

PROFESSOR JULIUS BRENZAIDA

By Ethelwyn Rebelo

1.

I am an old woman with the heart and soul of a young woman, a woman grown old in the blink of an eyelid. Slowly, inexorably, without realizing it at first, my skin and flesh have sabotaged me.

As older people do, I often think of my childhood and of my dead family, in particular, my father. While he was alive, I was his young daughter. He has died now and left me an old woman with a touch of madness. The name of this madness is Julius Brenzaida. He has cast a spell, woven a web of enchantment around me so that when I think of him, I forget about my lined skin and sagging flesh. Then, when I look in the mirror, I don't see an aging woman, I see a twenty-year old nymph with long, brown hair, a lithe body that can run fast, dance through the night and make love to a man athletically and gracefully. I see a girl who can entice a man with her body and her mind.

At times I forget him and when I look in the mirror again, I see myself as I truly am: old, overweight and tired. If I were a man, I wouldn't give me a second glance. Then my hopeless regime of dieting, facials, visits to the hairdresser and new clothes begin over, all in the hope that when I look at my reflection again, the nymph will return.

This is a tale of attempted wizardry, a tale which began the day I, a mediocre clinical psychologist working in a large state hospital, received a telephone call from our departmental secretary asking me to see Professor Brenzaida. What would he want with me? I wondered. I, a foot soldier in a vast army of clinicians working their way through sick people waiting outside various hospital doors. In my case, they come with sad accounts of suicidal feelings, unemployment, loss, alienation and desperation. It is the

hubris of my job that I have to try and change these narratives to make them more hopeful. It is the sort of work that leads easily to burnout. But I tell myself that I'm listening to stories of battle and journey. It's easier to engage with heroes and travelers than with victims devoid of hope. It is more useful also for them to think of themselves in this way.

Occasionally I write a small article or engage in some fairly irrelevant bit of research. These activities provide me with a transient illusion of achievement. While I am under the influence of a work in progress or sent for publication, I find it a little easier to get up in the morning and to make my way with some energy to my office.

It wasn't always such a struggle to find meaning and a sense of accomplishment. There was a time when I was confident and enthusiastic in my belief that my studies would provide me with the necessary spells to stand alongside people facing the tsunami waves of life, time and disillusion and to convert them into ripples.

Now I'm more aware of the limitations of my interventions and I am facing a tsunami of my own: that of swiftly passing time and approaching old age. I think about my life and realize that this is about as good as it's going to get.

But I'm fortunate, I have a job, I have a roof over my head and I eat. In fact, I eat too much, but that is another issue altogether.

2.

Twice a month I run a gay and lesbian support group. Some time ago I decided to construct a scale measuring attitudes towards same-sex relationships and to administer it to the families of my patients. I'm interested in the sort of beliefs and assumptions that they have to contend with. Professor Brenzaida wanted to speak to me about this research.

With the exception of seeing him at a couple of case presentations, I had, up to this time, very little to do with him. In the past, before I knew what he looked like, I heard people say that he was a difficult person, that he made people's lives a misery, that a number of psychologists had left their jobs on account of him. But then, literature and film are filled with tall, dark, handsome, turbulent, difficult men desired by women. Think of Heathcliff, Rochester and of Mr Darcy; think of the hordes of women in the 1920's swooning over Rudolph Valentino's Sheik; think of the multitudes of Barbara Cartland protagonists in soft covers eagerly sought by thousands.

As I sat in the secretary's office waiting to see him, a voice should have reminded me of the power that his sort of personality has over the female imagination. It should have cautioned me. Instead I was delighted that he was interested in speaking to me. I remembered that two of my group members wanted to have sex-change operations and thought of mentioning them to him. Perhaps he would know where I could refer them to?

I rehearsed a possible conversation in my head reflecting on the issue of sexual identity: "I don't go around thinking of myself as a woman", I would tell him. "Do other people go through their lives constantly aware of their gender?" "It occurs to me", I would go on, "that one only becomes aware of one's masculinity or femininity if one is confronted by some sort of social fact requiring its assertion, as in rules for dress, behavior or employment?"

In the end, I never discussed my thoughts on gender with him. All I could think of as I looked into his questioning, analyzing, laughing, gentle, sensitive face was: "I'm a woman, I'm a woman, I'm a woman...."

"Ah, Frances, you're here." He smiled warmly from the doorway. "Let's go and talk in my office."

After clarifying the goals of the work and suggesting readings, he smiled suddenly and said: "Yes, I think I'll take you on."

I was euphoric; I had a project to work on that would excite me and I was to be “taken on”.

3.

Two weeks later, I sat with my father in Hospice as he died of Cancer of the Pancreas. A year back, when the tumor had first been detected, I had wept as I asked the surgeon about his prognosis. He didn't reply and for the next few months we battled the illness with chemotherapy, then, as a last resort, radiation treatment. As time passed, it felt as if my dad and I were standing at the side of a cliff and he was slowly falling backwards as I tried helplessly and unsuccessfully to hold him back.

At around midnight on the thirtieth of May, he finally passed away and I rushed to my car, to drive screaming like a deranged woman down Louis Botha Avenue to my house. How was I going to manage to continue living in a world that did not contain that eccentric, iconoclastic, humorous, affectionate man?

I managed and I keep managing. However, in quiet moments such as those of lonely, shadowy, Sunday afternoons, I reflect that there's no one left now who can look at the middle-aged woman that I've become and see also the pretty child and delicate young girl that I once was. No longer is there anyone to listen with interest to details of my days and to accounts of battles lost and won.

4.

Some fifty years ago, my parents, then a young couple, moved in to a house in Johannesburg together with my father's old mother. At that time, my dad, handsome as Brenzaida, thought his fair-haired wife very beautiful and loved her very much. He liked to tell people about how they had met in a lift, how he'd later gone to fetch her from her home and of how it had been love at first sight.

All went well for a period. Then, some time after my birth, my mother left. My dad never quite recovered from losing his wife and slept with a picture of her at his bedside table for the rest of his life. Although I had his dark coloring and was nowhere near as good-looking as my mother, when he looked at me, he was able to see her. He told me he could see her also in some of my mannerisms and facial expressions.

When I became a teenager, he would take me to parties and to visit friends, where he would playfully refer to me as his “wife”, his “mistress” or his “girlfriend”. Although I knew that he was joking and that he’d never molest me sexually, it was a regular, repeated joke that made me feel awkward and uncomfortable.

But as I grew older, I began to feel more and more that he belonged to me, just as much as I belonged to him. He told me often that he had rejected women after the breakup of his marriage because he did not want me to be at the mercy of a stepmother. When he died, he wanted to leave all his money to me. He didn’t want me to have to share him with someone else. Given these messages, how was I ever to find a partner and to start a family?

