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Settler

Schulz, Tamara

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SETTLER

Tamara Schulz
425219

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Supervisor: Gerrit Olivier

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Settler

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The belief that we can be done with our past is a myth. The past is nudging at us constantly. Not only our own pasts, of course, but also the pasts of our ancestors. And the pasts of people we've never even heard of, and to whom we are not related at all. The energies of their great passions hang in the air forever, and possess a forever half-life, and all of that is awash in the universe.

-Alexandra Fuller, from *Quiet Until the Thaw*

I'm calculating the distance between the boardroom door and the bathroom, panic dialling swiftly from mild to full-blown. I'm gathering papers into the bag, phone charger tangling round the strap, laptop snapped shut, concluding the conversation quickly (too quickly, too rudely). I pull the black jersey out of my bag and stand up in a deft movement that slips the jersey around my waist covering the back of me. Or it would have been a deft movement if the phone charger hadn't caught on the edge of the chair. I tug, and walk a kind of comic legs-close-together walk, gripping my pelvic floor and wishing I had been better at those kegels.

As I stand up, I feel the trickle that is quickly going to become a flood. I imagine the stain spreading across the back of my skirt, the creeping massive wetness of it, running down my legs, the clot falling out of me, cotton sheath panty membrane holding it for one valiant moment before it seeps through, gathering momentum.

In the bathroom, the biggest clot falls out of me and I can't help myself, I catch it in the palm of my hand. I want to feel its thick, present bloodiness before I flush it into the anonymous sewer. It's hot and silky between my fingers. There's blood on the toilet seat, the floor, my legs.

When I get home, Reece is still at work. In the bath, the patterns swirl like when you drop ink into water. I google "why do babies keep dying inside me" but only because I am tired of the word miscarriage. It always sounds like Miscarriage of Justice. Justice has nothing to do with it. I want to tell someone but I don't. I want to tell Facebook but I will regret it. I start to write a blogpost. I call it The Baby and the Bathwater. I copy the words and paste them into my Facebook status. I delete them. I open a new document and write it as a poem. I delete the poem. Poems are embarrassing. This too will remain unfinished. I'm addicted to beginnings. I save the file in a folder called "LATER". I fall asleep, and wake to the sound of Reece's key, hot blood flooding the towel underneath me.

Joburg

1

Stanna found a beetle. Black shiny beetle with big claws on its legs.

"They're not claws, sweetheart, they are hooks."

"See, it's got legs like thorns."

"Yes just like thorns."

I am three years old maybe, in this photograph. I am wearing a pair of red shoes and clutching a spiral bound notebook in my hand. I am on top of the big wooden countertop of the Chibembe bar. They sliced a tree lengthways, polished it except for where they left the bark on, which looks funny all varnished. I am squatting down peering at something on the bar top. Behind me the river. Next to me, Daniel.

Daniel says, what's your name? He loves hearing it. It's a game.

"Stanna."

"Stanna who?"

"Stannastasia."

To this day, when a family member calls me Stannastasia I remember Daniel and his soft laugh and the Chibembe bar, even though that whole camp is in the river now. I was raised in bars. Bars are where the stories are told. The Chibembe bar had buffalo horns on one end and a white clammy tree frog nested in the crack of the wood, Mum coming to get us for supper-and-bath, because we have to be all ready for bed before dark and before mosquito time.

A dung beetle is a magical scarab. Also when it's a fly it will have that same green shiny back. And those flies mustn't land on our food. Sis.

"Ana, babe, we're not going to finish this exercise before the guests arrive. Let me bring you a box and you can put the photos in there and we can at least get this surface clear." Reece can't bear my nostalgia. His voice swarms at me. I don't look up to see his face but I know the metal edge of anxiety creeping in there. I take the box and drag together my wild, sprawling but sparsely photographed childhood and stack it into a little pile before putting the letters – blue aerogram foldovers – on top. Guests.

Guests are Clients and always will be, now and for eternity. I follow him to the kitchen.

"Don't tell them," I say to Reece as I pull out the chopping board and cut the brown tail off the onion.

"Ana."

"Seriously, don't. It'll make them feel uncomfortable."

"They are our friends."

"I don't want anyone to know. I just want to keep it close to me for the moment. It doesn't feel real."

"Talking about it will make it feel real."

"I don't want it to feel real."

"Well. I can't argue with that logic."

The oil in the pan shimmers for a moment then spits. Onions glitter. Green rainbow sheen. Dung beetle balls have elephant dung straw layered into them.

She's gone. Thud. The 1st of April like an April Fool's joke. The post composes itself in my head. The 160-character eulogy. Fuck it. That's a point. If I post that then Sarita and Jeanette will read it and they will be all like, "Why didn't you tell us?" "OhmiGod, An, if only we'd known, why didn't you Tell us?"

Fifteen years is how long since I've seen her. Fifteen years! How the fuck did that happen?

Reece – wine bottle between his knees, tugging at the cork. "If you don't tell them now, then they'll see it on Facebook anyway. So."

"I'm not going to put it on Facebook."

"Of course you are."

"Not."

"Ana."

"Dude...I...just don't."

The cork pops out more elegantly than it looked like it would. He pours. Sniffs.

"Mm. Well your sister is bound to. You know she will. You'd better beat her to it, she might write a better one than you."

"You are mean." Oven door squeaks.

"Yum. Roast chicken."

"I know, it's a problem. I didn't know Sarita was coming till this afternoon. So I'm having to do chickpea something-something on the side. Don't hover."

"Not hovering, not hovering, not hovering."

"Hovering like a hawk."

"Potatoes, potatoes...there's a crispy one –" He is too quick. My dish-towel is not as fast as my mother's.

My phone is on silent, evidently. The doorbell is broken, but I mean who has a working doorbell in Joburg? There are three missed calls by the time I look at the screen.

"Sorry, Jeanette, sorry." I fumble with keys and a sticky remote, stepping aside as the gate scrapes on its tracks and she drives her obnoxious Toyota Prado onto the driveway.

"Why not sorry *me?"* Sarita reaches forward for a cheek kiss.

"I just know that Jeanette hates waiting. Thank you. Wow. You always bring such lovely wine. You've already raised the tone just by crossing the threshold. But can we talk about this gas-guzzling beast?"

"Jean needs it for work." Sarita is crisp. "The roads are terrible, and she had a near-miss the other day coming back from Limpopo. So, yes. A fossil-hungry, but oh so sexy beast."

I guide them over the threshold and Jeanette nudges me in front of her, her hand on the small of my back.

"Woah, you weren't kidding about the books."

"Influx. Yes. There are more. Reece's fault."

I've been seeing the house through their eyes all afternoon, in a split screen next to their pristine granite counter tops and angular, expansive hallways. Yep, this is us. Cascades of papers tumbling off craggy cliffs. A drift of art materials gather against the backdoor, with toilet roll innards and plastic bottles collected up in black bags and spilling out again. A thicket of boxes crowds next to book stacks that aspire to be tree trunks reaching for lofty canopies.

"Come this way. It's lovely in *here*." Reece steers them.

We do try for pockets of sanity. The dining room has been rescued from my photo and diary project. An hour ago there was a swarm of memories like termites after the rain - sticky-foot crawling and silvery wings, whispering up from holes and batting against light bulbs. Now there is crisp white and the ting of a wine glass in candle light. I swept it all into a box. *Help me lay the table, Ana*, says Granny. Her vacuumed carpets and polished French oak surfaces linger. She is here. She is here.

"Oh wow. That smells delicious."

"Please take a seat, Jean. I'm so sorry, Sar. I made chicken. But there's rice and chickpeas for you."

"Woah, there is so much food here. You know Ana, you should totally open up a restaurant."

"Good God no. I have had enough of clients for one lifetime."

"Because of your upbringing in safari lodges?" Jeanette fills my glass like she's a waiter.

"For Ana," says Reece of the piercing eyes, "clients are the pinnacle of the foodchain."

Clients. I put my fork onto the plate with a clink, not hungry. Granny's voice in my head saying shush girls, there are clients in camp. Granny's Bella Fiore china and cut crystal is on my table. The feeling is like falling, like vertigo. Mom's voice matter of fact on the phone. It's been a long time coming. They let us know this morning. Will you let Zoe know? No one thought she would hold on as long as she did.

As if it were a relief. The last time I spoke to her, on her birthday, she had no idea who I was.

"What's wrong, An, you ok?"

"Of course." I gulp more wine, velvety on my tongue. "Just remembering the terror of the real life Client. Where we grew up, the nearest grocery store was like 150 km away at the end of an extremely bad road. We're talking ruts, corrugations, dust – it could take as long as four hours to travel that road. You definitely need a gas-guzzling beast for that journey. But the guests who came to the lodge – the Clients – they didn't understand what a struggle it was to get things like butter, for example. So all the good stuff went to the Clients and we ate beans and bully beef. Family hold back, it was called. FHB."

"Right." Sarita nods. "Like you can't eat pudding until the grown-ups have had."

"Something like that except not only pudding but also butter, eggs, salad, anything that was transported to camp on the supply truck, which was basically everything. For the clients."

"But they were like mythical monsters to you, weren't they?" Reece of the significant looks.

"Well we never really saw them, you know? Children were to be kept out of their way so that the Clients could enjoy their tranquil bush experience. On the occasions when we did run into them we were terrified!"

Reece grins. "Beware of scorpions, snakes, elephants, lions, and Clients."

"Terrifying creatures that we were kept away from at all times."

Sarita has finished her chickpea curry and glances disapprovingly at Jeanette's drumstick swimming in garlic rosemary olive oil. She catches me looking at her and recovers with "I love these plates, so old school. Have you always had them?"

"No. My Gran's. I just don't always put them out." My voice is steady. Reece gives me that look. I shake my head at him.

"Ana had some news today."

"Good or bad?"

"Neither." I smile at everyone, suddenly feeling absurdly sunny. "But I'm going to be going home soon. Home to Zambia." Red wine swirls in my mouth, I'm drinking too fast.

"I'm sure you need the rest," says Sarita, looking at me all narrow-eyed as if she's trying to dowse for more info. "After what you've been through."

"Been through?" I glance at Reece. He glances at Sarita.

Jeanette reaches across the table and slides Sarita's plate onto hers. "Your miscarriage, hon. Reece told us. I don't know why you can't just let us be there for you."

Everybody is staring at me. I feel dizzy. I smile, feeling tears swim their way upwards like lost fish. "Reece, he just can't keep a secret."

Sarita reaches over and touches my shoulder. "But why secret, hon? We've been a bit worried about you, Jean and I. You've been avoiding calls, cancelling appointments. Why didn't you tell us? You always play the tough guy."

I catch Reece's eye. "Her grandfather always used to say, 'If there's no blood don't cry.' But, in this case, there was." The tight smile that means *shame, poor you*.

"It's not like it's the first time."

"Will you keep trying?" asks Sarita. "Or is it too soon?"

"Too soon or too late. I'm 43. Probably the end of the line. Another failed project."

Jeanette refills my glass again. "The planet is too full anyway. Probably shouldn't be having kids."

"Says the owner of a gas-guzzling SUV."

"Says the non-vegetarian."

"Ok," says Reece. "Are we really going to do competitive environmentalism?"

"I'm sorry An."

I smile at her, but it's a trembly smile. "It's ok." Then: "My Gran died this morning."

Afterwards in the kitchen I ask him what he would like to be remembered for.

"He did the dishes and never complained. A eulogy to die for."

I pack Granny's best plates back into the dresser where they hibernate. When I come back into the kitchen he tilts one eyebrow at me.

"Well done. Wasn't so hard was it?" He hands me a glass with the last of the wine. "How long will you go for?"

"I don't know. As long as it takes." I hold the glass up to the light and a tiny rainbow flits across the crystal pattern.

"As long as it takes to...?"

I meet his eyes. "Maybe I should just take a break. For a while. Work has been super slow."

He puts down the cloth and turns to me.

"What? I don't mean a break break, just a - break."

"You're not letting me in, Ana."

I nod. It's a weary track this, and we have been down it many times. He looks as if he will pursue it but then sighs and switches off the kitchen light. "We'll talk tomorrow. Go do what you need to do."

I stroke my phone open and go online to post the photo of me on the Chibembe bartop looking at the beetle. There is another one, where we are posing for the photographer. Granny is behind me, but she's out of focus. There are so few photos of her, of us, from that time.

None of us will go to her funeral. It is too far and too expensive to fly to the old-age home with the bluebells and daffodils in the garden.

We already said goodbye a long time ago.

2

The neighbourhood dogs wake me. First my restless hound, howling and doing that frantic little bark she does. As I float to the surface of sleep I realise there is a whole chorus she's speaking to. Little pockets of frenzy as all the fenced-in dogs join in - some important alert system that I could not be bothered with. Bed is bed.

I lie in the dark a while. This morning cold keeps me huddled down resisting the world, I've never got used to it. 4 am, says the blinking alarm pad. This is the hour when the ghosts talk.

Feeling in the dark for matches. Can't switch on the lights, they'll be chased away and I need to hear them now before the world starts shouting at me. I wonder where I have hidden those matches. Reece steals them for his cigars so I hide stashes everywhere and can never find them again. In the drawer of the writing table. No. On the shelf behind the top row of books. There. The wick on the candle spits.

Now what were those early voices saying, sliding through the precious gap between dream and the day's anxiety? Something about -

Oh God. Of course.

I can still taste last night's wine on my tongue, my mouth has dried up. My grandmother is dead. The reality of it filters upwards from my chest to my head, it's a dullness, a fact that was always going to be there and now it's the day. I close my eyes because the dream is still hovering, just within reach. It's my familiar river landscape. Broad sweeps of sky and virgin Luangwa bush, hi-definition clear but something's wrong - there are plastic bags in the river. A string of elephants running scared, tails flattened. I start scratching my pen onto the open page, trying to anchor some detail but it's as thin as a haunting. Outside the sound of trolley wheels, as the informal recyclers start their morning pickings. It's rubbish day.

