station, he makes enquiries of the truck drivers; how one goes about getting a licence or if he can maybe wash the truck in between shifts. Doesn't look like there's too much hope of that and yet he keeps being drawn back to the place. It has a sideways gravity. It means the dimples of his mouth are more buoyant and elastic here, more likely to turn outward into a smile.

Two diggers join him under the concrete base.

He knows the first one. The unloved arms, ravaged by substances so unfriendly you have to force them in. Ragged fingernails and gaunt with veins and sinews, it's the hands that reveal the life of subtraction, of drying up. That one's name is Mutboy. The worst you could say of the other guy is that he looks vaguely overslept or hungover, red sclera and eye bags. He wears a scuffed beige jacket - which on its own is not in such a bad state as to signal the man as homeless - and the jeans are a bit ratty. But, no, not really impoverished, you wouldn't say that. He knows it just takes one or two bad decisions, or an unfortunate incident to get here. Mutboy has just been at it longer. The distance between the two of them is about a metre and give or take a year.

Mustn't let it come to that. You only got so many nooks before you end up in a hole.

Who is this now, not a tough guy but a Ya-Hey - just as they're getting settled - coming to deliver a notice? Doesn't this guy know that paper is worth more to a digger than the words printed on it?

"Under whose authority would you colonise this nook, Ya-hey?"

"I'm delivering the notice on behalf of my client."

"Client? Then you are an agent. We will open you up to see if you are a bloody one."

Whenever Jack wants to disappear, out comes the shadow man to take his place; the two of them tag team his body. In shadow mode he can see things that move in all the spectra. Infrabled, Ultraviolence. Everyone can see that this Ya-Hey is, but, in his mind's eye, Shadowjack can see what should be. Namely: the mob swarming around Ya-hey. He knows that in this city, when Something Is Happening, diggers sniff it in the chemicals of the air. Coalesce suddenly like ants pulling apart a grasshopper. The steady shuffle of more and more spectators.

"You are not the first ha-hey to come to a land of magical negroes and noble savages, bringing flags and notices," Shadowjack waves a letter in Ya-hey's face, who winces as a paper corner flicks his eyelid. "But you are the last. Don't you know the Cyprus of Babylon was cut by a garden tool?"

The small huddle swells to a crowd. They lift Shadowjack up on high and the whole milling of bodies sucks him toward the underside of the concrete deck.

Mutboy looks worried. He's looked at Jack like this before. "What are you doing under there, Nkos?"

"My home now." Shadow says. "Used to live up there, you know." He closes his eyes and sways from side to side, as if conjuring the memories. "In the before-time, so long ago, I had a lovely place in the parks. Your Parkhursts, your Parkviews, your Greensides, your Gardens of Eden, you know. I remember slithering up in the trees. Chatty serpent I was! I said something that got me into trouble. Or not really me but others. I don't remember. Then I was banished into the earth's mantel. A little nematode."

"Okay Nkos, but don't stay there too long," Mutboy probably wants to lump their cash together. See if they can get something good between the three of them. "Bernie here has a silver and a craving. You coming?"

"Come a looooong way baby."

"Where you come from?"

"Thousands of years I crawled upwards through the crust, the only thinking thing in the dark. Until one day, at last, there was a chip, chip, chip and I saw the light, flashing side to side as the hardhat turned. Shit-hot like lightning."

"Maybe we get a zama and a half-loaf. Maybe two zama if you invest. Nkos, what's your pressure?"

"Okay Nkos okay. I wasn't gonna tell you now but we picked up a manhole. We need another hand to push it. We'll even give you first shift off. You can ride the trolley."

"Do you know? I missed my ride on Mariner 1 in '62. NASA was shooting for their big redemption, a Morning Star flyby. But the kaputnik probe bombed after just five minutes, all because I was the one wormy comma missing from the code. It cost them, half annual budget, convert to rands, inflation, inflation, don't forget inflation, 5 billion Rand! The second-most expensive typographical mistake in history!"

Mutboy couldn't help himself. "What's the most expensive…"

"Everyone always wants to know who was Number One," he sighed. "The most expensive mistake occurs in the Wicked Bible which, through a printing error, omits the word 'not' from the seventh commandment."