My solution was to select weak men who would not be able to stand on their feet or to challenge my father’s position in my life. These men would make me feel normal. They would create the illusion that all was well and that I had successfully managed to negotiate the rite of passage represented by marriage.

They would also provide something of a buffer between my self and my father. This was necessary because, while a part of me believed that my dad would never do anything improper on a physical level, another part of me knew that he was in love with me or with my mother in me, just as much as I was in love with him.

Then he died and I became his widow.

5.

I remember, as a child, going to browse in book stores with him. The two of us would wander around the aisles looking through the books and reading bits of them. Eventually he'd ask me whether I'd found anything and I would show him a book that I hoped would impress him with my serious tastes in reading matter. Then he'd pay for it and we'd go for tea.

Once, given two Rand as a present by someone, I was able to buy a book for myself. I did not choose a school or adventure story. I did not choose an Enid Blyton, even though I loved her *Malory Towers* and *St Claire's* series and no books were more magical to me than her stories about the 'faraway tree'. These, however, I bought secretly from the local stationery shop with money my grandmother gave me. I knew that my dad would not have been impressed had he known that I was reading "such rubbish". So the book I chose, because I believed that it would prove my undoubted intellectual credentials to my father, was *The Life and Times of Peter the Great*.

When I was about thirteen, he gave me a set of novels by the Brontës. I loved their magnetically attractive Byronic heroes with personalities that suggested dark, mysterious, inner torments. Rereading these works today in the depths of my own hunger for love, I'm aware, as I wasn't then, of the authors' sexual frustrations. Charlotte, in particular, channeled her lustful longings into her fiction. Her heroines were women like me, women whose plain, insignificant faces concealed their passionate souls. When the brother of Charlotte's friend, Ellen Nussey, asked her to marry him, she wrote a letter to his sister explaining that she could only marry a man she adored and for whom she would be willing to die.

6.

I would be willing to die for Brenzaida, but I'm nothing more than a junior colleague to him, a colleague with whom he would like to collaborate on a research project. There's a

sane and sensible part of me that is aware of this reality, so I decide to try online dating. I tell myself over and over again that my attraction to the man and growing fantasies in relation to him are purely symptomatic of a greater lack in my life which I need to address. I find a web site where I fill in forms describing my height, hair color and so on. I say I am attractive even though I know it's a lie. Then I write a paragraph describing myself as a friendly, warm and kind person who enjoys reading, writing, good movies and the theatre. My taste in music is eclectic and I'm not looking for marriage. Rather I want a man who can be a good companion.

Then I write another paragraph describing my ideal mate. I would like someone who, like me, enjoys books, good movies and the theatre. No racists need apply.

After subscribing by paying with my credit card, it is then a simple matter of finding out who matches with me and to what extent.

There's "Gorgeous Hunk". He's looking for a special woman who would like to feel comfortable with a man with no hidden agendas. He would like to be "friends first and foremost" and looks forward to sharing his thoughts and feelings with her. He emphasizes that she must have a good sense of humor and be willing to make time for him. He anticipates going for drinks and meals with her and squeezing her tightly.

That would be nice.

She should be poised, confident, assured and sensual, an intelligent woman with the ability to laugh at anything. He's looking for someone who prides herself on what she looks like and who is "aware of being a woman". She should be the sort of person who always makes an effort to look her best and who loves long, lingering kisses. Most importantly, he says, she should have great legs.

Well, that clearly rules me out.

Then there's "Scotty" who believes women should get to know him because he enjoys life. He also loves a good laugh, but this doesn't diminish his strong sense of responsibility.

Why should it?

He enjoys being mentally stimulated; his sense of humor is 'wicked' and he's always very casual in his dress.

I wonder what "casual" means for him?

His ideal mate should also have a good sense of humor. She should be "honest and loyal, enjoy sport and be a good conversationalist". Most importantly, she should like animals and be able to play bridge.

"Juan" from Pretoria describes himself as a sensitive guy who likes to write poetry. His ideal mate must have mastered the "art of being". She should be content with herself and know that her "beauty will show despite the ebb and flow of everyday life". She should enjoy her own space and at the same time, marvel in togetherness. Finally (most importantly), this poet also wants a woman with good legs.

He's the only one of my matches who has posted a photograph of himself online and in it he is exceptionally good-looking with finely-chiseled features, golden hair and sunglasses. According to his written profile however, his hair is graying so I deduce that this must be an old picture.

"Ordinary Guy" wants chemistry with a woman whom he will then pamper. She should also be romantic, passionate, affectionate, caring and a good kisser. She should be able to make him laugh and be interested in seeking a strong mutual mental and physical bond with her lover. He wants to be able to communicate his thoughts and feelings to her without difficulty and to know that she's comfortable with herself in the belief that "life's

beauty emerges when it is shared by another”.

I browse down the gallery of single men to the poorer matches with my profile. A number of them have their photographs attached and I am aghast at how old they all are. I have to remind myself that I have indicated an interest in men between the ages of forty-six and fifty-six. Of course they all look like they're in late-middle and early-old age. This is where they are. This is where I am. What was I expecting?

Perhaps it is the sight of the feast that is Brenzaida that has brought my feelings of deprivation to the fore? Perhaps if I had never seen his face, nose, eyes, lips, hair, skin, shoulders, legs, hands and fingers, I might have been able to continue starving through the desert? Then again, the city is full of handsome men of his kind. Is it because he looks like he could be my father's son?

7.

I relax by reading Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*, then fall asleep. In my dream I'm in an ancient building with dark wood and large slats of stone paving the floors and the walls. At the front a short platform and podium face rows of desks. A dark haired man reads a book with me. I embrace him but cannot see his face. He holds my head in his hands and kisses me on the forehead. At first I believe him to be my dad, but then I notice that it is Brenzaida.

“Save me.” I whisper and the dream ends.

The following day, I bump into an English surgeon I once met briefly. He tells me that he has left his post at the hospital and that he's searching for another. He asks me to go to coffee with him and I arrange to meet him in a few days time at a Brazilian restaurant near by.

He tells me over and over again of bad treatment by his superiors at the hospital, of the terrible conditions in the surgery wards and of the nurses who can't be relied upon to do

their job properly. I try hard to listen and to respond empathically but we seem to talk past each other and in the end we both retreat into our private thoughts of defeat and sit in silence.

Perhaps still hoping to be energized or comforted by me, he asks me to follow him home. I ask why he does not rather come to my house for a meal. He replies that this would not be a good idea as my children would get in the way. I tell him that it's too soon for us to get physical. I need to be seduced by a man's mind and personality. This takes time. I don't do one-night stands. I need to take it slow. I would like to be friends with him and to talk to him, but no more for now.

I believe he understands and when he asks me again to follow him home as he has books to show me and music to play, I agree to follow him there.