I want the dream. Grasping for the tone of it, the feel, like my hands were grasping for matches. Ah. There it is. Zooming in, there are lions. Two yellow-eyed lions, which means, yes, when it's lions it is Grandpa. He sends me lions for strength and power, or protection. This I know. But these two were locked up in a basement, pacing.

The trolley people coast down the hill on rattling wheels, daredevil madness. I must put out the recycling for them. The dogs are pawing at the door. The day has started.

"My grandmother has joined the ancestors," I tell Facebook. My heart wriggles for a moment, avoiding the hook. Sitting on Granny's lap, ear against her vibrating chest, lost in the

powdery smell of her. Bubble baths and "Ana your hair is so shiny, how did we get it so shiny?" and "Lay the table". Silver dining service and table place mats with scenes of British countryside hunting.

It's too early to phone Zoe. I click on her profile but she is hardly on Facebook these days, has migrated to somewhere else, I don't know, Tumblr or something. I respect her privacy.

"It was she who named me Anastasia," I told her on the phone yesterday. "I think she was thinking of Russian princesses or something."

"She was literally the only person who called you that."

"I know. Everyone else calls me Stan or Stanna, Ana or Ann."

"Stannastasia." I can hear Zoe's smile.

"Will you come with me?" I am trying to hide the craving in my voice. "Come to the Valley? It's been so long."

"I don't know. There's thing's happening here. I feel like I need to be here."

"Is everything ok with you?"

"Yeah. Gotta go." But the smile is sucked out of her voice, and instantly there's a vastness between us, more than just the usual one we joke about, that she's looking at the mountain while I stare down mine dumps. She's been like this lately. So elusive.

It's not true anyway, I sulk, as the silence claims me. I don't have a view of the mine dumps. I have a bird feeder and a lemon tree. The lemon tree is sick, with some mealie bug. I turn to Facebook, Instagram, the feed like a river, like treacle. It slurps me in, like it always does.

Live fast, fade into obscurity. Leave a bewildering visual archive.

God, what have we done?

The fermenting froth of South Africa in 2015. A torrent of hashtags: Rhodes Must Fall. No to Xenophobia.

In 40 years, the world has lost half of its wildlife. Half of its biodiversity. Half of its species. I'm trying to let that sink in. That's in my lifetime. It was me who did that, who let that happen. Nothing sinks in anymore. Facebook, Twitter and all the other slipstream timelines are helping to keep everything just shimmering and slippery on the surface. No delving, no fact checking, no deep-sea diving. Just slip into the current and be pulled along to witness the devastation. Water shortages, species loss, selfies, 10 ways to lose weight faster, 101 things teachers say out loud, why Finland has the best education system in the world, why it's not true that Finland has the best education system in the world. I can't breathe.

Black lives Matter. Rhodes Must Fall. This person wants to friend you, that person is having a crisis. Resist the impulse to jump in and – oops, there I go. I need to help. Remember an article about coping with depression via mindfulness. Where did you see that, you should find the link and post it on her wall, it might help her. Scroll back, click out of the Fb feed and into one of the 23 tabs open. Remember that you were supposed to send a client copy for a blog post – 10 ways to reduce your carbon footprint at work. Flip past that and into the mind swamp.

Mind swamp. This is what I call it when my mind congeals into stew and I can barely think a thought. How is it at all possible to know which most important thing is the top of the pile if we are so crowded out with desperately urgent things that clamour and claw?

So here it is. When trying to compose a eulogy to your Grandmother, you are compelled to reach back, back, back, to try to fix it. When she was last here, when she still had some of the wandering tendrils of her mind in a holding pattern, I had helped her pack her boxes, sell her things. There was that one box, the one that she asked me to keep for her. The one that never arrived.

What I didn't tell Zoe, or Reece, or even Facebook, is that I am not going home for a funeral. I am going because of that box of papers. I imagine them at the Lost and Found at Lusaka airport, sagging in some corner, waterlogged. Her face looms at me. “I've been trying to edit these pages all day, and I can't make sense of them.”

“Let me help you, Gran.”

“Oh Ana darling, would you? Do you think you could? I've one more book in me, I know I do. This is the one. This is the one.”

The blur of packing and unpacking, trips to the antique store to sell precious things for miserable prices. And the day we found her keys in the fridge after we'd searched for them for a good hour. That day. The beginning of it. Eighty years old, her belongings dwindled and bundled, scarf wrapped around her hair, hand on the handle of the red suitcase as she scanned the check-in counters at Oliver Tambo International Departures. I see her now, as her eyes cloak over, like just for a minute it all collapses – decades of plane travel overlaid onto sea voyages – the Union Castle from Southampton in 1929, bound for Durban and she disembarks in Beira to board the train inland – Beira to Blantyre – how many of these voyages merge into each other for her? Cape Town to Salisbury by rail. Salisbury to Livingstone, Livingstone to Lusaka, Lusaka to Fort Jameson. Or was it Beira to Zomba to

Lilongwe to Fort Jameson? The routes spider-spin in my mind, the cold spoor of a lifetime of unsettlement.

When all her things were packed and shipped, some to England, some to Lusaka, some to the cousins in Port Elizabeth, the box didn't stay, but neither did it go.

And then Granny on the phone, far far away: "Where is my box of manuscripts, Ana? Is it with you? Did I leave it with you for safekeeping?"

"Yes, Granny, I have it, you left it with me." I lie to her. She wanted me to keep it. No-one knows where it ended up. Not Mother, who received the other half of the Belle Fiore china, not Aunty Faye who was meant to take receipt of it. It cleared through customs and ended up adrift somewhere.

My screen pings an alert. It's my sister. She has sent me a link. The click takes me to a site that says Chibembe and then cold spills into the centre of me. There is a website. There is that fancy font they use for high-end hospitality marketing. And it says Your Private Wilderness. It says, Something Amazing Is Coming Soon. There is a video, with sweeping music and photographs of the river, of carmine bee-eaters nesting, a fish eagle hovering, and lions stalking. I could be looking at an advert for Secure Estate Living in Midrand, except it's not Gauteng, it is 'the heart of the Zambian wilderness' in Darkest Africa – yes it actually says this.

Chibembe. It makes no sense. Chibembe has been carved into Plots for Sale to investors for amounts of money I can't even contemplate, and building specifications – like those glossy safari brochures: you can own this – a body corporate – a gym!

I snap the laptop shut, but the nausea doesn't go away.

3

When the forgetting first started I assumed it was just stress. Like a laptop that got too full, I needed to defrag. I was standing in the kitchen, Zoe was pouring milk into her cereal. I noticed as soon as it happened that the wrong word came out.

"I'm looking for the doorbell." I corrected it instantly. "I mean the brown sugar." But a private shock rang through me. It happened again a few weeks later. More than just calling the child by the husband's name or the sister's. The stuff that we heard our mothers do and laughed at them for. This was different. A completely different word had parachuted in. Was I like Granny now, I who had lived my whole life chasing words like shells on a beach, picking over them and holding them up to the light, collecting them in books like treasure to be marvelled at? I remembered the day she had put the keys in the fridge and we'd looked for them for an hour. And it felt, terrifyingly, like that.

When bones start to close and a feeling as old and cold as a curse spreads over you like a spilling stain, that was the first time the fear came. Because I saw, in that moment, the seed of what had bloomed in her. And then I saw how much there was to try and get down, to capture. That's when I started to collect.

At the gate the dogs strain forward, tasting the air, eager, pulling at me. Early April, it's warm already, the sky is lightening quickly. I'm glad to be out. The house has been cloying, festering. The dogs claws clatter on the tarmac, their tongues sloppy and grinning. I cross the road with them to avoid the barking frenzy that happens with the dog behind the gate of number 7. There's a manhole cover missing (personhole, says Grandpa, laughing) and I steer them off the kerb to miss it. Traffic is starting to thicken. I wave at the security guard at the boom gate. We curse the closed off roads, Reece and I, at our politically correct dinners, but I am grateful for them in the early morning walks. Grateful for them and the dogs.

Luangwa walking needs vigilance too, different kind though. Ears cocked, vision soft focused. I step and crunch and notice. From underfoot, smells of bruised wild basil, from the hot plains, buffalo shit and dust. Here it's a blur of late jasmine and chugs of carbon monoxide. These dogs pulling me like I'm a sled.

We cross the intersection by the Radium beerhall. It's busy already, only sixish People move aside, giving me and the dogs a wide arc. A mother with small child on their way to school cross the road to get away from us.

Stanna Stanna, Granny is coming! Running from the swimming pool towards the car park. Late afternoon dust stirred up by the excitement of a vehicle arriving from the airport. Airstrip to Chibembe is 30 minutes, but if it's the main airport it took them three hours to get here. The first hour takes you over two sandy river beds, lined with logs at the crossing points. Moon crater holes dug out by elephants and villagers searching for fresh water. You must duck for the overhanging *combretum* branches that can hook your hair or your eyes. You must watch for the golden buffalo beans hanging from curly vines, they itch you mad till you want to run shouting into the river to get the itches off you by rubbing on mud. I am afraid of the buffalo beans, not for myself but in case I should see an adult gone mad, running naked across the sandbanks and into the river to swim with crocodiles.

The second hour takes you through mopane forest cathedral arches. Early season the leaves are so green they pulse. Mid-season they dry rusty and fall off to crunch under your feet. Late season they come out wet and new, inviting the rains ahead with glossy reds and purple-browns. In mopane country you see elephants, swift and moving away from the car noise.

"Elephant! Elephants" the Italian tourist said once, pointing them out to me with great excitement. I think I must have stared rudely, like, so, what's the big deal?

And once you're through that long mopane bit, and through the Tsetse Fly Control gate, (as if a gate would help) you bump along until you get to the Salt Pans. At the Salt Pans there's always good game-viewing. Lions, licking chops over buffalo ribcage. Or wild dogs, nervous family backchat yipping through the ranks.

Then they arrive at Chibembe camp, with its thatch and pole reception, halfway brick walls and grass fences that neatly conceal the behind-the-scenes kitchen and cold room and workshop. The Bar is right there on the river bank with Daniel's friendly face to pour you your refreshing arrival drink. Gin and tonic with a teeniest thin lemon slice maybe, or Mosi beer. Soft drinks: lime juice, Coke or Fanta cooled down by a paraffin-fuelled chest freezer. Probably no ice.

And ducking behind the low fence, a seven-year old sucking a chunk of her hair, scanning the new faces on the back of the Land Rover, all wind-blasted and lulled. The Clients.

Sometimes those open Land Rovers bring cherished faces. Like the time Granny came. Here I am sitting on the river bank with Granny. I point to the puku across the bank, on the other side. I explain, with seven-year old authority, how you tell the difference between a

puku and an impala. *I can't believe how well you can spot*, she tells me. *You have such sharp eyes*.

I do. Even here in Joburg, my eyes can read a landscape and tell my body the difference between predator and scenery. I can tell harm when it's coming for me or for someone else. Even when it has already. Knowing these things, and being able to do something about that knowing, that is the problem that has always been a problem.

The dogs pull, barking frantically at a man sifting an open dustbin, his trolley already heaving with PET recyclables, plastic milk and coke bottles and the hardy yellow of a discarded 20l cooking oil. I yank on the dogs and switch direction.

Another shard of the dream pokes through. Lost heirlooms wrapped in a leather sleeve tied with thong, discarded in the yellowing grass. Cotton needlepoint and a jewel-studded locket, photographs and thick-paged books with hand-cut edges. This is one of the dreams that repeats and repeats but I ignore it because I don't know what to do with it. After all, by now I am used to filtering out the messages of the dead. They are all clamouring and I am surely not the only one who can tend to their needs.

When I get back, Reece is up, coffee-cup in one hand, copy of *Hamlet* in the other.

"Working from home today?"

"Nope. Gotta go in. Spoken to Zoe?"

"Not since yesterday."

"She ok?"

"It's not a big loss for her, I guess. She has fond memories, but, you know, not a relationship, as such."

"Coffee?"

"Thanks. I had this dream. One of those recurring ones."

"Uhuh"

"I'm walking in the bush, it's somewhere between Livingstone and Francistown, in scrubby acacia land, and I stumble across this bundle of treasures. It's like they fell off the back of a wagon or something."

"Sorry, Ana, have you seen my shoes, the brown ones?"

"Check under the kitchen table where you kicked them off last night."

"I wore them yesterday? Ah yes, of course. You're the best. I'm late. See you sixish."

This is the dance. He has two settings: creative frenzy, when chaos bubbles out from the centre of him, the force field which unsettles all of us, the dog, the furniture, the books that scatter in his path, the post-its fluttering on the edge of his laptop screen like wings. The other is military neatness. When the play is done, rehearsals over, the genius spent for now, he reverts to alienating orderliness to keep the depression at bay. I tread wearily around him then, waiting for the build-up to the next frenzy. The restless, distracted itch that signals its onset and the nights of absence. I live for the golden time in between, when the reviews have been good, and the laptop stays shut for a week or two.

Long ago, I stopped picking up the trail he leaves. It imprints in my head and I always know, always remember. He sometimes remembers. But if I put the things away, he spirals into loss and looking and distress. I hear the throb of the bike engine, and my eye lands on his wallet, next to the kettle. Run out to the driveway, holding it out for him to see.

"Oh. Thanks. Rushing too much."

"How will you survive without me?"

"So you're definitely going then?"

"I must. For Mum."

"Gotcha." He scans my face. "You ok?"

"Fine. You'll be late."

"Blog about it. And don't forget to take your car in." He air kisses from behind the helmet. Gate slides open and the cat sidles past my legs and out across the threshold from yard to street. The gate begins to close as he accelerates off, dogs give fanfare and the cat turns and bolts back inside.

I watch the back of his bike disappear into the maw of Joburg traffic. I envy him. He has a horde of adoring students, a salary, an office. I have a mountain of recycling – straw that must be spun into gold.

"Blog about it." If only it were that easy. I haven't blogged since that debacle last year when some Woke Intellectual left a trail of insensitive comments about cultural appropriation and how I romanticise Africa. I hid my blog and migrated to Instagram where I post pics of my upcycled creations. The blog is a graveyard, but I have a secret, another project, a seed that is slowly starting to grow.