"Look, Nkos. He'll give us hundreds and we can split it nice. Three ways. But not if you go on and on."

"Fanagolo from the mouths of babes and sucklings. Maids and pork dumplings. And also their stomachs. Lived in midriffs for a while. Expelled through tracts. Yes that grew tiresome, but I survived by feeding on shit and dirt, and always found my way into a nice warm stomach again. I was the curse placed upon the men who mined the earth and always I kept their tongues wagging. *Amafufunyana* don't shut up."

"Fine fuck it."

Long gone, he couldn't convince Mutboy and Bernie to make a donation but it doesn't matter. He has everything he needs in this suitcase right here.

He opens the clasps and lifts the lid. A slush of brown sticky matter and indeterminate objects spills out. It seems to writhe or boil, the surface, like the mound is alive. Bits of plastic, a glint of metal here and there, all of it encrusted in a slick clay mortar. At the top is a strange sculpture, embedded in the gunk like a bastard christmas tree finial made of skulls and bones.

This is his altar and Shadowjack is preaching to the choir. Delivers a sermon to his audience of ghosts.

"The Mozambiquan born to a Greek and Swazi tryst : Tsafendas! Now he was a jibber-jabberer! Through him we rambled multilingual again - *Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, French, Italian, Shangaan, German, Swedish even!* We travelled the globe as a half-breed ghost, too dark to be white, too white to pass pencil tests. No one wanted him. Not his baba. Not his mama. Not Suzman, not Mandela; the whole world's orphan. If you are going to be the scapegoat of an entire nation you need to be No-Name brand. I became his fairy godmother, the patron saint of hobgoblins and bogeymen,

the champion of halflings and in-between things. Inside my little Furiosis, I grew great and terrible! They called me dragon-tapeworm and I purred like a kitten when we passed the cake shop. I told him to make like Ehud of Judges 3 verse 15. I got my half-breed a job in parliament. Become the messenger, I said. Be the in-betweener. Liberate the Israelites, I said. A British Pratt had tried before and failed. The papers called it absolutely miraculous! Verwoerd only had eyes for black and white, he couldn't see the vaaletjies who were otherwise. You needed a shadow, weaving through the pews. So I gave my middle-man a double-sided dagger. I took his mouth and we said together "I have a secret errand unto thee O king" and we plunged it into the belly of the fat man. Split his heart in two. Why kill one king for another? Well bugaboo never knew why. He thought we had to end the conspiracy of doctors, once and for all, he used to say, once and for all! But the fat man just had some PHD in philosophy, psychology, something fluffy. In reality he was no doctor at all. He was an architect. And for our crimes they made us an inmate on death row, never to be hanged. Twenty eight years, we listened to the necks snapping next-door. I became immortal. Stuck in the middle of this world and the next."

Jack steps out from the background of his brain. The cavern gradually aligns into rectilinear edges, stone outcrops cutting back to flat verticals, edges becoming walls. Where was his kingdom from a moment ago? Which settler stole his castle? The figure of the deck falls over him and his skin feels cold. The earth under the station is muddy and foul; ground squelches in the shade, anonymous juices expelled from some pulpy substance.

How did he come to sit here in the muck of disused train terminal?

Seems his mind is just another place from where he's been evicted.

Chapter 21 - Ventilator

Somewhere, a ventilator rises silently. Gushes down again. A drip ticks away the day. The infusion of electrolytes and analgesic spreading through a vein, a sensation that feels strangely 'metallic'. A hand holding a pale hand. Some background comings and goings. A clipboard being checked and put down again. A beep. A beep. The flatline of a heart rate monitor has become a visual shorthand for expiration. A beep. A beep.

Meanwhile a beep also at the office; there is someone at the gate. It's end of the week, Marco, Elize and Nox are sharing a cigarette outside on the patio. Brody doesn't smoke but takes the cigarette between two fingers and inspects the end before passing it on. No one is expecting anyone at ten to five on a Friday so they ignore the beep of the gate intercom a second time. The third time the visitor leans on the button until Brody gets up, threads through the office, crossing over to the reception to lift the receiver.