He lives in a cottage at the back of a house. It has a beautiful view of a hill close by; the sun is shining, dappling the driveway with light and shadow. The trees around us are in a variety of greens and everywhere there is the scent of jasmine, lavender and forget-me-not. Inside, his rooms are bare of anything other than the most functional furniture. I have a few seconds to consider what hidden books or music he has to reveal before he pounces upon me like an overgrown, middle-aged, baby. I have an alluring energy, he tells me and my body is warm. He would guess that my hormones are all in good working order. I don't reply that he's wrong and that, in fact, I have an under active thyroid, but I caress him and try to be gentle and firm as I dislodge myself from his grasp.

Cold with anger, he walks me to my car. I, on the other hand, am aware only of an overwhelming sense of pity. I can see that the activities of the last few weeks which have lead to his losing his job have crushed him and I don't wish to add to his sense of failure, so I invite him to Sunday lunch, knowing that he won't show up.

I'm also grateful to him. I'd be lying if I pretended that I, a woman who has grown old in the blink of an eyelid, did not enjoy being pounced upon.

8.

The incident reminds me of my first kiss and the boy in Standard Seven I used to be in love with. His name was Mark and I viewed him as very knowledgeable and mature. My friend, Michelle, who lived next door to me, also had a crush on him. We organized a party with the sole aim of creating opportunities to get close to him. Which of us would get more dances? We wondered and challenged each other.

In the end he asked Michelle to dance more times than me, but hers were all fast and mine were slow. I was sure that I had won, because he also gave me a long, soggily intense, French kiss which I pretended to enjoy.

9.

Observing myself in the mirror, I consider possible changes to my appearance. I need to thin my thighs, my stomach and my waist. My skin needs to be freshened and, if possible, smoothed out, my hair requires more volume and color and my clothes should be discarded in favor of more youthful and flattering pieces. Preparing for the day that I know the professor will attend our case presentation: I exercise, diet, buy myself a new outfit, have my hair done and go for a facial. I then make sure that I sit at the back of the room so that I can examine him unhindered.

And what a pinup the man is, with his broad back and narrow waist. It is difficult to get a view of the arms beneath his shirt, but his wrist and hands are exquisite, like my father's. When he speaks to people, his eyes, also like my father's eyes, are gentle and kind. It is hard to believe the stories of his harshness.

As I observe him secretly from behind, I wonder who watches him dress in the mornings? Is there someone laughing affectionately at him as he stands before a mirror in underpants and a shirt? Is there a woman, or even possibly a man, watching as he puts on

his shined shoes? Does this person smooth his shampooed hair and kiss his face, feeling the shaved softness of his skin? Who holds him at night beneath the sheets and greets him the following day on his return from work?

My questions in this respect are very much related to the fact that he is extremely guarded about his private life. In a work system in which most people know who is sleeping with whom, nobody knows anything about Brenzaida. Debates break out with regard to whether he's gay or straight and remain unresolved. He's like a screen on which I may project whichever film I wish.

I sit under a large and ornate Bedouin tent wondering when I will hear the sound of horse's hoofs thundering through the desert sand signaling the return of Sheik Brenzaida. With a shudder of delight I think of his dark, smoldering eyes and the unspeakable activities he initiates at night, activities which I reluctantly have to admit that I enjoy.

Again on horseback, I race with him through the moors. "You cannot leave me," Heathcliff Brenzaida says. "I will die if you leave me and then come back and haunt you and enjoy your suffering, by God." He stops the horse, takes me in his arms and kisses me desperately.

Then there are home based fantasies in which I visit him in some leafy suburb of Johannesburg, have dinner with him by candle-light and massage him on a soft rug before a fire. "Come here." He pulls me down beside him and the heavens invade my body.

I feel so fortunate that I have an excuse to communicate with him, I can email him whenever I like about the research we're collaborating on together. There are times when I find an excuse to write to him almost every day. This is as much a function of my infatuation as it is related to his capacity to ward off shadows of grief and emptiness in my life.

10.

I wake from a dream in which I am wandering through numerous dark corridors edged with closed doors. One leads to the next, which leads to the next and the next and so on. I try to find the exit, without success. Eventually I come across a man dressed in a porter's uniform. I tell him I need to go home. He tells me to follow him and he leads me through a set of large wooden doors, out into a town square. I realize that the building I have just left is a museum and that the porter is Brenzaida.

He has become my adventure and my addiction, in the service of which, I begin to exercise and diet. I buy a slimming drink advertised as being able to "burn, drain, purify and mineralize". It has a dark, brown color and tastes strongly of peach so that as I drink it, I'm unexpectedly transported back to my childhood, to my grandmother's orchard of fruit in our back garden and to the many different kinds of peaches as well as the apricots, the plums, the mulberries, avocado and apples.

I think back to sitting barefooted on the grass with Michelle, both of us biting into the wet, aromatic sweetness of the peaches with the juice running down our chins and sticky hands.

This was my Garden of Eden, a place in which I could lie on the soft grass, stare at the clouds and dream. The paths leading away from it were not too far off. The entrance to purgatory could be found in the house where my grandparents with their many ailments sat and where my dad's pains and frustrations with life were expressed in regular outbursts of temper. It could be found in the outbuildings housing our black domestic worker, whose children were not permitted by law to stay with her, and at the garden gate through which police entered to check whether she had her pass and to periodically bully and intimidate her.

A path too is to be found in the short passage of time drawing the child to the lost woman, turning away unsuccessfully from her sadness as she dreams without hope of

being young and attractive to a man about whom she knows very little.

Putting on tracksuit pants, sneakers and an old shirt, I thump my body tortuously around the block. I need Brenzaida. I need my idea of him more than anyone else on this earth and the task of getting him will require nothing less than magic: a frumpish, boring, awkward, middle-aged old bat will have to be transformed into a thin, attractive, intellectual young woman.

Lighting up my cauldron, I throw in the ingredients: exercise, diet, new clothes, beauty therapy, a few botox injections will do nicely if I can get hold of them, hairdressing, hearty doses of writing and last, but not least, spoonfuls of ideas for articles and more articles. This man is an ambitious academic. The path to his heart lies in co-authorships.

11.

But despite my determination to work a spell which might bring me my love, I'm not feeling well. I diagnose a combination of exhaustion, a succession of demands on me and a lack of darlingprofessoritis. It's all very well to fantasize about him and to plan my seduction of him, but I haven't heard from him for a while. I desperately require a dosage of darlingprofessorexposure. Once I have this medicine, I'll feel better again and in the mood for hard work.

I conjure up an idea for an article, related to an aspect of the research which I am engaged in. What a good excuse to get the correspondence with him going again. I'll ask him to coauthor this paper with me.