4

Chibembe. Named after the river Chibembe, which flows into the Luangwa, which in turn flows into the Zambezi at Feira which flows into the Indian ocean at Chinde. Chinde is where Grandpa was born. He trailed inwards, to build Chibembe in the late 1960s. But his journey was overland, not on the rivers. When he first built it, it was a tiny bush camp, with grass houses, a chitenje shelter and a bleached elephant pelvis toilet seat. He then got a business partner to invest and built the 80-bed camp with wooden chalets, swimming pool, campsite, and the riverside bar that was the centre of my domain.

Chibembe is and was. The soil it was on is gone. The river took it. When an elephant eats a baobab tree, it can take a whole month to do so. Coming back every day to the same tree, tearing off strips of yielding silver bark to perfect an alchemical process that turns baobab flesh into steaming golden chunks of elephant shit, for the baboons, the termites, the dung beetles and others to feast on.

When the Luangwa river ingests the land it flows through it does so with hungry licks of its brown tongue. Crumbling biscuit earth falls in chunks and plops. As the rain comes the river swells and belches. Small impalas fall in and are gone in seconds, swallowed whole by crocodiles. Baboons are stranded in trees. Children splashing by the river's edge, or crossing one of the many gulleys to reach a good fishing spot, will be guzzled. Sucked up like fat. As the rains come faster the appetite increases, the jaws widen and the chunks that break off are bigger and bigger. A sausage tree, *kigelia africana*. A crash not a plop, but no one heard it. Swirling foam of digestive juices.

In the later part of his life, my grandfather built his camps far from the Luangwa's licking tongue, inland, on the dambos and in the back country. He knew by then that she was fond of camps. That even the mighty winterthorns and the restive trichelias would be gobbled in time.

Of course my memories of Chibembe are romantic. They are sculpted by time and memory. Decorated with thin shadows of mopane. The way the elephants ate off the chitenje roof, metres from you. The prickle in your nose from a grass seed.

I have dreams now which make me sit up in the night with a painful chest. Dreams of Shoprite packets and washing powder boxes floating down the river. Dreams of a rainy season when the river simply doesn't fill.

I had thought of Chibembe as sleeping, and dreaming me. "Own your Private Wilderness", with plots and building designs that looked very like the ones at the golf course up the road? That was not a reality I had considered. The least I can do now is start to remember.

I file it under the folder *Captions for photographs that don't exist.*

5

Genet. The instant I saw those eyes reflected in my headlights, I knew it was a genet. The spacing – the distance between the eyes – not a cat. The movement – long and liquid. The height from the ground, the sudden stop and the turn of the head. I've spotted genets on night drives since I was four or five years old. Just because this is an urban genet doesn't make it any less distinctive.

We laughed. It's escaping from the zoo. Crossing through the palisade, over Northwold avenue where our light catches her eyes, blinding her temporarily – enough so that she thinks better of her excursion, turns and goes fast-trotting back into the enclosure.

The reason I thought of that genet this morning, was because of the way the cat did exactly that when Reece was reversing out of the gate. Gate opens and cat starts to casually wander over the threshold. Car engine starts, cat pauses, freezes, to assess the situation. Car starts reversing. Cat changes plan and goes back to the known territory from where he came, instead of crossing the driveway.

I guess that is how it is. We all bolt for the safety of our captivity, when it comes down to it, the minute we are interrupted or surprised. My bush schooling lives in me. Sometimes a big dog, yellow-haired and bulk-like, swims across my vision as lioness at sunset. Blink and its dog-walking in the park. But some primal part of my blood goes thud. Mistaking the golden fur, just for a second.

I've exchanged hippo noises for the rumble of that truck that tars the road, dragging gravel in its jaws. Hyena calls at night are sirens now. Joburg loops and spirals, criss-crosses my thoughts into cross sections and intersections and traffic snarls. I can't expect Reece to understand. I can barely make sense of it myself. I am wild but compliant and ready to choose this captivity over and over again.

My house is full of broken things. The bag I wanted to pack has a broken handle. It's been stuffed into the woven raffia beach basket my sister brought back from Nairobi. Slightly split at the seam. It's full of all the things that haven't been mended and haven't been thrown away. The brown boots that need gluing but I always forget to buy adhesive when I go to the hardware store.

I'm doomed.

The list spools through my head. Mosquito repellent and sunhat, walking shoes and coconut milk for Mother's green curry. This specific bag, the bag that I was going to pack,

evokes three or four other caches of undone, unfinished business, exhausting my resolve. The broken handle has defeated me.

I retreat, back into captivity.

6

I didn't tell Reece that I was taking the car to the Zimbabwean mechanic called Elias, to his workshop in Lorentzville. I didn't feel like the argument and words like "dodgy".

Granny certainly wouldn't have approved either, I smirked to myself as I turned into an unmarked un-signposted road which the GPS assured me was Sydney Road. "A better class of people lived here once," she might have said. Perhaps she was saying it right then, not just a memory or an imagining but her, her voice, her floating unfettered spirit scolding me and shuddering at the drifts of litter piled up in the gutter.

The radio was storming with news about student protests in Cape Town. A woman called in – an older white woman with that private school old money accent – she was saying how the students should be grateful to Rhodes because it is because of him that there is a university in the first place, and their protests disgust her; imagine, faeces on a public monument and you can't change history you know, it's part of how we got here. I think of Zoe and what she would say in response. Her phone has been off all week. I must call her.

I leave the car with Elias, comforted by the way oil on the ground makes the same grainy stains as it does in the bush workshops back home. I refuse his lift and tell him I am being picked up outside on the corner. He says let me send my cousin to stand with you, I say, no really, it's fine.

I want to walk. The thought hasn't even formed in my head yet but I realise I am going to visit André at his studio, a few blocks away in Bertrams. There is something, some thought form trying to push through. Like the way tufts of grass will continue to try and grow through the fins of an abandoned air filter, even in an oil-stained back-yard workshop.

It's either writing or walking.

Walking is Grandpa. Walking is letting the body assert a simple discipline over the loops of thought. For Granny, it was words. It is possible to write your way out of misery and disorder. Her blue biro scrawl on lined foolscap, accumulating in the wooden chest next to her desk where I used to sit as a child. Writing, for her, was a way of tidying, I understood that. This goes there, and that goes there. I remember how she would arrange the fruit and vegetables – the lemons in one bowl, tomatoes in another, and a crown of spinach on the polished hardwood counter.

"Put your things away nicely, Ana." Before disorder over-ran her mind, tendrils that grasped back into the past – her childhood in India, the momentous boat crossings, the failed

husbands. It occurred to me with surprise that her past, which I had always thought of as sepia or smudged black and white like the photographs with their curling edges, was for her bright and full of movement. Yellow mangoes made towers next to piles of spice that needed words like scarlet and crimson, not red. Turmeric and guavas and pet monkeys never lost their vividness for her. She needed to write it all down before those tendrils began to curl in on themselves in ever decreasing loops.

A piece of broken glass crunches under my shoe. The pavement up Viljoen Street is strewn with blue plastic bags and thin yellow stripes – airtime vouchers. "Careful," says Granny in my head. I breathe and walk, remembering to be alert to missing manhole covers. I turn left into Ascot Road, shade cast by a row of buildings that must have been gutted by fire. Pumpkin yellow walls faded to ochre and blackened on the inside. People burn fires to cook in these buildings, when Joburg winter bites. Suspicious looking water flows from a broken pipe, curdled with cirrus cloud formations where toilet paper catches on the tarmac. There is a smell to match. Further down the street a man staggers out of an entrance, sways and steadies himself, his hands hoisting his pants up by the pockets. I am about to turn to change my route when I see it. It's the thing I couldn't photograph because I didn't want to take my phone out on this street. It looks like the scattered contents of an out-turned pocket or a tipped-out handbag. Torn pieces of an abortion advert. Abor – abort – 072 - Call this number.

The pieces of paper have been captured, prevented from blowing away, by a dark syrupy liquid that licks them into place. It's a purply liquid – red wine or cough mixture, a stain on the crumbling concrete of the pavement, and spilling over onto the stinking tarmac.

I am 21 and on my way to lectures. I am up early, because it's a Wednesday and that means a dawnie, an earlier-than-is-civilised class that I can't afford to miss. The sky is neither frowning nor smiling, just blank and expansive and waiting for my signature. I have skipped breakfast like I always do, but shook a collection of vitamins into my hand on my way out, a swallow of someone else's juice from the fridge and a banana, which I am eating on the run. For no apparent reason whatsoever a wave of nausea rises from my stomach and I deposit the meagre contents of my stomach into the nearest dustbin. Weird, I think, and keep walking.

Two weeks later, amidst a blur of deadlines, I am walking past the cathedral and the pharmacy on the corner is open so I walk in and I hear myself say, "Please may I have a pregnancy test kit."

The grey-haired woman behind the till puts it in a brown paper packet and I meet her gaze. Another week later my mother gets me at the train station in Joburg and the same clear voice

tells her "Mom, I am pregnant," and she says "I knew you were going to say that." And, "what are you going to do," she says and I say I'm going to have a baby.

We don't say anything else to each other on the way home. But for the whole of that mid-term break I get calls from friends, all of whom seem to have an awkward agenda to fulfill. I go to the zoo to stare at the elephant. The elephant doesn't meet my gaze, just pulls listlessly at his pile of hay.

I went to the psychologist. I went to the gynaecologist. I went to the dentist too, because an abscess had flared in my jaw. She drove me to all these places in the Land Rover, whose doors only shut if you slam them.

"If you leave it any longer it's going to be too late," she snapped one day. I felt the cold cut of that, and wanted to say, "I was a mistake too, remember." But the clear voice I had in the pharmacy and at the train station had deserted me.

On the way to the hospital every traffic light was red. I pushed my feet against the hot metal of the floor of the Land Rover, wanting my legs to be her legs so I could press on the brakes. It was too late. South Africa had a new democracy, abortion was legal, and moms know best.

Exactly ten months later, she drove Cassandra the same route to the same hospital, spilling out of herself with worry and tender concern, as her favourite daughter laboured to bring beautiful Zoe into the world. Maybe she was worn down by then, maybe she'd come round to the idea of being a granny, but Mother put up no resistance that time round. The way I like to think of it is that when Zoe applied for her residency on earth, she needed to get here quick as she could, and she didn't care which one of us would do it. Because Zoe is the end of the line. She had to catch that ride.

There is no doorbell at the studios, so I dig my phone out of my pocket and scroll for André's number. It's hot, and my mouth is dry. The gate rolls back and my stomach falls away, I think I shouldn't do this, I should go back, I should go somewhere else, maybe I should Uber home. André stands in the door-way and seems to fill the whole frame. He runs a hand through his hair and his face is a grin.

"Well, this is a nice surprise," he says.

"I hope I'm not interrupting some important journalistic endeavours."

"You kidding, I'm writing about students throwing shit at statues. Come in."

Inside the yard is part building site, part campsite and part outdoor office. His Land Cruiser is parked to the left of a huge pile of yellow building sand, its back door open to either receive or release the neat piles of tents, flysheets, sleeping bags and blue mini gas bottles arranged around it.

"Going or coming?" I fight down a bubble of envy, of longing. What I would give right now to hear the flap of canvas in the wind and taste road dust in my throat.

"Coming. Just got back from Zim. Was tryna do a 7-years follow-on story after my last trip - remember when I went in 2008?

"I remember you showed me footage of people scrambling to pick up grains of maize that had fallen off the back of a truck."

"You remember that? Broken cities, broken towns. Sit." He offers me a grey and green camping chair and leans back against the low red wall that edges the stoep.

"I like what you've done with the stoep."

"This is not a stoep. This is a veranda" He says it like copying fancy English, like how Granny would have said it.

"Oh yeah, a ver*and*a. Where we entertain with canapés and cocktails."

He looks at me hard, he has lion's eyes. Like the lions in my dream, I think suddenly, my stomach flipping over.

"Sorry about your Gran," he says.

I shrug. "Who told you?"

"You did. Fool. You put it on Facebook."

"I didn't think you did Facebook."

"Sometimes I stalk my favourite people." He grins at me. "I'm glad I got to meet her."

I don't know what it is he is remembering about her but the feeling is there and I smile too.

"In fact," he says, laying his half-smoked cigarette on a perlemoen shell ashtray collected from some wild bit of coastline somewhere, "in fact, didn't I interview her when we were going to make a doccie about your wild family? Come, let's have a look for it."

"What are you building?" I nod towards the sand and gravel heaps.

He grins. "I'm making myself burglar-proof."

I follow him in through the main door of the house, it's dark after the bright sun outside. He leads me down a broad corridor to the back of the house. The floors are concrete screed

and the ceilings bear the ornate pressed designs of another era, with streaks of rust decorating their edges. This house is clinging to a past the whole neighbourhood wants to forget.

"Come in, to my den." He clangs open a heavy security gate and gestures me into a large west-facing room. The window frames a Joburg skyline - Ponte tower flashing Vodacom red on top, and the ship-like steel and pole rigging of Ellis Park stadium. The view, though, has a grid overlaid on it - thick metal square-bar welded into a mathematical pattern; graph paper over the city. I follow the lines with my eyes, and see that they continue, wrapping around the inside of the walls too. The whole room is enclosed by a grid of metal.

"Dude, you've made yourself a cage!"

"It's not a cage, it's a strong-room."

"It's a cage. I feel like I'm at the zoo on the wrong side of the bars."

"I'm hoping my insurance premiums will go down. Fucking equipment keeps getting stolen."

In the corner of the room, an assortment of blue tin trunks, flight cases and plastic boxes hides André's entire studio, his cameras and cables, his mini-DVs containing precious footage. Next to the pile, a broad desk with two side-by-side Mac screens and a keyboard. The desk arrangement is makeshift, waiting for the room to be finished.

"I suppose when you paint it white you won't notice it so much."

"I don't mind it so much."

"I'm surprised, Mr wide-open spaces. Makes me feel a tad claustrophobic. I mean, why the whole room? Most people are content with burglar bars on doors and windows."