"Yes, hello, this is Lazlo," comes the voice from the other side.

When Brody buzzes him in to the office Lazlo brings a large cardboard box, effortlessly hoisted onto his shoulder.

"What's this?" Brody asks.

"I need you please sign," Lazlo hands him a delivery slip, which Brody signs absentmindedly.

Inside, amongst foam and cardboard offcuts used to brace it from impact during transportation, is a model of a building which is instantly familiar. He reaches in to lift it out and realises the model comes in two pieces to open up like a book revealing the central atrium inside, flanked with four floors of offices. At the top of the model hangs an office containing two figures, one obviously male, the other female, posed to look out from the slit window from which it is possible to see every other figure in the building. On the ground floor is a kind of pit, with little desks and more figures and there is a small room off to the side, containing a perfect replica of a Wabisabi plotter. Brody picks up the white plastic figure sitting at the third desk from the left. "This is me," he says holding it up for Lazlo to see.

"Yes we built Load offices. Leendert ordered earlier this year but he never receive it. You take it now."

Brody's homunculus is forever frozen in the seated position and it's difficult to slot him back in between the desk and the chair. He struggles for a bit, shaking the model while steadying himself against the roof of it. He finally manages to wedge it in with some force but dislodges one of the two figures in the overhead office. "Shit," he says, after it falls into the pit and suffers a tiny death.

After Lazlo leaves, Brody is left puzzled. When and why would Leendert have ordered this? He checks the delivery slip, but there is only the date of receipt, the signature of the receiver (his), and a project name: the two words DREAM CASTLE.

They know what's coming. Word spreads through the office like a passover ghost. Most everyone has gone home already. They are now just waiting for the final confirmation. The conversation stalls intermittently as one after another they fixate on the middle world that exists between a floor tile and their daydreams. Elize checks her phone again.

"So I need to tell you about my interview with Len." Marco says.

Marco smokes a brand he's never heard of: Ferryman's Silver Label. The paper has a slight sheen and the filter is black like charcoal.

"Were you here when Eric worked here?" he asks Nox.

"Nope, before my time." she scoots her chair in closer to the table.

"He was this guy we studied with. When we graduated we had job offers in Rome, in New York, in London, in Paris. But none of that appealed to me, you know. He told me, come to Africa! My brother can get us jobs at this architecture firm that is blowing up.'

"But your interview, you were saying."

"It wasn't even an interview. Len talked and the whole time we just smiled and nodded like idiots. He was doing interesting things even then. Designing everything from penthouses to spectacles. He designed a pasta."

"Oh I remember," Elize says. "He was obsessed with pasta! For a good six months! Not especially the eating of it. Just the shapes."

"He called Fattis & Monis and told them their farfalle wasn't working. It didn't hold the sauce. So he proposed a new kind of pasta. He called it La Signora. It was very.. yonic. But never went into production. At the end of like two hours of talking about everything, architecture, food, music, he said something like, okay, you know, you guys seem nice but I don't know if we're ready to hire. Call me next week and we'll see. But then when he gets up…" Marco mimes patting his pockets, his chest. "My keys, he says, I can't find my keys, have you seen my keys? We look at each other. No of course not, we haven't seen your keys. He says, okay… can you drop me off at home?"

"So we pack this guy into our VW, a rented Citi Golf. And you know how tall Len was; he pushed the seat all the way back until Eric was kissing his knees. Clowns in a clown car."

Marco takes the cigarette and sucks the ember closer to his mouth. Then he chuckles. "He looked around, touched the dashboard, almost like he had never been inside a car before. Then he said, you know, these are good lines, good form. Of course, this is a Giugiaro design. Giugiaro designed the Delorean, the Lotus Espirit, the Alfa GTV, even the Fiat Uno. But what interests me is his pasta."

Brody laughs but no one else does so he feels sheepish.

"Giugiaro designed the marille." In a second Marco has whipped out his thin pocket sized notebook and a felt tip and is now sketching a little triple curl extrusion. "Like this, like Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall."

"But so what was the obsession?"