I write to him and realize that I have developed a code of love. "Dear Professor Brenzaida" means "darling, most precious angel". "Please coauthor with me" or "supervise me" means "I want to join with you symbolically" (if I can't do it physically). "Help me" means "care for me". "Forgive me" means "I can't live with the thought that you may be angry with me" and "regards" means "with undying love".

In the following weeks, I hardly leave him alone: Dear Professor Brenzaida, I spoke to Prof Lipton yesterday and she provided me with the Attitudes Towards Same-Sex Unions Scale which I suspect will be very useful for our purposes. Dear Professor Brenzaida, reflecting on the statistician's findings, it is hard for me to make sense of his particular selection of components to increase internal consistency. Dear Professor Brenzaida, I have tried to organize my pilot study as thoroughly as possible. Dear Professor Brenzaida, just a quick communication regarding work in progress. Dear Professor Brenzaida, recently I came upon a book written by two gay anthropologists. Dear Professor Brenzaida, I hope the corrections are as you envisaged them. Dear Professor Brenzaida, I have been going through your comments.

With what desire I check my computer message centre each evening for mail from him. I'm like Lucy Snowe waiting for a letter from Dr John Bretton in *Villette*, her anticipation likened to that of an animal in a cage that is scantily fed so as to be always upon the verge of famine, waiting for its food.

I email him at every opportunity and his replies are polite, at times even warm. Yet he never invites me to call him "Julius". His letters are all: "Dear Frances" and "Regards, Prof Brenzaida" or "Hi Frances" and "Kind Regards, Prof". It is always a senior corresponding to a junior, a teacher talking to a pupil. My desire, uncertainty and lack of power in relation to him feels like bondage sex.

Mark grew up to become a tall and athletic man with the sort of fleshy pink face one would imagine on a Mafia club bouncer. After school, he set about making life enjoyable for himself. In addition to going to university to study law, he learned how to fly, how to sail boats, to ride horses and to climb mountains. He learned how to play the clarinet, to speak French, to paint and write mediocre stories and poetry. In fact, however good or not he was at all these activities, in pursuing them he succeeded in making himself interesting to women, so that Michelle and I found ourselves with competition in our desire for him. However he had also become a heavy drinker and so his relationships

were never long-lasting.

“I want to tie you up” he would say, revealing a selection of silk scarves and ties. Then he’d blindfold me so that I lay there, a body, naked, vulnerable, passive, expectant, unable to see or move and ignorant of what sensations would follow. Would I smile a calm pleasure, giggle with delight or suppress a groan?

Then later he would say, “relax, breathe deeply and leave everything to me.” I might feel a feather or petal move from my stomach down to my thighs, then back up between my legs. A sequence of kisses might flow from his hands and his lips. At times, caresses and fondling might be interspersed with rougher but no less pleasurable sensations so that I would lose myself even more. I would become a mass of nerve endings attached to the will of another. So he would become parent and god as I lay there waiting for him to gratify or frustrate, to inflict pleasure or pain.

Brenzaida with his gentle guardedness, his polite obliqueness, his hesitant charm and kindness and his insistence on his status too has tied me up so that I’m entirely at his mercy.

12.

Then one day, after a case presentation, he gives me a gift, an unexpected caress of sorts. I walk with him out of the seminar room chatting about those topics that form conversation between us: our research and our article. Not that there’s much dialogue. Tense and with my autonomic nervous system going wild, I babble on compulsively and possibly incoherently as he listens. At length we reach the tea room which is divided into two parts: a sitting, tea-drinking section in which everyone is congregated and an archway leading to a small kitchenette. We enter together.

He then stands underneath the arch with his back to my colleagues, facing me in the kitchen and winks at me, a secret communication of affection and understanding which

only I am able to see.

After that, who needs tea? Who needs food? My body is warm and tingling as I rush to my office to close my eyes and conjure him up before me winking again and again and again.

I imagine myself at a party with him. We stand in a group with some colleagues. One of them, a chestnut-haired, young woman with long legs, is entirely focused on him. She hangs on to his every word; she makes suggestive comments, her eyes never leave him. Then she asks him to dance and I am left standing, watching her wriggle her hips, touch his waist and make love to him with her movements. The dance ends and she holds on to him, as if he were her lover. She wants to continue dancing.

Gently, he disengages himself and walks towards me. As he does so, the music begins, it is soft and slow. "Thank you Lesley, that was great, but this dance is with Frances." He says as he winks at me.

Later, we stand at the large balcony of a house with a thatched roof on a hill overlooking the city at night. Below us millions of lights twinkle with promise.

He fetches me a drink and we move to an armchair where we sit side by side. His left arm embraces me. "Careful" I laugh, having nearly spilt my drink. I place it carefully on a table before me and snuggle against him. I inhale his cologne mixed with the soapy smell of clean skin and hair, a scent that is his alone. We say little to each other and are both quite comfortable in the silence. We are as one and have no need of words.

I look at his beloved face with its tanned skin, its deeply-set eyes and his dark, closely-cropped hair. I kiss his cheek softly, inhaling its fragrance and relishing the ticklish feel of stubble on my lips like hundreds of miniature kisses. He seems to be deep in thought, but my touch arouses him.

“Perhaps we should go inside?” He suggests. I get up and follow him to a large bedroom beneath a thatched roof and carpeted with a thick, white carpet. A king-size double bed is on the left. To the right, a small table has been prepared for dinner by candlelight. He holds the chair for me and I sit down. We serve each other slices of roast and spoonfuls of vegetables.

“What were you and Roux speaking so intently to each other about this evening?” He suddenly asks.

“Nothing very interesting really, just gossip.” I reply. “Apparently Lindiwe has applied for the senior post.”

“You do know that he’s in love with you?”

“Oh, please....”

”You kept giggling and touching him, I would rather that you didn’t give him hope by speaking to him in such a seductive manner.”

“I refuse to be dictated to with regard to whom I should speak to and how, by you or by anyone else....” I am suddenly angry. I jump up and make determinedly for the door. Quick as a flash he grabs me and throws me on to the bed. His dark eyes are gleaming furiously.

“I love you Frances. I cannot risk losing you. It will kill me.” I sit up but he pushes me down. The fierce expression on his face scares and excites me.

He tears open my soft evening gown and kisses me so that waves of pleasure course through my belly and my groin.

13.

I think of little else other than him. I struggle to concentrate on the people who come to see me. At times, I sit listening, supposedly intently, only to suddenly become aware that I haven't picked up anything that has been said.

These people don't deserve such treatment, but I can't help myself. I can't afford to stop thinking of him. He has become my antidepressant. Whenever I think of my dad or whenever sadness and loss threaten to overwhelm me with fatigue, I think of him even more.

I decide to tell him.

14.