"Burglar bars get ripped off windows. Security gates too. I want this to be my studio room, editing room, coz it's big and it has the view. But that's a vulnerable wall. So."

"I guess. Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

"Ja. Talking of paranoid, I must tell you the latest development in this rhino story. I have an incredible lead."

"Incredible or credible?"

"Incredibly credible. Wanna drink? I have whisky or rum."

"Um, some water would be great."

"Water makes you sick."

He opens a tin trunk and takes out a bottle of Captain Morgan and a silver hip flask. Behind the trunk a tall bookshelf reaches almost to the ceiling. It's empty, pulled away from the wall. Stacks of books, CDs and notebooks sprawl over the floor.

"Do you need some help?"

"I'm beyond that."

"I mean with the packing. Putting books onto shelves and stuff."

"No. I'm still getting organised. Ah, here it is."

He pulls the lid off a plastic box. Inside are rows of mini-dv tapes all packed neat and labelled. "I've got your whole family here. We're going to make that doccie someday."

He puts the box under one arm. "Come, let's get some ice and go outside."

The kitchen consists of a huge table, the kind that you'd find in some Karoo farmhouse. A white fridge that has seen better days leans slightly towards a two-plate gas hob and open shelving with stacks of mismatched plates and cups.

He hauls a plastic bag full of ice out of the freezer compartment, picks up a wooden chopping board with a handle and whacks it over the ice. The sudden violence of it makes me jump.

"You see, you do need a whisky."

It's barely 11 am. I can't think of an earthly reason why not.

"How is Zoe?" he asks me when we are outside again, sitting on the low wall of the veranda. He lights a Stuyvesant.

"Ok, I guess. Busy being a revolutionary."

"Chucking shit at statues."

"Well, you know. Trying to topple them, I suppose."

"It won't stop there."

"It shouldn't, surely? If we're not going to make the changes this country needs, then we have to let the kids do what they gotta do."

He sips his drink, rum and Coke.

"Anyway, we've been down this road before. Let's not talk politics. Rather something safe like - tell me about your trip. Or the rhino story."

"Ha. That's hardly a safe story."

"Have you made progress?"

"There's a guy who's talking to me. We can track where the horn goes out, through Mozambique. We know that there is one family. We think we have traced links to deals all over - even your neck of the woods. That hardwood they love, what's it called?"

"Mukula."

"That's the one. Massive deforestation in Mozambique, now they're moving into Zambia. My informant, he's got it all figured out, right down to the front businesses. Vietnamese. They bring in girls and take horn out through Mozambique. Cash never changes hands, you see, so it's always hard to trace, but if you find the right thread to pull, you see that the links are all over. One guy gets paid in horn, another in timber, someone else has diamonds – ja. It's big."

"So can you bust them?"

"Problem is, this guy, he just walked away from his job. Government. Fed up with corruption and incompetence, with no-one interested in following the story, or worse, being on the take. Took all the files with him. So now all that evidence is illegal."

"Can't you – ?" I'm not sure what I was about to ask. I look down at my knees.

"Publish anyway? Not sure. These guys are serious. Heard news the other day about another informant of mine. Whistle-blower. Well," he has a slow sip from his glass, "let's just say he won't be talking again."

I take a sip of the whisky, caramelly in my mouth. My veins and muscles respond with a soft giving way.

"They always make it look like an accident."

Outside on the road a Pikitup truck is labouring, the engine strains, bins clunk and someone is yelling instructions to a driver to back up.

"I'm thinking of Luangwa rhinos, how quickly they went. One minute we were seeing ten a day on a game drive, then we were seeing carcasses, then...suddenly there were none."

He nods. "It's happening here."

When I was 10 years old, Grandpa asked us to create logos and slogans for the Save The Rhino Trust, as a school project. 1982. The three aunts were visiting for the weekend, I remember the one they chose. A rhino's head framed in a circle, with a cross-hairs target over the horn and blood dripping down underneath the logo.

"That's the one!" chorused Aunty Avril and Aunty Faye, pleased with their choice. "We'll order the T-shirts. *My horn is my dilemma.*"

I didn't get it, even after they explained the slogan to me. I had seen the pile of skulls at the wildlife offices. I didn't see how the T-shirt was going to help with that. By the time they had raised money and mobilised troops, the rhinos had been picked off the landscape, one by one, with semi-automatic weapons.

"I don't know how to help," I say, feeling clumsy and ashamed. The same feeling as with Sarita and Jeanette, with their important make-a-difference-in-the-world jobs.

He gets up abruptly. I sit in the silence, not reaching for my phone, conscious of a sort of rush of blood around my ears. I think of my beloved dead. Grandpa, resting after his labours. Or maybe not resting anymore, now that Granny has crossed over.

I feel self-conscious and look up to catch his gaze. That enormous, spreading, light-breaking smile. It fades again quickly.

"You going back up there?" He is looking at me intensely.

"Yeah."

"You could dig around for me."

"What do you mean?"

"That rhino project up at the North Park. Maybe there's a story there, some links. The illegal logging. Find me some contacts."

"I guess. I doubt there's a connection to here though."

"I don't know. Seems like the network is huge."

"And dangerous."

He shrugs. "It's always dangerous. How are things that side?"

"Well, my beloved childhood camp is being turned into a golf estate."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah."

"World's changing."

"Yeah. It is."

In the silence, he drains his glass, turns his attention back to the tapes in the box. "We have, let's see... we have Leonard James...we have... your mother... Nope, sadly, your gran is the one person I did not get to interview."

"I know. She was never in the right place."

He's writing on the tape covers with a thin black khoki pen. "Anyway, it's all here, we can edit when you are ready." Picks a brown envelope out of the bottom of the plastic box and lets the pen hover over the envelope. He puts it down again.

"No-one's interested in the genealogy of a bunch of white colonial bush misfits."

"I am."

"You have more important work to do."

He winces. "Yeah, like statues." He cradles his phone in one hand, thumb flicking through photographs of students holding banners, with slogans painted on their bare arms and backs.

"Rhodes Must Fall," I say, cradling the whisky glass in my hands and feeling like I need a nap.

"Is Zoe there, in the thick of it?"

"I imagine she's up there, jostling for a front position." My eyes are scouring the images as he rolls past them but I don't see her. One of the photos shows "Fuck your dream of Empire" spray-painted on the pedestal.

"So many battles to fight and they are attacking a useless bronze. Cecil John Rhodes."

"That's not the line I would have expected you to take on this one."

"Come on. You should know by now that political correctness is not my game."

It's an old routine, like the one I have with my uncle. But right now, my heart isn't in it.

"The statue is deeply symbolic. If he offends people, from up there on his pedestal, surely the least they can do is remove it."

"I thought you were a conservationist."

"Of living things."

He shrugs. "Well, it's just the beginning."

"It seems fitting that he should topple in the same week that my grandmother joins the ancestors."

"Yeah," he chuckles. "It was nice of them to wait."

There's a long silence. The rubbish truck has moved a few streets up. It's still chugging and cranking but less urgent, replaced by the sounds of metal on metal, from the workshop next door.

He's looking at me again, his face cloudy now, wearing a look I can't decode. "There is something, though."

"What?"

He picks up the brown envelope again and opens it. It's a black and white photocopy of a newspaper clipping.

It is unmistakably her: the soft curl over the left eyebrow, the cheekbones, and that stylish way she had – champagne glass in hand, stockinged leg.

"I'm pinning it for about 1978," he says.

"Ok. So what? Who is the man? Who is she with?"

There's a note of impatience in his voice. "Ana, your knowledge of South African's recent political history is kak. Sorry."

"I know it is. Sorry."

"He was an apartheid operative. Security forces. Nasty piece of work. Charming as hell, one of those charismatic leaders, chicks loved him. But, y'know. Murderer."

Something cold creeps down the back of my neck. "No, man."

"I'm not saying she was in bed with the top apparatus. I'm just saying..."

"She was cozy."

"Looks cozy, nè?"

There is so much more to this woman than we knew.

"Christ, well, don't show that to Zoe."

"Ha."

"But André, this photo says nothing though. She was often at these sorts of functions and stuff - she was a columnist, she loved covering the glitterati."

"Ja. Sure. I just thought you'd like to see it." He folds it up and puts it back in the envelope. "You want a lift to your car?"

"No. No, it's cool. I think it'll be ready now."

7

After the abortion I threw myself into studying and heavy drinking. I invented a new word. Oblotto-rate. I showed off my new hard edges, danced in the same clubs and poured my heart out to exactly no-one. April 27th 1994, and I joined the queue that went around the block and swelled the masses with my tiny X.

The country was in its post-birth afterglow and Granny was overseas. *Running away from the TRC,* someone joked later. Really? Do I really remember hearing someone say that?

When I heard about Cass being pregnant I was already on a bus to the airport, nursing a hangover the size of a November sky. I probably wouldn't have gone home if the tickets hadn't already been booked.

I arrived at the airport with its polished black floors and the glass and aluminium doors that keep the tarmac heat out. I picked my bag off the big trolley they had wheeled across the runway, the small plane already taxiing off to head back to Lusaka. For the first time since I could remember there was no one to meet me, no Land Rover, no Lodge vehicle with a khaki-uniformed guide saying welcome back. I spotted tall Shadrack across the lobby and strode over to him, feeling too big in this space where we used to run and skid across the floors on our bums.

"Hi Shadz, any chance of a lift?"

"Oh Stanna, hi. I didn't recognise you for a minute. I have clients but only four, so there is plenty of space."

"Thank you."

"Welcome, any time."

Pregnancy suited her. She was in the chitenje, framed by two gum poles and the dambo behind, eating a mango. I noticed right away that she wasn't eating the peels.

"I know, it's the best bit, but all I can't think of is Mom saying wash the mangos for hepatitis."

I sat down next to her and ate her pile of mango skins, yellow and slippery on one side and green on the other. Afterwards we sat and picked strings out of our teeth and didn't talk about it.

Everything shifted that summer, though you could hardly notice. I became big sister. I cooked, I bought her mangoes and went to the market. I foraged for tamarinds when that was what she felt like, fended off our fussing mother and became the one with mosquito-net

paranoia every time there was a whine in the air. I collected elephant dung and burned it to keep mosquitoes away. We rigged a net up in the chitenje so that she could sit underneath it in the evenings.

Eventually, I had to go back to university.

"Send me pictures of your tummy," I implored.

In a way it was the perfect arrangement. I got to keep studying, she got the attention we had always fought for. And Zoe grew in her like a baby impala.

There was one day in the pregnancy that I will never forget. Cass was about four or five months in. I'd come home for the April vac, more for myself than for her. I'd been spiralling into booziness. I was an ant's nest of emotions around Cass's pregnancy. The jokes had worn thin, almost as thin as the membrane that was holding me together. We were lying next to each other on sunbeds by the pool. She'd just felt the baby move inside her.

"It feels like popcorn popping," she said, in response to my pressing her. I was a mess of jealousy, admiration, regret, grief, relief. She was doing it, not me, but I still wanted in.

"Here's your auntie," she said, my ear on her belly button. Then, "I can smell the beer you had last night."

I groaned. "Which one?"

"I can smell everything. I've become a mama elephant."

I sat next to her, soaking in her stillness, feeling my heart prickle and squeeze. Then it was as if a soft dambo breeze drifted over me and there was a gradual sharpening of my senses until my nostrils subtly flared and my palette opened. I could taste the musty pond smell of the Nile cabbage on the lagoon, I could smell the dying of the late-rain puddles. My shoes, kicked off by the pool's edge, were delicately festering on top of a base note of chlorine.

"Oh my God, I've tuned in! I can smell everything too. Gosh, how are you coping, it's *intense*!"

She looked at me, a blaze of hatred from her eyes.

"What?" I asked her. "I have read about this – people riding on the pregnancy hormones of their spouses and such. It's like the way women synch their periods."

"Fucks sakes, Stan. You cannot let me have a single thing to myself, can you?"

When Zoe was born, I was there. I cut her cord. When she was a tiny, mewling tiny thing, naked and scrawny, straining for Cassandra's breasts, I wanted to put her on mine. Once or

twice, I did. I didn't tell Cass, of course, but the child needed something to suck on. She gnawed and pawed at me, and I felt the same tearful frustration that my sister did. The baby is hungry, I told myself. There is no difference between the way she is sucking on me and the way she sucks on her mother, I thought. Frantic sucking with breaks for crying. Then, she became listless. She'd give up and meekly fall into a nap. This was followed by more rage and crying.

We called Mum, on safari in Botswana with Clients. "Oh darlings, she said, “you must persist. It's the hardest thing in the world. I remember you, Cass, you didn't want to latch at all. And then I got malaria and the milk dried up, it was terrible."

Cass looks at me, eyes dark. "Didn't she say exactly the same about you when *you* were a baby?"

So I called Elina over. She came on her bicycle with her chitenje wrapped loose around her shoulders, sat on the edge of Cass's bed and took Zoe firmly, holding the back of her head and pushing her onto Cass's nipple. She watched as Zoe did the same frantic sucking routine followed by red-faced yelling. She rubbed her tiny tummy. Cass looked at her, tearful.

"I'm a useless mother!" she sobbed.

"Maybe we should go to the clinic,” I said, feeble in my desperation to help.

"Ow, fuck fuck fuck!" Cass screamed.

Elina massaged her breast, squeezing and pulling her like a milk cow.

"There's nothing," she said. "You must buy formula."

"I told you I'm useless," wailed Cass. "I can't even do this!"

"I know you want to do everything naturally." I had to raise my voice over Zoe's crying. "But let's just do the formula and keep trying."

Ellie came back an hour later with a tin of Nan strapped to her bicycle with long black strips of *malegin* rubber and started boiling kettles and teats. It was a whole other world and Cass seemed to be collapsing into defeat. But when we saw the way Zoe glugged on that fake rubber nipple we both sighed with relief. She had just been hungry, not dying of a scorpion sting, or cerebral malaria or tick bite fever. Just plain old hunger. Ellie sang to her, she burped, she slept.

It was hard to leave. In the days leading up to my departure, Cass didn't seem to care. She seemed relieved, glad even. But when I stood at her bedside saying goodbye, her cheeks were tracked with tears.