Marco shakes his head. "That was my question also."

"He told me," Elize says, "he wanted to take a corner of the world and make everything in it the way he liked. He wanted to sit on a chair he made at a table he designed in a house he built and eat his own vagina pasta." She smiles. "Of course, he didn't say 'vagina' at the time."

As they talk they pass the cigarette around the circle but each round it stalls at Marco. Marco only draws from it between story beats and the way he absentmindedly holds it aloft in his index and forefingers frustrates everyone. Nox clicks her fingers for it and he pulls a short snappy drag before passing it to her.

"Well so that makes sense," he goes on, still exhaling. "Because, when we drop him off at his house, he tells us, you know I like you guys, you can all start on Monday, but don't you want to come in for a whiskey - this is four o clock. Next thing as he pours these massive tumblers he switches on the…"

"He played Wagner?" Elize asks.

"He played so much Wagner."

Elize closes her eyes and nods.

"He played more Wagner than you can imagine," she explains to Brody.

"Not for the music, but for the autocracy. Do you know the Ring Cycle Opera? The Valkyries, you know?" Marco stands up and with great sweeping gestures of his arms, as if conducting an invisible philharmonic, he sings: "Da da da daaaaaaa da! Da da da daaaaaaaaa da!"

Lazy smoke swirls out of his nostrils as Marco sits down again.

"He loved that it took twenty-five years to write the thing. And five days to perform it. So Len showed me some sketches of these weird instruments he'd designed because he heard that

Wagner had designed new instruments to go lower and louder than any others. Really weird instruments that you played with your toes, you know, your nose. He designed his own Bayreuth, a whole theatre that would only ever play his music. Everything to get the experience just right."

The cigarette passes. A column of ash cantilevers off it and Brody can't stand it any longer. Knocks it into the ashtray. Everyone groans.

"So we were sitting in his kitchen, at a perfect black marble counter with these impossibly sharp edges, that of course he had personally overseen the crafting of and the next moment, we can sort of see him hesitate before he says: 'Did you know that Giugiaro also designed a gun? A Bereta hand gun?"

"He made a gun, didn't he? Len made a gun."

"That's what we thought certainly. That's what I asked. But he surprised me. He said, no. He was interested in it, because ever since he could remember he had wanted to make life prettier and it was only when he saw Giugiaro's gun that he realised he could take the weapon that administered death and consider, critically consider, the texture, and the form. Make every aspect express that purpose. He could make death beautiful."

"But not a gun?"

Shakes his head. "He said he wanted to design something much deadlier."

The cigarette arrives to his right again but this time he stops talking, completely dedicated his attention to it. He puts his lips to it and draws slowly and deeply. His lips smack as he stops and his arm begins the slow-motion arc from right, passing across him from one hand into the other, to the left.

"He designed this cigarette."

They sit quietly while Marco takes a fresh cigarette and grips it between his lips, holding the nearly finished one against it, end to end, transferring the light.

Elize's phone, lying on the table, vibrates with the message. Without having to read it she knows. "Leendert is gone."

Chapter 22 - Home

He finds them in the garden playing with the dandelions. Merina holds a stalk up to her mouth and blows a trail of feathery bristles for Superkid. That head, still too big for his body but too small for the world, quietly contemplates the pappus while the rest of him sways slightly. Brody tries to imagine what might be going through his head. What was that like, seeing something for the first time and having absolutely nothing similar to compare it to?

Everything new Brody experiences can only ever be half new, will always be related or compared to something similar before. As he grows older he becomes increasingly unlikely to be surprised by anything. Each birthday, the unit of a year becomes a smaller percentage of his life.

To the kid on the other hand everything is a revelation: hot chocolate, amazing; the beach, the sea, incomprehensible. All these things fundamentally change his conception of the world. He will forever remember the first time he realised the universe has Ferraris in it, and pancakes, the first time he realised that Christmas is a thing, or that small dalmatians came from the bottom of larger dalmations. Superkid tries to blow like Merina, but can't coordinate his lips with the burst of air from his lungs. He dislodges a few wisps. Then he stares and stares, really wonders for a good minute or two, at the bald stalk left behind. Brody can't wait to take him to the planetarium.