At work, on the day before I visit, I see an old woman of sixty-four whose husband is in prison. She's spry, thin, articulate and elegantly dressed in a pink suit with matching scarf and hat. She tells me that she listens to religious programs on the radio every day and that she has found one pastor in particular to be very helpful to her. She had therefore decided to go and look for him at his home in Bloemfontein some time ago. Since that visit, she hears his voice continuously, commenting on what is happening around her and telling her what to do.

"That must be quite disturbing?" I say.

"Not at all, it makes me very happy because it shows that we have something very special together. He also comes to me at night", she continues with a bashful expression on her face.

"He comes to you?"

“Oh yes, his spirit comes every night to have intercourse with me.”

“How do you know this is happening?”

“I can feel it. I’m a woman. I know how such things feel. I don’t expect you as a white person to understand this, but highly spiritual people are able to do such things.”

Ha! Only yesterday, Brenzaida and I lay on his bed beneath the thatched roof, surrounded by the fluffy, white carpet and made love. I massaged him very thoroughly with an aroma therapy oil. My hands moved all over his body as they caressed and rubbed and kneaded his muscles to loosen their tension. Then, like a hungry infant, I took him into my mouth, sucking him to orgasm repeatedly and swallowing his semen thirstily. I wanted to drink all of him.

It is around nine when I arrive at the Department of Psychiatry. I see Brenzaida in the corridor. In a rush as he’s on his way to a meeting, he hands me a copy of the article, dripping blood with corrections. He can’t talk to me now, we will speak in due course he tells me as he marches off with an attractive female colleague.

Later at home, I weep and think of emailing him but am not sure what I want to say. I fear that I may put things wrongly so that he gets a mistaken impression of me.

I want to tell him that I’ve never worked with anyone on an article before and I’m not sure how people do such things. I’m not sure, for instance, whether I need to work on the text more before I send it to him. I don’t want him to think I’m useless and not like the smart female walking with him with whom he interacts every day and perhaps even writes articles with, or to feel overwhelmed by how much needs to be done when he works with me. He needs to know that when I write I put my writing away for a while then after some time I take it out to re-look at it with a fresh eye and at that stage I usually find a great deal wrong with it. It’s a good method but the problem is that it takes a long time and I want to get our article done some time this year. I’ve no issue with

making whatever and however many corrections he may suggest, however if he should find my standard too low so that it is frustrating and tiring for him then he should please let me know and I will slow down as much as possible and re-look at it several times before I send it to him. I wish I could be as clever and attractive as that woman he marched down the passage with and with whom he spoke animatedly and it seemed to me intimately so that I wondered what sort of things he said to her and whether he ever made love to her and whether she called him “Julius”.

Then I go to his bedroom beneath the thatched roof to wait for him.

15.

In a dream I dance with him. We are on a crowded dance floor and I move energetically beside him, leaping and waving. Then my legs leave the ground so that I fly around him, caressing his face as I do so. He takes my hands and pulls me down. We swing around and around so that suddenly we are seated on a fast moving circular coaster at a fair. It slows down and an attendant with a large, booming voice shouts out “next”.

“I’m worried about you Frances.” Michelle, now a successful social worker in private practice tells me. “You’ve been working in stressful circumstances for a number of years now and I don’t think you take enough holidays.”

“I’m planning a few weeks in Umhlanga in December.”

“Good, but I think you might need a break now.”

“Impossible, I’m far too busy.”

“Well, at least go back to therapy, Frances. I’ve found someone who has space to see you.”

His name is Jacques and I go to see him, filled with anxiety. It has been a while since I was last in therapy. But this tall, fair man exudes gentleness and empathy. He collects me from my car, parked in his driveway before my session and walks me back to it afterwards. I like it that he is at least in his late forties and probably gay. I can be a child with him, uncomplicated by my adult sexual desires and fears around impending old age.

His house is decorated with late Nineteenth Century furniture, full of dark wood, avocado wall paper, ornate furnishings, sculptures and paintings. My appointment is at five and since it is winter, he has a few lights on which create a chiaroscuro effect so that there, in his small sitting room filled with antiques, I engage with shadows, both those without and those within.

When I leave, my thoughts are more ordered and coherent. I think I know where my fantasies begin and end and where the real Professor Brenzaida himself begins and ends.

Then he emails me. He is coming to the hospital for a meeting next Wednesday and he proposes that afterwards we should go through our article together. I'm on leave that week but decide to go in to work especially to see him. This will be my opportunity to explain myself to him. "Dear Professor Brenzaida", I will say, quite calmly. "I am a fifty year old woman with a teenager's crush on you".

However, in the end, sitting next to him and going through the paper, I am mesmerized by the inadvertent touch of his arm against mine. I believe I can hear the sound of his heart beating rhythmically and I imagine the sound, like waves upon a distant shore, of his lungs inhaling and exhaling. I change my mind about speaking to him and reveal nothing.

16.

When I was five years old I dreamed again and again that I was wandering alone in a desert, a vast Sahara-like landscape of emptiness, and after each step that I took, a crater

would appear. Walking was a difficult business of dodging holes while still trying to go forward. Eventually I would come to a small town square or a hall filled with people with painted faces and fancy dresses. I would feel safer amongst these people, comforted that I was not alone, but inevitably, before long, they would disappear and I would be back in the desert pierced with pitfalls.

Believing that it was God who sent me the dream, I prayed repeatedly throughout the day that it would not come to me in the night and eventually my prayers were answered.

In my more negative moments, however, I believe that this dream predicted my life.

“Why did no one tell me that Geraldine Almeda was employed here?” Brenzaida asks me one day.

“She’s been here for a few months already.”

“What an accomplished woman. I believe she has a PhD?”

“Yes, yes indeed.”

“Have you read her article on Salutogenesis?”

“Er... no, I haven’t.”

“You should.”

I feel as if I have been kicked off a cliff, fed poison, strangled and then, not quite dead, left to die slowly. Geraldine Almeda is beautiful and young, I am ugly and middle-aged. She has a PhD; I have only a Masters degree. She has written an article on Salutogenesis because she’s interested in survival, which she knows only too well how to manage effectively. I know only how to keep going.

Why does he ask me about Almeda? Is it because he cannot see the tortured love in my miserable face or is it because he can?

“You bastard. You have the temerity to go on about Roux but feel it is quite okay to flirt with Almeda.” I shout at him in the bedroom high on the hill beneath the thatched roof.

“I love you, Frances. You are the one.... “

“I always knew you didn’t really love me.”

“I do love you, please understand....”

“I understand enough.” I snap.

“Please, please Frances.” He pulls me into his arms. “Almeda means nothing to me. It is only you that I love darling. I was just trying to make you jealous. I wanted to prove to myself that you still cared.”

“I want to leave you.” I say. “I don’t want to think of you. I don’t want to see you ever again with your tall, athletic body, your dark hair and deep-set eyes. I want to eliminate you from my consciousness. I don’t want you to exist.”