"Come back soon," she said.

I didn't come back soon. Exams, productions, portfolios, parties - it was easy to be away from them. I didn't call. I didn't write. The Millennium happened. I met Reece. By the time I returned, Zoe was almost walking, had a mouthful of teeth, a silly gurgling smile, and the mighty unbreakable will that she still wields over us all was in full plumage. Cass, however, was a shell.

"You need a break," I said.

"What I need," she said, is to get back to work. I'm going to go and find Jethro."

"You should write a book about your Gran's life," Sarita had said at dinner. She always has some helpful suggestion as to what I should do next. "You should open a restaurant. You should write a book." She wants to manage my career like I'm a project, and seems to think my life should be this arc, a journey of cause and effect, a climbing from one pre-mapped bit of terrain to the next. Some people's careers are like that. Most, I suppose. Not mine. I'm a valley girl not a mountain climber, I've not balanced on ladders and stepped sure-footedly on rungs that appear in all the right places just as I'm looking for another foothold. School to varsity, varsity to graduate internship to first job to career development. Good lord. Every time I have tried to climb, I've snagged the edge of my trouser hem and come tumbling down. Maybe it's a Gen X curse, though not all my peers seem cursed with it. Maybe they just have more stamina than I.

Oh, I've followed spoor trails here and there, into the densest of undergrowth and across dry terrain. If I was to map it, it might look like a river system – thin tributaries, jobs that led nowhere but paid for a ticket home; long periods when Reece paid all the bills and I marked his first year student's essays and exam scripts. The occasional delta where I felt like it was all coming together. A pattern? A purpose? What do I do with it all now that I am 40 *something?*

Reece is drifting away, stealthily. Every week the raft he is on is a little further away. I wave at him and he smiles, waves back cheerily. Doesn't seem to mind.

André doesn't even have a journalism degree and look at how effortlessly he churns out stories, documentaries, cutting-edge hard-hitting pieces of investigative knock-out. Dammit. I *could* help him. I would. But I am a coward.

8

On the 4th of September in 1995, my grandfather called for a family reunion. What an ordinary sentence that is. But a "family reunion" would always be an extraordinary event for us, far flung and disparate as we were then. As we are now. I remember the morning the invitation came in.

I was in my final year. Deadlines hung over my head like a pair of albatrosses: Journalism: make a documentary. English: mini dissertation. I emerged from the library, blinking out the too-clear Eastern Cape afternoon light, books tugging my shoulders like the undertow at Kasouga beach. Dragging me back to their cavernous logic, the kind enclosure of an afternoon of study – God, when I think of that now it feels like a luxury, but I guess then I felt blighted by too much work.

The computer lab. Grey hard plastic monitors, the interminable waking up of the beast, Word Perfect 1 or 2 – the green flicker on grey screen. Or in some cases orange. Tight regular letters, winking at you with the quiet surety that at any minute they could freeze you out, disappear, not be Saved. My fumbling fingers, not really understanding yet what it all meant – how to impose my will on the solemn screens that I didn't fully know how to command.

"How can I trust a machine that says press Enter to Exit," my English lecturer said. And we laughed, because we knew that we were the heirs to all of this. We knew what could be and what must be, and that the Internet was our dizzy promise of future liberation, just like our parents had Woodstock and the pill.

Anyway, the email.

"I'm using my authority here as Grandpa," he wrote, "to say that I expect you all to come for Christmas this year. Even the grandkids. I'm selling the lodge and I've got some important matters to talk to you all about."

I went straight to the Student Travel office on the edge of campus and booked my ticket, for R3421. After that, there was R33 left in my account.

I tried calling my sister, but the blue metal of the phone booth took every coin in my pocket, clunking with the finality of last drops of water glugging down a drain during a drought. That afternoon, as the long Eastern Cape light started to turn golden and I sat outside the Journalism Department on the steps, smoking Peter Stuyvesant Blues and pretending to be cool with all the other people pretending to be cool, I could feel the cool turning slightly

sick in my stomach. It swirled around in my belly the way the puddle of mercury did in the palm of my hand when Mom let me hold the contents of the broken thermometer.

"Selling the lodge." The words kept blinking at me like the unfeeling green of the font on the monitor.

Selling the lodge.

Fuck.

The Clients. There I am at 24, at the Lodge, the new Lodge, long after Chibembe has been reclaimed by the river. I am holding Zoe's hand as we walk to the swimming pool. Two strangers walk on the path towards us and she cowers, saying "Clients!" Coz, Clients are to be feared, right, else why would the grown-ups always say,

"Shh, the Clients!" And my heart seizes up in sympathy because I know she already has it in her blood, the thing that I have too. And how will we be rid of it?

"The joys of growing up in the hospitality industry" I joke whenever there is too much food left over at the end of the evening and when I go down the road to the Woolworths for salad, my body remembers Chipata grocery runs that take eight hours there and back over rattling corrugations. Eight hours to bring back gas bottles, crates of beer and wilting spinach leaves.

And my body remembers grown-ups having serious conversations about fences that don't help to keep elephants out of the vegetable garden. The catastrophe of the pushed over fence, the early morning baboon raid. Trying to grow your own food on the edges of the South Luangwa National Park in 1979 is not for sissies. Not for sissies. One of those things they say.

Now that you can buy fresh perky lettuces from Given on his bicycle, and the road from Chipata is tarred, and the timber is being shipped out on Chinese trucks, it's easy to forget.

Lots of things are easy to forget. Like, I can't even tell you who it was who phoned me to say Granny had died. Long after her mind had gone wandering, her body relinquished its 96-year grasp on materiality and said a final toodle-oo. Humming some 1950s show tune, no doubt, in a cloud of powdery scent.

Some things are not so easy to forget. Like how to be a perfect host for a lovely dinner party even though you've just been told your grandmother died.

"Your Gran was an author, wasn't she?" Sarita had asked.

"A columnist," I'd ventured, nervously. "She did write a couple of books, but I haven't actually read them."

"But why not?" Alarm and consternation.

"Too scared."

Reece had grinned at me and tried to explain. "Ana didn't want her knowledge of her Grandmother's politics to cloud the relationship."

I'd nodded. "It was kind of easier to just let her rant."

What I didn't say is that the reason I'd never read her books was because I was scared of what I might see of myself in there. Scared of what she was – silver dining service and table place mats with scenes of British countryside hunting. What that means about me, here, as Rhodes is falling.

Luangwa

1

"Catch a lift on one of the Lodge vehicles," Mom says.

"Are we friends with the Lodge now?" I ask.

"I spoke to Fidel. He's dropping clients but coming back empty."

Every landing at this airport is the same, whether it's the family reunion of 1995 when Grandpa gave everything away, or this one, where we will try somehow to bury our faraway Gran. The plane touches down on that hot tarmac - melty and nostril-burning even though it's April. The pink flowers in the flowerbeds are just as they have been since the '80s. I scan the arrivals area, and there is Fidel behind the wheel, looking trim in olive green with pert lapels and a name badge. He grabs my offered handshake but it turns into a hug anyway, and he holds my shoulder and looks into my eyes.

"Nice to see you, Stanna, it's been long. *Mulibwino?* You are well?"

"*Ndilibwino*," I reply, all the shyness rising to my face. "Yes, I know. It has been long." I'm searching for familiar faces. There's the bank manager – been here forever, but he doesn't see me as he scurries across the black polished floor to his waiting queue at the ZANACO counter. There's the Mfuwe Lodge safari guide team, I see the logo on their signboards, recognise their faces but names I can't access. I realise that it's all the mzungu faces that are new and strange. The Zambian faces are part of the weft and warp of my whole life, as familiar as the mural on the wall that says Welcome to the Luangwa Valley, with its naively drawn zebras and hippos. I'm reluctant to greet anyone because I can't think of names, but when the moment comes, the name sails up to my lips, as do the long-silent Chinyanja greetings.

Bwanji Mbewa, Bwanji Lyson, oh, you are a safari guide now, wow, well done. Hello, hello, no, South Africa is just ok. Only that, yes it's true, they are chasing foreigners again, yes, I know, they are crazy. See you soon, I am here for a week or two.

Greetings done, I follow Fidel to the open-topped Land Cruiser. The logo sticker on the side bears my grandfather's name, though the Lodge is no longer ours. Fidel drives fast with no clients in the vehicle, and the small talk gets lost in the wind that lifts my hair and strips away my Joburg self, as we follow the single-strip tarmac towards the national park, through the populated stretch of villages and burgeoning shops, my heart gasping at how quickly this

road has turned from farming homestead to outpost to town. Plastic bottles litter the side of the road, and small girls and boys stretch out their hands asking for sweets and ballpoint pens.

It's always like this when I come back. Memories hang on particular stretches of tree-lined riverbank, some of which no longer exist, because the river swallowed them and turned land into a new oxbow loop, and the hippo territory that once lined this piece of road is now marketplace, crowded with small-size lean-to shops.

As we turn off the tarmac and onto the sand road, the clamour starts up in my head. It's impossible to remain in the here and now. Every time I see that tree I am 13 years old with a hand-made sign that says Thunder Road. I'm nailing it to the tree with nails that are always too soft and bend under the hammer. Every time I pass that smoky clearing in the mopane on the left, I see that baby rhino bleating next to its mother's carcass, orphaned and feisty. My mind replays Patrick wrangling and wrestling, hanging on to the horn and being dragged across the scrubby soil. Replay after replay, like a dog that keeps coming back for attention, faithful and slightly tiresome. I wonder what happened to that baby rhino.

Fidel has one hand on the steering wheel and the other on his mobile phone, which has beeped and rung and buzzed all the way. He takes the calls and drives with accustomed casualness until we bump over the last stretch into the mopane forest and up to The Shacks.

The difference now is that the road diverts. We don't drive past the Lodge with its gracious entrance leading past the swimming pool and the sign marked "Reception". We don't go past the back of the Kitchen and the Workshop, waving to Isaac and Raf, and Solomon, and stopping to shake hands and greet every single member of staff. The road diverts through the mopane woodland, avoiding the best views of river and dambo, which are reserved strictly for the Clients. When I arrive at The Shacks, the sun is beginning to set and though I am windswept and tired, the smell of the city is still in my clothes.

The solemnness of the mchenja that still stands outside my mother's window, home to baboons who roost in its branches because it has the best view for predator spotting. This z-shaped sprawl of a house that started as a simple L. The roofing sheets withstand beatings from sun, rains, and 4am baboon dive-bombing.

Grandpa's house yields the memory of December 1995. A sprightly morning just after the first rains have started. I arrive to find him riding a bicycle, wobbly around the puddles and sand flicking under the tyres.

That red golf t-shirt with the Lacoste label so washed and ironed that the crocodile is as bleached as a Luangwa sandbank. In 1995 Grandpa's place is starting to look tatty. With the

grandkids away at university and my parent's energy going into the wearisome wranglings of a drawn-out divorce, the whole place needs a new coat of creosote to stave off the oncoming rains. There is a piece of gauze on the flyscreen door that has rusted right through.

“Granpa, we must fix up your mozzie-proofing, we don't want you getting malaria this rainy season."

"I haven't had malaria for years. I have a theory, you know, that if you don't leave the area for a few rainy seasons then you build up an immunity." We have heard the theory before.

"Besides, I have my net."

Grandpa's reading chair is positioned under the light which has been nailed to the wooden pre-fab wall. Above that is a shelf bracket, and suspended from the shelf bracket, a mosquito net. In his chair, with his whodunit in hand, he is shrouded from the insects that crawl in through the gaps, and pelt themselves against the fluorescent strip.

"Do you know I identified over 40 different species the other night? Marvellous."

I'm not sure if the "marvellous" is for the 40 species or the whisky my sister has just poured him.

"When do the others get here?"

"Who else is coming?"

"Your uncle."

"And Avril and Faye?"

"I said I wanted everyone to get together, didn't I?"

"It's been ages," says my sister. "We didn't even manage it for Jess's wedding."

"Cass, where's Mom?"

"She'll come now, she's checking that there's something for supper."

"Woah, look at this guy, his feelers are longer than his body."

"Did you see that one that looks just like a piece of bark?"

Cassandra and I fill the insect-busy air with chatter, our minds crawling with questions we don't want to ask, or to be answered. Zoe is asleep under a mosquito net, close enough to hear if she wakes and cries, but Cassie is antsy.

"It's your grandmother," Grandpa had said. "We need to raise some funds, she has medical costs and we need to support her when she goes to England."

"*Eng*land?"

"Why can’t she stay in South Africa,” I ask, “where we can keep an eye on her? I’m about to graduate, I could move to Joburg."

Grandpa looks out through the battered mosquito gauze. Outside the rain starts up again, falling in sheets and making a racket on the roof.

“Your grandmother has never been happy in Africa, if truth be told. Her happiest memories are of her childhood in England. I have an obligation to help her.”

If it seems strange that Grandpa is talking of selling up his life’s work in order to support the woman who left him over 30 years ago, no-one is saying so. I can see by the way Cass’s fingers are twiddling and turning, clenching and unclenching, that she is a termite’s nest of unsaid things.

"What about all her properties in South Africa? Surely the money isn't all gone?" I have to raise my voice, there is such a din from the rain.

Grandpa sighs. There is a threadbare yellow towel over his knees. He adjusts it, and I see that he is wearing plastic bags over his feet, so that when he goes for his nightly pee under the stars his feet won’t get muddy.

Mom appears at the door balancing a tray of mismatched mugs and spoons, a blackened pot and loaf of bread. She smiles, first at me, then Cass. Still wearing her khaki safari shirt from the day’s work of ministering to clients. “I’m sorry darlings, I suppose you feel like your inheritance is being taken away.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, it’s not that!” Cass is cross. “It’s just...it was a mistake to sell Chibembe, and I don’t understand what will happen to us, here. Who will be our neighbours? Will they be...will they be our sort of people?”

“Yes! I see exactly what Cass means,” I say. “What if they put up fences? What if they don’t let the elephants through? What if they cut down trees?”

"Your uncle Jerry is going to help with the sale,” says Mom, patting me on the knee. I’m sure he will find the right person."