"Can I borrow one of your pills?" he says to Merina.

"It's impossible to borrow a pill."

"Fine. I mean can I have one?"

This finally stops her gardening long enough for her to smile wryly at him. "There was a Scotsman who landed in Johannesburg and thought he had died and gone to hell. He figured because of the heat, you know?"

"This is a riddle?"

"A syndrome. A side effect from the pills. They call it 'Walking Corpse'."

She takes the kid by the hand and leads him into the apartment, pulling his dirty shirt over his head on the way to the bathroom. She checks the water temp and helps the kid into a bath she's run for him, foam up to the rim. He drops his shorts, steps in and sinks in below the bubbles.

"Dad I found a mole person."

"You did?"

"Just the head. We buried him in the garden."

"That's a good place."

"I ran us a bath too," Merina says from the bathroom. "Also with bubbles."

"I need wine."

"No," she says. "No alcohol. Just get in here."

They don't speak as she undoes his shirt buttons, or as she yanks his belt loose. She just guides him to sit down in the bath with the subtlest of nudges from her pelvis. He loves watching her pull on her hosiery in the mornings. Calls that particular dip and flex the pantyhose plié. How is it that he notices now, for the first time, the beauty of the process in reverse? She unrolls it with practised vigour - life leaving the foot-shaped nylon. The wilt and flop of a lump of cloth dying on the floor as she climbs in behind him.

She says: “I am concerned that you haven’t been crying.”

“I thought that was a good thing.”

“It a travesty. It’s so sad that I want to cry for you.”

“I have always considered it a strength to not cry.”

“You are lacking a critical facet of your experience as a human being if you aren’t crying.”

“I guess I haven’t had anything to have a proper cry about.”

“You haven’t cried in so long your tear ducts have crystalised. Like you have kidney stones in your eyes.”

“I’m generally quite happy.”

“I disagree.”

“Am I not? Am I depressed?”

“You are utterly depressed. This is the reasonable response under the circumstances. You have so much to be unhappy about.”

“Honestly, I think I’m alright.”

“You are lonely in this marriage. You regret sometimes your decision to get married generally and to me specifically. What’s more you fear the arrival of that regret so you busy yourself with something until it goes away so that you never get to unpack it. You carry loneliness and fear because you still have hopes for this marriage. The most toxic thing in a marriage is optimism that is unearned. Many of the hopes you have for us have to die. The good news is that they will die by themselves, you just have to let them. You have to know that, as insightful and perspicacious as I am, I won’t understand you. Not even most of the time. You need to realise that even an infrequent glimpse of understanding is a miracle. What you require of a partner and a wife and the mother of your child and a housemate and friend… its impossible and the only chance you have at any happiness whatsoever is to assume a posture of defeat at the outset.”

“Okay it’s working. I’m depressed now.”

“You despair. You despair over the habits which you think stop you from being an adult. That make you unfit to be a parent.”

“The kid and I, we’re going to go get ice-cream. You can’t have any.”

“You can’t appreciate the good things because you are too busy hoping for them to be better.”

“Every day, my body falls apart on a molecular level, the telomeres in my cells get shortened. I get wrinklier all the time. Grey in places you wouldn’t expect.” She scoops handfuls of water onto his head. “You need to know that I was planning on cheating on you with a hotel room in Japan.”

“In a hotel room?”

“With a hotel room. A dedicated weeping resort. I bought a plane ticket, multiple tickets, just to cry. I didn’t go through with it but I feel this is a betrayal of you even so.”

“No other person involved?”

“I would like you to come to Japan with me to cry.”

“Just let me borrow a pill.”

“You can’t borrow or have a pill because I got rid of them. I’m off the juice. Flushed them all away. CMMG is the same compound used in herpes simplex medications. Off-label use milks the limbic system, explaining my hyperactive amygdala from the other night. People have laughed themselves to death by watching a Fish Called Wanda. Sherman’s date sends me journals.”

“I knew they were dangerous.”

“And anyway they’re contraindicated for pregnancy.”