And, indeed, despite the pleasure and escape afforded by my fantasies and thoughts of him, a part of me is beginning to wish that I do not have to see him or write to him. It is hard to repeatedly have to confront that which I intensely desire but which is denied to me.

But I can’t withdraw. I can’t simply stop communicating with him because it has become too painful to do so.

I email him, but I can't get Almeda out of my mind. Without her realizing it, she has become the focus of my attention at meetings. I'm interested in how she does her nails, how much extra fat she has on her, how clean her hair is, what her toenails look like and whether her heels are clean and smooth? I notice that she has three ear piercings and wonder whether I shouldn't do the same.

I learn that she's single, childless and sharing a flat with an older sister. She has no partner and doesn't know Brenzaida well. Apparently she met him once in a coffee shop and like me, considers him to be immensely attractive.

Despite her PhD she is junior to me. She is junior also to a number of senior psychiatric registrars and junior consultants. These registrars and consultants, like me, are never invited to call him anything other than "Prof". She calls him "Julius".

On the days he comes for case presentations and meetings, I notice that she takes particular care of her dress. I notice too that on these days, she makes sure to find a seat close to his. I make a note of her body language as she speaks to him and to his as he replies to her.

Usually passive and well-meaning in relation to the world, I confess that hatred grows in me. I wish ill upon her. Are there no spells that can be cast against Almeda and the realization of those of her hopes which involve Brenzaida? Considering her, I abandon all traces of the maturity and wisdom that should accompany my age and my profession. This maturity reminds me, most rationally, that I'm old and she's young. I have completed most rites of passage. Many still await her.

If only I were younger, more beautiful and somewhere else - perhaps in a place of sun, sand, tents and horses. There might be a wind too, one which would blow against the tents causing their loose sides and entrance openings to flap like the sound of drum beats in the distance and the edges of the dunes to look smudged against the bright blue sky.

Inside the main tent, I, with my long, thin but curvaceous body, lie across large cushions covered in rich fabric. My feet are surrounded by the bright colors and designs of a Persian carpet and I sip my coffee as I await the return of Sheik Brenzaida.

Also awaiting his return in the next compartment by practicing the steps of a seductive belly dance is that upstart, his new wife, Leila. As I watch her nimble steps and gyrating hips, I feel both venomous and helpless. I can read the writing on the wall: my days as his beloved are numbered. Before soon, he will cease any pretence of concern for me and I will be discarded, as he discards animals who outlive their usefulness. Emotionally abandoned, I will be forced to witness this burgeoning romance.

I decide I cannot do it. I will steal one of his horses and escape back to the city from where he kidnapped me.

Stealthily, I slip away to where the horses are tethered. I look around me and realize to my dismay that too many of his men are about. There is no way I can leave in broad daylight; I will have to wait for dusk. Then once on a horse I will ride as fast as I can to the nearest oasis. At dawn I can then get an early start towards the West.

I do this and by the next day I am galloping through the desert. I ride my horse hard till day again turns to dusk and I camp at another oasis.

The next day resembles the one past, and the next and the next until at around noon on the fifth day, I hear the sound of horse's hooves in the distance. To whom could these animals belong: a rival Bedouin chief, to brigands, perhaps to a tall European psychotherapist with short, blonde hair?

For a few moments I explore the sensation of being rescued by the gentle, nurturing Jacques and taken back to the order and safety of the city. We go to a hotel room and I sit on his lap and nuzzle my face like a small child against his chest. He caresses my back and hair and I turn to kiss him, but not for long. Soon I am back racing across the

desert, away from the dark shapes on the horizon.

At length, I turn back to look and I identify the movements of Brenzaida's favorite horse. It is he who is coming after me.

I spur my steed on and try to get away. I do not want to have to look again at his face with its exquisite bone structure. I do not want to see his eyes and his nose and his chin. I want to forget the color of his skin and hair and the easy, athletic grace of the body that will not be mine in the future.

His horse is faster than mine and he catches up with me. With a whistle, he brings my animal to a standstill. He picks me up and places me on the saddle behind him and we ride back to his camp, which is five days away: five days of smelling his skin, of hearing his heart beat, of feeling his body against mine; five days of kissing his shoulders and neck and of admiring the curve of his nose and cheekbones.

Once we arrive, I am not sure what I want to happen.

"You are very naughty," he might scold, "to have run off as you did. Do you know how terrified I was that I had lost you?"

"I believed you no longer wanted me." I would reply.

"How could you imagine that I'd want to be without the air that I breathe?"

"I couldn't bear the thought that you had tired of me."

"Something bad could've happened to you. I'm going to spank you now," he might say as he put me over his knee.

Or he could take me in his arms, holding me fiercely as he kissed me?

We could make slow and gentle love together?

He could feed me fruit dipped in chocolate as I lay blindfolded on a large divan of red and gold cloth?

I consider the potential sequence of images waiting to delight and intoxicate me, but I can't enter them thoroughly. Each time I see Leila, in the image of Geraldine Almeda, watching and waiting.

17.

For a while I comfort myself with a man called Steve on the internet. It emerges that I'm a hundred percent of what he wants but he's only thirty-six percent of what I'm looking for. He conceals his description of himself, known as a "profile", temporarily, but writes to compliment me on mine and to mourn the fact that he is not a match for me.

"You have hidden your profile – how mysterious and intriguing." I say, urging him to write back. He does, and so begins a delectable cyber hunting game of revelation, concealment and theatre in which we pretend to be dissolute Victorians.

"Thank you for your interest dear lady, but I did warn you that we are not a match. Accept such a warning when it is sincere. Why is it so important to discover what you don't wish to discover? Let me utter this wish then for you, that many an intelligent man will flock to your profile and make you forget the existence of this one. Have a wonderful day. The sun is shining bright. It should not be hard."

"Dear Sir, how do you know what I wish to discover or don't wish to discover?"

"Dear Lady, I agree. I cannot pretend to know what you'd like to discover or not. That would be presumptuous. However, in my defense, allow me to remind you that I have read your profile and I would not want to be accused of trying to lure you into something

you would not want to be lured into. It is in this light, my lady, that I have deemed it to be fair to warn you that in my opinion you would not consider me to be worth your time and attention in discovering. Having said my piece, it is for you to decide whether to continue or to abort this correspondence.”

“Dear Sir, again you presume too much with regard to what I may or may not wish to be lured into. Furthermore, you are guilty of bad faith in that you say that you do not wish to lure me into something I may not want to be lured into, but you remove your profile so that I am deprived to some degree of more detailed warning. You succeed, thus, only in making yourself more tantalizing, which, one has to believe must be your intent. Indeed, one suspects that you are one of those deliciously evil men who specialize in luring good and innocent women into their lairs. As I am able to see behind your cloak of deception and I am neither good nor innocent, you do not scare me.”