Uncle Jerry. Cass and I look at each other. We both know Granny can't look after herself anymore. We saw it the last time we visited. Her mind loops and meanders like a river full of oxbows.

"There's been a diagnosis. The mini-strokes are connected to the onset of – well it is strictly speaking not Alzheimers but effectively the same thing."

"In the UK she can get proper care," says Mom.

"We don't want to burden you girls. You’re just starting out."

“We don't want to sell the Lodge.” Trust Cass to come out with it, blunt as can be.

"Well, we haven't been out of overdraft for years. None of my children can manage the upkeep. Nor the grandchildren. You have your lives to live."

It's an accusation. We have failed. We never come home for the holidays. We chose no-good degrees that will keep us poor and far away. We know these things, though they are never spoken.

"We will keep our residence, don't worry – it's a sub-division, not a total sale," says Mom. "The Shacks will stay in the family."

"That's what we said about Chibembe."

"Girls, girls," says Grandpa, "surely you're not still sentimental about Chibembe?"

"How could we not be, it's where we were raised. Chibembe was the best."

"Yes, it's a pity Chibembe was not practical for us," says Grandpa. "I'd always hoped it could be viable. We stuck it out as long as we could."

"You've put everything you had into the Lodge." Cassandra is not giving up that easily.

"It's a pity we're not more money-minded as a family, isn't it?" Mom's remarks are not particularly helpful. I know that what the grandchildren have to say won't count. His mind is made up, and that's that. We will try to discuss figures and point out where and how they are being ripped off, but...

"Bushcamps too?"

"We will keep Luwi camp."

That cool blue feeling in my stomach.

"We'll discuss it further when your Uncle Jerry gets here." Meaning, the men will close ranks and that will be that.

This scene feels like a lifetime ago. I suppose it was. Two years later Grandpa died and Uncle Jerry took charge of all things paperwork, deeds and wills. Mom had a tall grass fence built and turned her back on the lodge. Cass moved back to Joburg with Zoe, then back to Luangwa again. She'd fight with Jethro, make up with Jethro, leave Zoe with me and go on long road trips to music festivals I only heard about. Those years are a blur. It took a while for Granny to finally get her dream of bluebells and daffodils, and by then, her mind had unspooled, and when she reached into her basket of stories they came out tangled. Only the ones from her deep past remained intact: tales of her fierce mother riding horses on the Afghan plains, her British army officer father returning home with fevers, and the way she had to feed him cold soups and unlace his boots.

2

Whenever I come home, on the first night I like to stay up late, alone. I burn a candle and drink a beer, listening. I listen to nightjars and bush babies soothing each other. I wait to hear hyenas whooping, across the river, and perhaps a lion call. I don't try and write in my notebooks, not yet. That will happen in the early morning. The first night is about dissolving the city, letting each familiar noise tether me back to this place, in the dark.

In the morning, the air is thick with sound and Reece and Joburg and the dogs and the traffic have faded into something that could have just been a lightly imagined other life. Above my head in the roof is a squirrel's nest. The baby wakes and the parents argue; a throaty rattling chucking sound. Morning doves, or is it mourning doves, I never knew, pretty damn repetitive aren't they, making up the wind section. Egyptian geese cranky, further away at the lagoon and down by the river. Hadedas sound from time and rattling cisticolas, cuckoos, warblers, shrikes, babblers squabble on above the oboe hippos who are just getting on with their brassy grunting. Sometimes (often these days) you'll hear an elephant protest, conflict with a fisherman on a bicycle path or being chased away from a kitchen. That's the shout that stops you and sends blood pulsing to your head if you hear it when you are on foot on your own.

Grandpa used to say to us, the dove has lost its children – one, two, one two three, oh oh oh o-o-o. And the other one responds – Poor father, poor father. Hippos form a chorus with benign laughter. It's only a life, they pooh-pooh, fat patriarchal clan of cousins registering their 20-second comments and riffing in deep bass appreciation of each other's fart jokes. I have not heard the boom of ground hornbills here this morning but a giant eagle owl's staccato hoots remind me how early it is.

A female bushbuck creeps by the window now, shadowed by a young male. I remember the bushbuck we bottle-fed and nursed with its broken leg in a cast and I wonder if this could be her offspring. They do these timid tiptoes every morning. Yes, there goes another elephant scream, but this time on the other side of the river, shouting at some pesky truckload of tourists that rounded the bend too fast. The baboons haven't even woken yet, they've got lazy here, fattened on mother's mchenja tree.

Oh wait, they didn't roost here last night. There's the breakfast squabble 100 metres away. And near that, a Land Cruiser is being coaxed awake, its ignition whining at the indignity. People here don't look after their vehicles.

I understand it a little better now. Without the night noises of the bush I have been a singer without a melody, without an orchestra. I need my backing band.

It's easy to think everything is fine, everything is the same, the wildlife populations are thriving. But the concentration here around the Shacks and Mom's place is because they have nowhere left to hide.

3

I find myself procrastinating before I go to visit my sister. It's early anyway. I go into Mom's pantry, feeling like something to nibble. A fan of small bananas waves at me. I peel one, the skin is thin. White inside, and not sweet like supermarket bananas. It's cool and dim in here. The bulb fizzes when I hit the light switch. I pick up a battered tin. This tin has been here for 30 years. Once it was fat with proud Quality Street chocolates – an unheard of treat that we marvelled over and rationed. Now the pink and white is layered with unknown browns, the fancy ladies with their parasols and men in top hats are chipped and scratched, hazed over with Luangwa grime.

Inside there is enough flour to tip into a mixing bowl – roughly two cups. I break a pale egg into the mixture and a tot of sunflower oil. A small unlabelled plastic container contains some hardened white powder that could well be baking soda, so I scrape in a teaspoonful. A glob of dark forest honey. I smash in the last of the bananas.

When this mixture comes out of Mom's oven, the door creaking in surprise, it resembles the crumbling mud cakes we used to make down in the gully.

There is a new dwelling on the path down to the river. We don't use the dambo way anymore, Mom said last night. There is a group of grumpy buffalo in the thicket. It's grown over so much. So I take the forest path and am stopped short by the sound of a Jack Russel barking and jumping at a gridiron fence. Suburban creep. Someone I don't know, sandy blonde hair and short beard, is standing at the fence. Good looking in that "I've styled myself as a ranger" sort of way. He slowly lifts his hand up as I wave. I realise with shock that to him, I am the intruder.

Orange laterite and crunchy stones laid down to stave off the wet season mud. Off to the side, you can see where some fool got stuck six months ago, their ruts hardened into embarrassing trenches now. Where the road turns to sand again, two fresh strips of tyre tracks and a hollow in my belly.

A snake streaks across the path. Olive green grass snake. The elephant dung on the right is a few days dry.

Deep breath. "Sistaaaaah!" I throw my voice and wait. The house has its back to the path – a solid back, with no window and the plaster-ochre mix peeling off in big scabs.

What was once a neat bamboo gate has parted from the fence, giving up any attempt to make a boundary between yard and bush. A concussed pot lies at an angle by the back step,

releasing a straggled piece of geranium. The pole and thatch studio retreat that Dad built still lurks in there somewhere, but mud brick walls have engulfed the original structure, dated to circa 1997 when Zoe was a baby. Bricks to keep predators out, and a patchwork of mosquito gauze to hold malaria at bay.

The pottery studio still leans up against the termite mound, tamarind tree dropping fruit onto the bent zinc roof, strewn with scruffy thatch which the baboons have pulled off. One of them blinks at me from up there, as I pause on the threshold. Her baby takes fright and scurries back to her, she absentmindedly drags it and lets it clasp onto her belly. Its pink sticky-out ears are backlit by the morning sun.

I'm trying to feel something. I remember the rage, regret, jealousy. I remember Dad's email: "We're giving Cassandra the river house – just for now, I know it's your special place, but she needs more space for the baby." I remember Mom's lack of email. I don't feel anything except a slight dread in my chest.

"Yoohoo!" This is my mother's voice coming out of me now. Cassandra might still be in bed, I realise. Hung over. I hope she's alone. I walk around the side of the house. The Land Rover is there. "Hellooo?" My voice is softer than it should be if I am really calling her. There was that time I walked in on her and Alex. Let that not happen again. I imagine her, slumped over a miserable piece of toast, her mind circling around the whisky bottle at the back of the cupboard, tempted to dose her morning coffee.

I hear the door crash. She comes charging around the corner, with all the energy of a baby elephant in full frisk. "What the fuck?" She grabs me by the shoulders, extended arms-reach grip to get a good look then full-squeeze hug. "Fuck's sakes! No-one told me!"

"Really? I told Mom to tell you. And also – check your email."

"No one tells me anything." Her eyes are very intense. "No one tells me a fucking thing. Look at you. It's actually you. Come, come."

We go around the side of the house, in between the poles of the wilting garage and the rough ochre plaster of the wall.

"The Landie is still running?"

"Needs a new set of springs. Mind that pole – termites started on it, it's gonna go any day, I must prop it up."

Round the corner, and there we are – the Luangwa River, same as ever ever. Smooth arc of brown water, a run of silky white sand, the bump and dip of short-cropped green down to the

gully where I sat and had my teenage sulks and covert cigarettes. There's my spot under the trichelia, and my, how that tree has grown.

"Come!" She's impatient, holding the door.

"Wait. I'm looking. I don't get to look at this every day, you know."

"Oh blah blah. Come in, the monkeys are super cheeky these days, I don't want to leave the door open. Come, you can still see the view from inside."

It's true. The door is a wobbly frame holding up some mosquito gauze. Two poles with daubing in between form makeshift pillars on either end of a slow curve of low wall which supports a massive window. Once upon a time it was not much more than a chitenje. There's the table where I used to sit and write A level English Literature compositions, early in the morning before he'd wake up. There is the river bank, recklessly beautiful and unfeeling. I am momentarily dizzy, and grip the chair, put down the sweaty packet containing this morning's baking efforts.

"What's in there?" She heaves a pile of laundry off the chair.

"Golden brown banana cookies with hardly any smell of weevils."

"Ah, Stan, how amazing. Trust you to bake on your first morning back. Wait – it is your first morning back, right?"

She knows.

"Have one."

"Because Anderson said he saw you at the bridge yesterday." She sniffs one of the biscuits. "I said it couldn't have been. But now here you are."

"Got any coffee?"

"No milk though."

"I don't mind."

"Not any fancy stuff – only instant."

"Ah, no cappuccino? No flat white?" I go to the back wall which is made of solid brick: one side of the very secure bedroom they built to keep children safe at night. A counter top with blue plastic kettle, ceramic jars with mismatched lids; rejects from her pottery studio. Some car part that I can't identify is sitting next to the kettle, along with Tabard mosquito repellent lotion and a copy of Newman’s bird book.

"I take it you came without your appendage?" she says.

"Reece has to work."

"Oh, good."

"Cass."

"What? It is good, isn't it? For you, I mean."

"For him, probably."

"Oh fuck, whatever. At least you can be free here."

"I'm not unfree at home."

"Oh, come on. You know what I mean."

"He sends his condolences. About Granny."

She sets a mug down next to me. "Sure."

The hippos in the river snort. A plover frets, down on the sand. I don't want to talk about that stuff.

"And Zoe? Not coming, apparently."

"Too expensive."

She bites into one of the biscuit and coughs. "God these are terrible. It's ok. I'm amazed we're even doing anything for her, I didn't think we'd get it together."

"It's not like it's a real funeral or anything."

"No, but still. We are gathering. I didn't think you'd come." She's not looking at me, but it seems harmless. Not a poisoned arrow.

"Nearly didn't."

"Mom doesn't give a shit either."

"Don't say 'either'. I give a lot of shits. I guess I just, I said goodbye a long time ago."

"It's weird. She can't even attend her own burial. If we were African we would fucking make a plan, get the body here. There's nothing to grieve - no coffin, nothing."

"But Cass, she hated Africa. She must be in the English soil and fertilise some daffodils or something."

She's wrestling with something. Something more than Granny and faraway burials. Something more than keeping an eye on the time so that she can have a 12 o'clock gin.

"I can't believe Zoe is almost finished varsity," she says.

"Can you fucking believe it?"

"I just said I couldn't."

We fall into easy chatter. Mom has had another bout of malaria. There are new camps going up all over the place. Eneria's twins both got jobs at the Croc Farm bar and a client complained to management that they were abusing their staff by making them do double

shifts and never giving them time off. Time stretches and turns back on itself like an oxbow loop. The hippos in the river underscore our stories with baritone laughter.

At some point she says, a little too casually, "So did you meet my neighbour?"

"Handsome dude with a Jack Russell?"

"Chris."

"Uhuh."

"He's taken."

"Never stopped you before."

She grins, her eyes flash green. "How long till a leopard takes that dog though."

"How long has he been here? What's he doing here?"

I'm staring at the river line and all the anxiety has melted away and it doesn't matter that she is here and I am not and that Joburg has swallowed me and my inbox is full of creditors' letters. It's just us and it's just the same as always.

"Carnivore research."

"Huh?"

"Chris. The Jack Russell dude. He is with the carnivore programme. Counting wild dogs, collaring lions, stuff like that. And the 'girlfriend' is doing elephant research. Sort of."

"Oh. Another one. What now, chilli pepper fences, bees?"

"Something like that."

I feel a pang in my chest. That's supposed to be my life. Why didn't I just become an ecologist and marry a biologist and live by the river and study elephants or termites or something?

Cassie is restless now, making piles of papers, putting stray books onto the shelf.

"What time is it? Almost 12. Shall we have a little something?"

"Brunch?" I say, though I know it's not brunch she wants. "I could make some eggs..."

"Aren't you thirsty? I think I may have a little something in the cupboard. We should toast Granny, don't you think?"

"Cass. Not for me. I still have to –"

"Still have to what? Just a little toast. Come on, I haven't seen you for fucking ever, and you didn't even come straight here."

"Mom is planning a big meal tonight. Don't you think we should –"

"Aunty Faye arrives this afternoon. Mom will be just fine."