“You’re?”

“Not yet.”

Rising, she takes his hand, leads him out of the bath and dries him off before her, then wraps him in his own bathrobe. In the bedroom she kisses him. What surprises him is that the moment her mouth swallows his tongue, his shoulders fall and his neck softens as if wilting. She keeps their mouths connected by scooping his head up in her hands; cradled against her. “I love you,” he says. “I know,” she says. In one motion he collapses onto the bed and pulls her on top of him. “I’m so tired,” he said. “I know,” she says. The rolling of her hips against him rocks the bed in the rhythm of a tumble dryer as she lulls him into a daydream. The thoughts that have been causing pressure in his skull, clogging him up, come loose, like tectonic plates clutching at each other for millions of years, then finally shifting. “I… I…” he says. “I know,” she says. His brain feels warm and soft, like a freshly laundered towel, unfolding.

Epilogue

His favourite construction vehicle is probably the Tele-lift. The telescoping forklift and the four-way steering wheels. Bobcats are good too - agile forklifts that whizz around the site like Superkid's wind-up hot wheels do over their living room floor. What he likes is the utility. No compactor has ever had an existential crisis. Compactors compact things all day because that is all they know to do. Graders grade. Dump trucks dump. Only the TLB (Tractor-Loader-Backhoe) might have some ambiguity as to whether to backhoe or load at any given moment.

Construction drawings are legal documents. It's easy to remember that when issuing them via mail. Once the company Logo and regulatory notes make it onto the title block the brain automatically assumes the officious position. Fingertips rattle with herewiths and herebys and kindly… regards. The site instruction book on the other hand is more deceptive in its legal capacity. Leaning over a Tupperware container of pap and chops, Brody had sketched a diagram of walls and foundations on the grid-lined paper, signing it with the minimalist version of his autograph he used for coffee shops and Woolworths. As he drew he pressed the nib deep into the flesh of the pulp, More because he liked the feel than for any consideration of the carbon copy paper behind. "This is a nice pen," he said and wondered longer about the brand of the borrowed pen and where he might find another than he did about why there might be so many multiple pink and blue duplicates for each page.

It seemed like such a child-like practice. Brickwork was always indicated with double diagonal hatching, concrete with the stipple-squiggle signifying aggregate and sand, yellow for timber. It felt like he might colour in his doodle with crayon or glue fun shapes he'd cut out of crepe with safety scissors. It felt silly, right up until the day when the crude ballpoint sketch was made manifest as a three meter tall column. Once he realised the gravity of those doodles, he made a point of sitting down to draw.

When the structure and walls come together, when the steel beams express the envelope, fill out the extents of what the thing is going to become, when it feels for the first time that one is 'inside' - it's the closest architecture gets to childbirth. The realisation that one has brought forth this being. A child which is both as familiar as the inside of your skull and also completely surprising. It's the single feeling that makes the whole enterprIse worthwhile. Nothing comes close.

Going up the structure is dictated by physics. Coming down it is governed by economics. The rebar goes first - stacked like sticks in a bonfire. There is an etiquette that is being flouted here. Pickers usually wait for the thing to be built, hanging out by the sidelines, they wait for the body to go cold before they deconstruct it. But when news got out that the project was to be mothballed, that the remaining equipment was leaving permanently and the hoarding around the site was coming down, the pickers descended like ants slowly pulling a grasshopper apart.

A necessary service, of hands rent by wayward edges, blood and rust, that which they take away from here will be brought down, disintegrated, forged into colossal pylons again, even greater structures. Wrecked barrows will be put to work or melted down. Copper from first fix electrical wires will be stripped, sold and reused in other Buildings, underground land lines, and stripped again, doubtlessly three or four more times, before being melted down again; transmuted into busbars, breakers and magnetrons.

The galvanised beams will be disintegrated, separated, reconstituted and merged with other steels until every hollow section and steel angle installed south of Empire Road afterwards will contain inside it at least one trace particle that was once part of The Damsel. They pick the bones clean and the meat becomes the city.

He watches a picker stretch his arms out. Far too much steel to carry in even ten trips. The picker turns away again.

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