“Dear Lady, it is true that I have hidden my profile. It is no less true that I have informed you of my incompatibility with your goodness and innocence. Why is it that when a man such as I warns a woman not to pursue him further, she becomes even more determined to do just that? Are a few warnings against this perseverance really bad faith, warnings aimed at preserving you from the consequences of being lured into my lair of questionable intentions?”

“Dearest Sir, the issue here is who is running into whose lair? Clearly it is you who are innocent with regard to the possibilities and appearances of deception. It may indeed be that you should hide yourself together with your profile. I am a woman who is well-versed in complicated pleasures and to reiterate: I am neither innocent nor good. Perhaps you should be the one to run away?”

In the end, he promises to reveal his profile and I am excited about the thought of finally getting to know this man who can be so creative in his flirtations. Then he informs me that the reason he had hidden it in the first place was because he is married. My enthusiasm sinks like frothy, boiled milk taken off the stove. He would love to meet me,

he tells me, but I must understand that he will never leave his wife. “I appreciate your honesty” I reply, “but I am not interested”.

18.

“Thank you for coming to see me, Frances.” Prof Thabethe, the head of our unit at the hospital beckons for me to sit down. “As you may recall, one of our posts was originally sponsored by the Psychiatric Families Association. I think you may have heard that they now want to withdraw it?”

“Does this mean one of us is going to lose our job?”

“Well, one of you will have to agree to be transferred, together with the post, to a clinic in Krugersdorp that the Association wants to assist. I would like you to think about it and to decide who should go. Please talk to the others also.”

Later I am back in her office. “I’ve gone through the staff lists.” I say. “Most people are doing important work. Tshepiwe tells me that she is seeing a great many Burns patients, Johann is valued by the Renal people, if Steve goes the paraplegics will struggle to find someone to replace him. I have my gay support groups. Sadly, this leaves only Geraldine. She is, in fact, the most likely candidate for the move.”

Indeed, and there in Krugersdorp, with her long blonde hair, her eyes the color of a chlorinated swimming pool, her delicate nose, petite frame, small melon breasts and her come-fuck-me-now high-heeled slip-on shoes, she will be out of sight of Brenzaida and myself.

“Although Prof Brenzaida may not want us to lose her.” I tell my boss nervously. “He seems to think very highly of her.”

“I am the boss here, not Brenzaida.” Thabethe, a highly ambitious veteran of the

Struggle flashes her eyes angrily.

When Almeda is told about the move, she is angry. “I am going to speak to Prof Brenzaida.” She says.

“Prof Brenzaida has nothing to do with staffing in the hospital. His is an academic post and he deals only with academic matters. I’m afraid he cannot help.” Thabethe snaps.

If I had a champagne bottle at hand, I would be pulling out the cork.

Eighteen years ago, my weak husband now grown strong and tired of sharing me with my father, told me that he was leaving because he had fallen in love with someone else. Shell-lost, I drank an entire bottle of Cointreau together with a miscellany of other drinks to achieve temporary oblivion.

Later, he came back to try to make the marriage work, but each morning he wept like a baby for the woman he had left behind. Unable to vanquish her, in the end I let him go. If I struggled to defeat other women in my youth, I’m less able now. This matter of the transfer of posts is a gift from heaven. The move will be an opportunity for Almeda to increase her financial resources and to move out of her sister’s flat into one of her own. Krugersdorp is hardly the back of the beyond. She will easily be able to come to Johannesburg. Little of her life need be affected. Her friends and family will still be within reach. The only reason she is baulking at the prospect is because she will not get to see Brenzaida much. I, on the other hand, intend to see more of him.

19.

After a session with Jacques I attend a talk on Delusions and from my position at the extreme left at the back I indulge in my practice of observing him unhindered. Watching him in this way it is neither Sheik Brenzaida nor Heathcliff Brenzaida that I want; it is not the Brenzaida from my fantasy, thatch-roofed bedroom on top of a hill that I desire. I want the man whose facial features could have cast him as my father’s son in a play.

More than anything, I want the man of flesh and blood that I am spying on.

But he is all “superego” in the Classical Freudian sense. He is polite, guarded and evaluating. I, on the other hand, am becoming more and more possessed by my instincts and drives. Before long, my excessive emails, the unbridled enthusiasm with which I seek him and my inappropriate attempts to monopolize his attentions will do me in. His warm smile will turn into an expression of disapproval or irritation, my emails will be ignored and he will engage in discussions with colleagues about my instability and incapacity for self-control. I remind myself of my intention to talk to him about my feelings. It will be a wise move. If he understands that it is he I am mad about, he may forgive me my madness.

“Frances, how much regard have you for me?” Charlotte Brontë’s protagonist asks his love in *The Professor*.

She tells him: “You have always made me happy; I like to hear you speak; I like to see you; I like to be near you; I believe you are very good, and very superior.” It is what I would say to Brenzaida if he ever asked me why I adored him.

I make an appointment to see him in a week. Then I embark on my ritual of preparation, including as it does a trip to a boutique, the hairdresser and the beauty therapist.

Dressed in a smartly tailored maroon suit with navy shirt and navy stilettos, I arrive at the Medical School for my appointment with him. I pass three cloakrooms from the parking garage to his office and enter all of them for last-second touches to my hair and make-up.

“So, Frances, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Professor Brenzaida, you must think I’m an awfully obsessive woman?”

“Not at all, I think you are extremely passionate about your work.”

“Thank you.” I am aware of his eyes fixed on me questioningly. “Professor Brenzaida, I don’t want to embarrass you or myself, but the thing is, the thing is....”

“Yes?”

“I have feelings for you.”

He drops his head to one side and looks down. His expression is reflective, perhaps a little sad.

“Frances, I think I have always behaved in a professional way in relation to you?”

“Yes, you have.”

“I just wanted to tell you.”

“Ah huh,” he says.

Swiftly, he changes the subject. “It occurs to me that you should bring in the Greenspan paper into the article more, Frances. The research blah, blah, blah.”

“Blah, blah blah.” I reply and for the next ten minutes we play tennis with words as meaningless little balls which he serves to me and I then hit back to him.

“Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.”

He does not say: “Thank you Frances but I am involved” or “I can’t possibly respond because of....” He simply talks resolutely about our work. At some stage he looks down again and he appears to be blushing slightly.

I'm calm. My shock comes as he walks me down the corridor to the stairs and points to an empty office: "Have I mentioned that I've arranged for Geraldine Almeda to be transferred here as my Research Assistant?" He asks.