The sun is high when we stumble out, giggling and talking over each other. “Let’s go down to the river,” she says. “No, it’s too hot, way too hot. I know! Let's go to the Croc Farm!”

It's too late to do anything now. The only thing lining our stomachs are those dry biscuits that made us choke and drink more gin and tonic. At least at the Croc Farm there will be food. So she slams the Land Rover door and pulls her bush hat low on her head.

"Wait, I thought you said the Landie wasn't ok?"

"Shaddupp and get in. It's fine. Just a bit bumpy."

As we pass the fence with the Jack Russell she slows the car down to an idle. Nothing stirs. This house wasn't here the last time I visited. It has been built to rent - cold grey cement blocks painted over with a red ochre slurry. Glass in the windows, even. She is hunched over the wheel, tense for a moment, her hair windswept and the same colour as a lioness. Her eyes, when she turns to me, are hard.

"Probably went north." She slides into gear and we jolt off.

When we arrive at the Croc Farm my heart sinks. There are just too many big 4x4s in the parking lot and I am not hungry for company. Cass, however, is a rock star. Her entrance is all bubbles and bravado. She greets Davie who is uncoiling a hose pipe at the entrance, and comments on how lush the lawn is looking. Davie giggles at her easy fluency, greets me and then asks me in ChiKunda if I remember how to speak ChiKunda.

"*Pangono*," I falter. A little. I am forgetting, I say. "*Naiwala*."

"Ah, *machona*," he says to Cass knowingly. It's a word I remember. Detribalised.

"Come, let's go see Elina in Reception."

Elina has known me since I was eight. She comes running out to shake hands. "Ah, Stanna, *mulibwanji, onani, mafuta*." I am fat. It's a compliment. Elina is exactly the same, she never seems to age – her skin stretched taut over regal cheek bones, deep-seeing eyes that rove from Cassie's face to mine. Only her hands give away that she is old enough to be my mother.

"And how is your daughter? How is Zoe?" she asks Cass, but is looking at me.

Cass turns her gaze slowly onto me. "Zoe is – well, I don't know. We haven't spoken about Zoe. How is Zoe, Stan?"

"Zoe is well," I say, for the benefit of Elina. "She is having fun at university."

"She is too clever, like you, Stanna. But she mustn't forget where she comes from." The sound of a phone ringing inside the dark of the office. "Ok, ok, I am coming. Sorry, my girls, the telephone - come to my village, I will cook you nsima."

"Mustn't forget where she comes from, ey?"

I see that same something I saw earlier – she's grasping, wrestling. There's a chord in me that feels it too, and for a minute the dizziness is back.

"Cassie, let's not."

"Come, I'm thirsty."

The Croc Farm. They've renovated since the days of sordid tequila parties and rainy season video marathons - endless reruns of *Dances with Wolves* and the complete series of *Cheers*, watched on home-recorded VHS sent out to us from England or donated by some client. As if the TV set had flickered and buzzed, I am transported back to that screened-in sitting room with sick fluorescent tube lighting and insects pinging against the gauze. Cass and I running out when there's a break in the rain, skidding through the mud towards the croc pens and peering over the top of the concrete wall to see the swarming writhing croclets in murky green water. They are separated from the lazier teenager crocs next door. I see Cass for a second, 11 years old and blonde bird's nest hair, her sweet face turned to me as she holds a squirming croc in her fist, squawking at its tiny teeth. The Croc Farm's claim to fame is that it was the first place to sell ice cream in the whole Valley, and we –we were the first customers.

This is the new bar, built upstream a good distance from the old one after too many incidents with drunk visitors playing daredevil with the croc enclosures. The new bar is handsome polished hardwood and bottles that rest in those fancy holders that dispense a measured tot. In the old bar, the bottles were locked in a metal cage away from the baboons and the thirsty safari guides. It's cool under the thatch. The floor is slasto with concrete veins – what they used to call Crazy Paving.

There's a pool, glistening blue, and a big cement fire pit with chairs in a circle. The chairs claim space, with their slatted reclining backs and their stories to tell.

"Are these the same chairs we had at Chibembe, or is there only one type of lounge chair that ever gets made here?"

"Haha, yeah – Jeff the carpenter, he's been making those for decades, like no-one ever thought to bring him a magazine or something with some new designs. Woah. Mzungu alert. I guess that's what the 4x4 convention is all about."

A group of seven or eight white folk are walking in single file along the river bank. They are all dressed in khaki with long socks and veldskoens, some wearing peaked caps with a yellow logo – SLCS." I shoot her a questioning look. "South Luangwa – what? Camp Scouts?"

She giggles. "Conservation Society. The anti-poaching lot. Come, let's go sit in the shade."

At the bar, Wiseman cracks several jokes about what she will be drinking, whether tea, coffee, water, Fanta, Coke or Sprite. He's trying to draw me into the exchange but I fumble and she doesn't help me out.

"I'll have a Coke," I say.

"And a beer to go with it."

"To go with yours," grins Wiseman at Cass and then the joke is exhausted and she's scanning the chalk menu. A trio of overlanders step in under the thatch – a woman in her 30s with sunburnt shoulders and a kikoi; her boyfriend or partner – dark longish hair and sandals. With them, a boy who looks about as bored as a teenager can, slouching against the heavy varnished countertop. Behind us, the river is almost a mirage against the baking white sand. Baboons on the dry bank are turning over clumps of earth in search of mud crickets.

"How's the game viewing?" she asks the teenager.

He shrugs. "It's ok, I guess. We saw elephants today. No lions."

"Lions are boring," she winks at him.

We take our drinks to the river's edge.

"Awkward," she says, swigging the Mosi out the bottle. "Fucken awkward age. Just like Zoe."

I say nothing, staring out at the river. A massive croc basks on the far bank.

"Not as awkward as that though," she grins suddenly. "Incoming."

I look up, and see the thing I have been dreading all day. Damian. Khaki swagger, dusty hat with a porcupine quill sticking out of it, and, I swear I can smell his scent, even though he is 200 metres away.

"Fuck."

"Wanna go? Or wanna have some fun?"

"Neither," I say, but I can taste whisky and cigarette kisses from two decades ago. "Where is he these days, anyway? I thought he had moved to Lusaka."

"Damian? He's around. Lives in town, comes up for the beginning and end of the season, to collect his cash. Big bwana now, you know. One of the few people who is actually getting rich around here."

"From safaris?"

"No, from exploiting the locals. He has a factory. And partnerships. With other rich people. He owns half the fucken river."

"Really?" My voice feels a bit far away from my ears.

"Kingfisher, Hippo Lagoon, and Chivumba Plains. So he's basically got the market all tied up. A budget bush camp, a middle of the range photographic and a luxury tented. Oh my god, look at you."

"What?"

"You're all fidgety and nervous. Where are you going, I thought we were going to get another round."

"We should be getting back anyway. Mom will want us back."

"Come on. Put that bag down."

"I just don't have the energy for it, Cass."

"It was like a million years ago." She is looking at me with that lioness stare when the yellow flecks in her eyes shine out and trouble is coming. I need to get her home. I need to get me home. I'm watching to see if he has spotted us and if we can escape without having to make eye contact. If he has, he is playing it cool. Although this is Damian we are talking about. He will always be playing it cool.

"Damian the devil!" she yells, across the chitenje. The overlanders turn and stare. She's turning it on, big voice, big charm, big actressy bonhomie. I am watching him closely. There is a gear shift in that bowlegged gait, an almost stumble, a recovery and then back to an even more swaggery swagger. He's just noticed us. No chance for out now.

"Looky look! The sisters of mercy. How are you guys? Eh? Anastasia. How the hell are you?"

"Hi." I am still standing, poised to go.

Cass is very much sitting, legs stretched in front of her, empty beer bottle in hand, leaning back on the khaki cushions and watching me with a withheld grin. Pass the popcorn, she seems to be saying, though thankfully she doesn't. I am still taller than him, obviously. The

kiss is awkward – his cheek is all stubble and dust and the nervous laugh I remember jutters out as I step on what I think is his foot but it's not. It's my bag but I apologise anyway.

"Ana. Great to see you. Hey, Cass. It's been helluva long. What's up? What's news? What're you girls doing? Can I get you a drink?"

"Just a Mosi for me, thanks Dames," says Cass, as smooth and quick as a croc sliding off the riverbank into the deep water. "Stan will have a G and T. We were just about to get another round."

"We were actually just about to go. I promised Mom I'd cook supper. We have a thing – a family thing."

"The matriarchs are assembling," she says with just a shadow of a slur. "To honour the passing of Audrey Emily Barrie who has left this mortal plane."

"Oh, dear old Auds, shuffled off at last, did she? Well. Sorry to hear. That was a good innings. They don't make them like that anymore."

"No, they don't." She is unreadable now, and the pause is too long. I am looking at the river and I know he is looking at me, I feel it in my throat, and there are no words there. I sling the bag over my shoulder and open it to scramble for money, a purse.

"Don't babe, it's fine, I have a tab. Wiseman knows I'll pay. Eventually! Right, Wise?"

She laughs with him. "Sorry, Damian. Sister's giving me the mamba eyes. We'll rain check. I'm dying to know how the building is going." She's looking at me pointedly. "You know Damian has bought the land on the island there, opposite where the elephants cross?"

I didn't.

"Yep. Remember, the area which Grandpa said would remain untouched, as per the 'Gentleman's Agreement'?"

"Er, yeah."

"The wildlife corridor. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well Damian's going to build a camp there. Not just a camp with chalets but an actual campsite too. A budget campsite. For overlanders. Like this one, but bigger. And a bar. With a pool table."

If he's feeling awkward, it doesn't show. There's a rehearsed smile sweeping over us both. "Gentleman's Agreement, remember that? Funny. Your grandfather wasn't one for contracts and title deeds, eh? He was from another time. You know, girls, wouldn't you rather it was

me, someone who knows and loves the area, instead of some stranger, or worse, some Chipata Indian who will just come use the land as a hunting base?"

We are both staring at him. Something hard and knotty is stirring in my chest. The smile has been replaced by an earnest frown, two deep lines leading down to the sweaty nose.

"You'll love our plans," he says, "they are very respectful to the habitat, and leave lots of space for the elephants to cross. I know your grandfather would have approved. So of course it would be good to get your approval too."

"I'm still stuck on 'Gentleman's Agreement'," I manage to say.

A squeal comes out of Cassie, like a baby warthog.

"Yes!" she says. "That's my sis. There she is. There's life in her yet."

"Heheh." He laughs that rickety laugh and now I'm cross. I don't want to cry. It's like a series of shutters are lifting, one after the other. Behind each one is a flash, and the flash comes with a torrent of words, but it blinds me, the flash, and so I can't see or hear the words. There are only hot cheeks and the feel of a cold bottle being pushed into my hand. I turn on Cass.

"Cassandra, I don't want another drink. I want to get back to Mom. We have a fucking green curry to cook for ten people."

"Drink!" she orders, and her eyes are alight.

I drink.

"Drink!" she orders Damian, who has also just been handed a Mosi bottle. He swigs.

"A toast!" declares Cass. "To Audrey. May her soul remember the things she forgot. And may the elephants always cross at the crossing spot."

I am 16 years old, skinny as a baby impala but fattening myself on moonbeams, poetry and 19th century literature. I am Tess of the d'Urbevilles; I swoon under Heathcliff's heavy-browed gaze. My arms are full of broken things, I am a perfectly kindled campfire ready for the touch of a flame. I am ripe for the plucking. Good God, whoever it was who said that youth is wasted on the young could use me as their case study. Look at me now with my slow blood and thickened girth. I wish I could go back there and tell myself not to be plucked. Not by him. Not by the man with a copy of *Still Life with Woodpecker* under his arm, and a porcupine quill stuck in his hat.

She's whootling at me as we approach the car, making lunges for the car-keys which I'd snatched and thrown into my bag. She is bent on getting in the driver's seat. I head her off at the gate and stand firmly in the way.

"No, Cass"

"Oh, fe fucksakes," she blurrs at me. "Thisiszznt Joburg. Therezz no copss anyway."

"There may not be cops but there are elephants."

"Elephants. Pfft. We should stay for a sundowner and watch them cross."

"You're not driving. Simple."

"You think I don't drive like this whenever I like, when you're not arrownd."

"The difference is, I'm not in the passenger seat those times."

"Corrrrect. You're not arrouwnd." She manages to swipe at me once to grab the keys and I change tack.

"Cass, come on, man, I haven't driven this ole Landy for ever. Lemme have a go. It's always you, you get to drive her every day, and I miss it, Cass. I miss it so much." It works.

"Well," she mutters, then swoops in with "you must give her lots of gas. Don't idle, she stalls."

Landy is smooth under my feet, and it fills me up to be able to drive, to feel the thrum, to grasp the big steering wheel, warm from the afternoon sun.

"Fuckn Damian," she is muttering. "What does he – he does nothing for us. Approval. Fuck. Why should we?"

"You were stirring, Cass. Totally stirring."

"No, no, Stan, you don't know. You're not here anyway. You an your fuckn keep the peace bullshit, no. No. You've missed the turnoff."

"I haven't missed the turnoff."

"Have."

"On purpose."

I drive another 200 meters and take the rutted track on the left, to Kalowani pan. Majestic winterthorns hold court over the skyline, where the sun is starting to sweeten into orange.

"Remember when we used to come and ride bikes here?"

"You know what the problem is, Stan. The problem is, you keep saying remember remember but for me it’s not remember, it’s just life, the same everyday. Nkay?"

"I was 16. I was on my bike. He came down this road in that horrible little green Jeep he used to drive. It was the simplest thing in the world. We fell in love."

"You did. You fell in love."

"You know, I like to think it was mutual."

"He was a grown-up, you were a kid. 15 fucken years. If some guy 15 years older than Zoe tried that shit with her, I'd fuckn kill him."

"Even if she was happier than she'd ever been?"

"Don't confuse things."

I grin. "Grandpa said to him – one of the times that Mom and Dad were away and it was just us in camp – he said, 'I do expect you to behave like a gentleman.' He got that wrong. Gentleman's agreement." I look at her but the laughing has gone, her whole face has soured.