When I get into my car I cry so much that I can't go to work. I go home and weep myself into a headache. I weep for the deadness of my life. I weep for the loss of my dad and I weep with anger at a victory that can only be temporary for Geraldine Almeda. Why can't she accept that he's mine, that he was always meant to be mine and that every time I see his warm eyes looking at me I can see that he understands this.

20.

The more I think of my chat with him, the more I 'm convinced of his affection for me. I imagine myself visiting the Medical School to deliver a document to the secretary. When I arrive, it becomes evident that there is a fire on one of the floors. People are huddled in groups speaking anxiously together and there are firemen all over the place. With a shock, I learn that the fire is in the Department of Psychiatry. The secretary approaches me weeping. Brenzaida is still there. He is trapped inside.

I force myself through the crowds, push away the firemen trying to hold me back with a superhuman strength born of love and bound up the stairs to his office. Breathing through my shirt, I battle the smoke and flames till I glimpse him lying down unconscious.

I pull him away towards the stairs. Bits of ceiling and wall begin to cave in. Dodging the falling plaster, I drag him away. Like an ant carrying a pebble many times heavier than itself, I carry him to safety and to the waiting firemen who hastily lead us to an ambulance.

In the vehicle I sit beside him, wiping away the dirt and grime from his face and assisting the paramedics with their ministrations, all the while speaking to him encouragingly, just

in case he can hear me.

“You’re going to make it.” I say. “You’re strong, you can fight. You can do it. You have to live. You have to live for us.”

I visit him in hospital. The minute I enter the ward, he has eyes only for me. “Frances, you saved me. If it hadn’t been for you, I would be dead now.” He takes my hands in his. “Thank you.”

My reverie is interrupted by Thabethe towering over me in the tea room: “I’m very unhappy with the way the psychology department is being run.” She looks at me as if she has been forced to eat a lizard.

“Johann sneaks off early in the afternoons, one can never find him after lunch. I suspect his private practice is impinging on his hospital work.”

“I’ll speak to him...”

“No, I will speak to him.” She pauses as if contemplating the evil taste of the lizard. “Do you have any idea, Frances, what Tshepiwe does with the Burns patients?”

“No.”

“Apparently nothing. Dr Naidoo tells me she hasn’t seen her there for weeks.”

“That’s bad.”

“Yes, Frances. That is very bad. It confirms that you’re not doing your job. In fact people are noticing that you walk around these days with your head in the clouds.”

I try to look serious and suitably outraged, but the truth is I don’t care. I don’t care about any of this. All that matters to me is Brenzaida.

At times, doubts assail me and I am gripped by fear; by an unknown and generalized terror in which the world feels empty and cold. Then I know that he belongs to Almeda and I imagine them laughing at me.

At other times, I am certain that we are meant to be together and that he feels this as much as I do. These are my meager times of happiness and peace.

“I’m organizing a psychologist’s meeting for tomorrow morning.” She sighs theatrically, rolling her eyes in an expression of exasperation.

“Right.”

For a few days now I’ve heard a voice talking to me. It is Brenzaida’s voice, clear and loud as if he were standing near me. “Perhaps the problem is that you rely too much on words.” He tells me. “Come to my office. Say nothing as you take me in your arms, then remove my clothes until you can feel the smoothness of my muscled flesh between your palms.”

“I also intend to ask Steve to take over the administration of the department, Frances. Hopefully he’ll do a better job.” Thabethe goes on.

“I understand.”

“First lock my door.” Brenzaida’s voice instructs, “so that we cannot be disturbed. Undress. Stand in front me and unbutton your shirt. Then slowly, as seductively as you can manage, allow your skirt to drop to your ankles. If I speak, kiss me long on the mouth.”

“Do you understand what I am saying, Frances?” Thabethe drags me back.

“Yes.” I understand that Steve is going to take my position; that Johann cares more about his private patients than his hospital work; that Tshepiwe is hiding from the purgatory that is the Burns Unit and that Thabethe looks like she’s eaten a lizard.

“I understand.”

21.

I dream that I am lying on an operating table. A number of surgeons and nurses surround me. Catching sight of a scalpel in the hands of one of the doctors, I realize that he is about to cut me. I try to scream, to tell him that I am still awake, that the anesthetic has not worked, but no sound comes from my lips. I then see a coffin in one corner of the room and understand that they all believe me to be dead. They must be pathologists. I recognize the faces of my colleagues and realize that they are, in fact, psychologists doing a post mortem on me.

Awake, I am cold and alone. I hunger to be held, to feel contained and loved by another. I don’t want a meaningless embrace, like those I get from some of the other patients here. These feel as if the arms of a shop window mannequin have been arranged and rearranged around my shoulders or torso. Closeness without connection.

I was held some time ago, but in a painful way. Was it a few weeks back? Months? I can’t remember much. All that remains is an uncertain flashback of a voice in my ear telling me to be calm while unknown hands and faces engulf me. This is followed by the recollection of arms restraining and imprisoning, as I am injected with some medication or other. Then there is the voice again, reassuring me that I will be all right.

The bell rings at six-thirty and breakfast is an hour later in a large hall where we help ourselves to porridge, bread and tea. At nine o’clock I follow the others to Occupational Therapy where I read articles and books and answer questions on them. I would far prefer to do sewing or woodwork as the others do but I’m told that my needs, as a

previously “highly functioning” person, are different. Mpho, the sweetest therapist there, has however promised me that she’s going to get me some oil paint so that I can do some art work. I’m looking forward to this.

Visiting hours are from three to four but I’m given some leeway because I’m a staff member from another hospital. Johann brought me Belgian chocolates yesterday. Tshepiwe came last week with a whole bundle of magazines and books. Thabethe sent fruit and I received a basket of pink roses with a card from Steve wishing me a “speedy return to health”.

22.

Life at work will never be the same. Never again will my opinion or judgment be sought. Never again will I be asked to keep an eye on my younger and more inexperienced colleagues. Only the least disturbed will be referred to me. I’ll spend the remainder of my working life befriending the hospitalized and offering uncomplicated emotional support to those in need. Slowly I’ll become more and more of a curiosity: a crazy, ludicrous, funny, eccentric, sidelined, old woman, kept on as a result of protective labor legislation. I’ll be a woman rendered harmless by pharmaceuticals and tolerated in an old, dusty, hidden office.

A cold wind is blowing as I stand alone at the balcony of Brenzaida’s thatched house on the hill. As before, the lights of the city below seem to challenge and vanquish those above in their brilliance. My love is sitting at the table.

“It is you and only you that I love. My life is nothing without you.”

“Without you, my life too is meaningless.” I pull him from the table on to the bed where I kiss him long and lingeringly. “Please make love to me now.”

He grabs me roughly, unbuttons my shirt and loosens my bra straps before kissing my

neck and chest as he fondles my breasts.

Hungrily, as if racing against time, he tears off his shirt and trousers and gets on top of me.

(12 372 words)