"Our grandfather was not a particularly good judge of character. Can we go now, I need a nap."

"Shh. Look. Eles." I hear them before I see them. A crack as a branch is broken off a mopane tree. A trunk threading through the combretum bush followed by the shake of her head, turning to watch a young one scurry between tall legs. My heart catches for a moment and I start the engine.

"There are more," Cassie warns, "it's the wonkytusk herd. They must've crossed over early. That's the matriarch there – see, she has one tusk bent backwards."

I don't tell my sister that I know this group intimately from my dreams. That when I wake way before dawn on a Joburg morning, with neighbourhood dogs barking and suburban alarms sounding, I am surfacing with a dream of this exact group of elephants. I've known them since I was a girl, except I don't call her Mrs Wonkytusk. I've known them from when I slept in the mud-brick house, waking in the early hours, listening to them munching outside my window. I have dreamed about them nightly since Gran died. And before that too, sometimes close-up with breathing and footfall, other times they are running scared, ears pinned back, screams. And now I know why. Because Damian is building a camp at the crossing point. They are hounded, crowded, curtailed.

I count six adult females, a baby and two younger ones, ears pinned back and keeping close together. My foot hovers over the accelerator, mindful of how the Landy likes to stall. My sister sways slightly, giving herself to the moment, the sunset, the infra-sound rumble in the earth under us.

"Less go," she says. "I'm fucken hungry."

We head back to where they are waiting. Aunt Winnie with suitcases from London will be clucking about how do we live with so many mosquitoes. Her sister Faye, evaporating against the dusty cushions, will be sniffing into her handkerchief and recounting how

beautiful Audrey was when they were girls. The dreaded questions about husbands and jobs will rain down on us. We will tell brave tales about our cherished Zoe who is not here to defend herself. We will argue about whether or not to put soy sauce in a green curry. My mother will fret about mosquito nets and are there enough knives and forks. And in the dim background, receding away from the clamour, my uncle will nurse his whisky and remember better times.

Cass makes me stop at the fork, to drop me off before she heads back down to the house by the river.

"See you in an hour." She looks at me with one eye closed, trying to focus. "I just need to freshen up."

"I'm giving you up for dead then."

"You'll see me, don't worry. We have to make a green curry." She revs and drives off into the mopane forest. The dusk and the trees swallow her and I turn towards the quiet of The Shacks.

These trees have seen it all. They've seen the bamboo-and-thatch basket houses, the asbestos prefab on concrete slab, that time when all the dwellings were tin-can-sized and the concrete ablutions block boasted the only plumbing in a 50km radius. These trees have seen me do adolescent angst, break my heart over dead pets, and learn to assert myself over the blue-balled male monkey that ruled the place.

The Shacks. Shackville. Once, it was descriptive, and now the name has stuck, despite gentrification. It all exists at the same time though, the higgedly-piggedly mess it was in the beginning and the unified red ochre proportions of the current village. The space in front of the dambo is empty now, given back to the baboons. But when I look, I see that it was the obvious spot for the first chitenje, and there we are, eating breakfast at the round wooden table, Cass practising card tricks on us, eyes quicker than a scorpion tail. Then concrete pillars replaced the gum poles, hurricane lamps made way for dodgy home-wired electrics, and a flickering TV screen played reruns of *Cheers* on a clapped-out VCR through insect-rich rainy seasons. Now the chitenje has gone. Mom pulled it down, the whole thing, after Grandpa died and she laagered herself in to her many-roomed new brick house with en-suite bathroom and not-so communal kitchen.

The lights are on there. Aunts and uncles send cascades of laughter up into the trees where the baboons are roosting. I open the door to the little rondavel – the elephant house, where

Mom's made a bed for me. There are holes in the mosquito net and the bedcover is faded to a geometry of threadbare greys. Perhaps there is just enough time to lie down and catch myself.

In the stillness I can hear the scratch and creak of wood borers in the roof poles, in the thatch. There is nothing here that doesn't move with life in it. I slept and woke and dreamed to all these sounds, and it's so easy to melt back into it.

Until you hear footsteps on the path and a tap-tap on the door.

"Ana?"

Groaning awake, mouth thirsty. "Ma?"

"Oh, sorry darling, are you asleep?"

"No, Ma, it's fine."

"It's just that – well I looked for you earlier but you had gone off somewhere."

"I was with Cass, Ma."

"It's just that I've invited Leonard and and Faye and – Aunty Winnie has arrived. I was wondering if you girls were –"

"It's ok, Mom, I know. We said we'd cook, we're still going to do it."

"Oh, that's wonderful."

"Ok, Mom." And I close my eyes.

"I've started chopping already."

I don't answer.

"And the chicken has defrosted."

"I'll be right there, Mom, just having a quick quick shower."

"Are you sure, darling, maybe you need to rest."

"No, Mom. It's fine."

Mom's green curries are not made from shop-bought paste. There's garlic to be peeled and crushed, lemongrass to be minced in the whining coffee grinder. Green curry means business.

"Thank you, darling."

"Ok, Mom"

"It's a relief to have your help."

"Of course."

"There's also – can you open the door, sweetheart?"

I swing my legs over the bed. The key is fiddly in the lock.

"Sorry – I don't know why I locked. I guess it's just my Joburg habits. What's wrong?" Even for her this is agitated.

"I tried to find you."

"What is it, Mom?"

She makes that bright everything-is-fine face, with the voice to match. "Your dad's here."

"Wait, here, as in, here?"

"Not here yet, but – here."

"He's in the Valley?"

"Yes darling."

4

When did it start? I remember one time at a birthday party, the woman with the very pink handbag asking, and it was just easier to call her my daughter. And of course I remember the first time Zoe was caught saying it. She was 7. It kind of slipped out. She was fiddling with the buckle on a bag, and getting into that frustrated heat that used to consume her.

"No, Mama, you do it." I saw Zoe freeze, and move her eyes slowly over to me, then to Cass.

"What?" Cass said, her eyes a pale green shock at me.

"It's just simpler sometimes."

"But you're not her mother."

"I realise that, and I have no –"

"You're her aunt. You're her – aunt."

"Cass, it's actually easier for her – it's complicated otherwise, she wants to fit in."

"My child is no conformist."

"She doesn't need this to be a complicated story."

And then, in front of Zoe, she'd start. "Darling, please go and get your *Mama Ana's* glass." Or, "I suppose you've left your bag at your *Mama's* place."

I leave the party because I need to wee. My head is alive with the rush of being back home, I'm laughing at some story that Aunt Winifred has told. The taste of Mosi is fresh and yeasty on my tongue. Five buttons on my Levi 501s. Squat on the incline so the pee runs downhill. Check the area for snakes and scorps and anything that might bite where you don't want a bite. The moon is furious overhead, drowning out the milky way. I am 15, listening to the strand of Paul Simon's *Graceland* on a stretched cassette tape played on a gritty tape deck rigged to a car battery.

1 am twenty, home for the holidays, falling back into the embrace of cricket song and night noises. Twenty-five: listening out with one ear for Zoe, roles reversed then - Cass out drinking while I watch the baby. Thirty: walking back from the bar after Grandpa's funeral. No torch, no care, weeing under the stars for old time's sake.

Now here I am, under the tamarind tree, the sound of laughter coming from Mom's kitchen. Over the dambo somewhere an elephant screams and I hear tin cans clanging and shouts – villagers trying to close out a night raid. These were sounds we never heard so close

up from this patch of the Valley. Human settlement encroaching on Grandpa's perfect wilderness.

"NO, no! That was in 1968!" The clear pealing voice of Aunty Win, piecing together Granny's chronology. "Oh dear, oh dear," she says, "someone should write this all down."

I think of Zoe. I think of my twenty-year-old self, all the unwritten stories in front of me. The same shocking nausea giddies me as I pull up my jeans. All the unwritten stories are behind me now. It is too late. And so we will pin our hopes on Zoe. I button up, remembering for a swift moment what it was to have a taut brown stomach and angular hips. Beyond that, I remember knobbly knees and scabs, thorns in my feet and the smell of wee on dry grass.

Some wetness around my ankle tells me that I have pissed on the cuffs of my jeans. Some kind of amateur, I mutter. And giggle.

Back inside, Cass comes tilting towards me, sits close, sliding her hand down my arm and lacing her fingers over mine. "My sis is back," she slurs at Uncle Leonard. "How did I survive without her?"

I wake early to alarm calls. Baboons and puku barks and whistles. The nervous terror that grips them when a leopard is in the area. Dry mouth in the morning goes with remembering the low points and the high points.

Low point 1: Two sisters and a mother milling around a pot on a gas stove. The guests are hungry.

"I'm putting the soy sauce in now," says Cass.

"Soy sauce? We don't put soy sauce in a green curry."

"What? I do. Mom, do you put soy sauce in a green curry?"

"No darling. I never put soy sauce in a green curry."

I say nothing. There is no joy in being right any more.

Low point 2: "Darlings, tell us about Zoe? Why didn't she come? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, tell us," says Aunt Winifred, drawing herself up to full haughtiness. "Why isn't she coming? I flew all the way from London hoping to meet this elusive child."

"I'm sure Mama Ana can explain," Cass dazzles at me.

"How wonderful that you've been so involved, dear, isn't it?" Aunt Fay tinkles the ice in her gin. Then, darkly dramatic: "We girls must look after each other."

"Does she call you Mama too?" Winifred's lipstick has retreated into the rivulets around her mouth. "How lovely."

Low point 3: Uncle Leonard leaves without eating because it's taken too long for the food to be ready.

Low point 4: My phone beeps, and it's a message from my father. I smile across the table as Mum catches my eye, and I carefully turn the phone off.

Mouth dry and tasting of woodborer dust, I sit up and pull the mosquito net aside. My jeans are in a discarded heap on the floor by the bed. I switch on my phone. Yes, the message is there, I didn't dream it. *How about you meet your old dad for sundowners then?* I sigh. It's going to be a long day.

5

I sit at the sundowner spot feeling like an intruder. He had said he'd meet me there at five but "five" means nothing except "sometime before the sun goes down". With my arm outstretched now like Grandpa taught me, there's a hand's width between the ripening ball and the horizon. That means it's an hour til sunset but there's no-one to share my wisdom and calculations with and my cooler box of cold tonics, biltong and olives is slowly turning into a cooler box full of warm tonics and olive pips. I need the salt, I tell myself, wondering if he's stood me up. Across the river, a streak of dust in the air indicates the presence of game drives in the national park.

Sweeping my eyes right, to where the river bends, just on this side of the bridge, I see the bank is worn to a smooth hump, the characteristic cragginess smoothed out by generations of elephants treading and sliding down to the crossing point. This is where they gather after the day's browsing in the park. The extended family assembles up on the higher bank, teens and younger cows sliding playfully down to the mezzanine level, before they all cautiously proceed to the water's edge. Babies with tails and trunks reaching horizontal, teens jostling, and the aunts and mothers exuding that Zen calm with an edge of nerviness. Crossing the river is serious business.

I don't know where Dad is. My stomach clenches suddenly and my chest reveals a hollowness I'd forgotten was there. The rumble and whine of a car engine and I jump to my feet, thinking it's him. But it's not. The vehicle that comes into view through combretum thicket is a white open-topped Land Cruiser. A khaki peaked cap pulled over tanned brown face, I recognise him from yesterday, the guy who waved at me on my way down to Cass's house. I don't recognise the woman. Blonde fly-away hair and a sort of cowboy hat pulled over her head. That doesn't narrow it down. There are so damn many blonde fly-aways in the Valley these days, privilege refugees from the UK, gap-year caterers and volunteers in service. God.

And there's the Jack Russell. It wriggles out of the car and jumps down, turning back to look at the owner who says something to it to stop it bounding off into the bushes. I feel my blood cooling at the thought of them casually walking up to me. Time was, if you saw someone at a spot, you'd just keep driving, safari etiquette 101. Maybe they can't see me? I'm panicking now, not sure whether to keep standing and show them their mistake or sit and wait for the awkwardness of the arrival. I need Cass in moments like this.

They've parked just in front of the gulley. He's hoisting the cooler box out of the back of their Cruiser. It's a big red one with a white lid. Coleman. He sees me at 25 metres and waves, without breaking stride. Seriously? I sit.

"Hi," he says, when they emerge from the gulley's dip and puts the big red box down under the trichelia tree. "You must be – Cass's sister, right? Stanna, is it?" Just like that.

"Hi. Er." I'm mumbling. Stand up or something. No, keep sitting. Sit. I stand. I manage to say "I hope I didn't take your spot. I was waiting for someone." Your spot? Your spot? This is *my* elephant crossing sundowner spot and has been since I was a sneaky smoking teenager.

"No no! The more the messier. Always good to have fresh blood." He's opened the cold box, taken out a beer – Castle (really?) and cracked it. The Coleman is one of those with a bottle opener secreted under the handle. Hands her the beer. "This is our favourite spot, isn't it, Jules? Sorry – this is Jules, and I'm Chris. Er, it is Stanna, isn't it, or Anna, or?"

"Everyone here calls me Stanna. Pleased to meet you, Jules, Chris."

We stand there a moment, suspended like farts. She is smiling.

"Drink?" He's flipped the lid of the Coleman again, and –

"I'm not staying – I – I was meant to meet someone here but it looks like he's not coming."

"Well, the only person we met on the way here was Stereo Steve. He's going to join us."

The proverbial ground did not open up to swallow me. Instead, a small army of swords leaping to defend him.

"Oh. You know him?"

"Stereo Steve? He's legend."

"He hasn't been here in a while," I venture. The word exile floats through my mind.

"Everybody knows him," says Jack Russell guy. "He's one of the Valley's famous exports, right? We went to one of his concerts in Lusaka. He invited us back to his place afterwards – what a guy; so many stories."

"He's very entertaining," says Jules, though she seems less enthusiastic. "I suppose you know him from growing up here."

"He's my father," I say, suddenly wanting to claim all of him.

"What? That's crazy, he never mentioned the connection to your family."

I smile vaguely and look out over the river. The first of the elephants are starting to enter the water, milling at the threshold, urging the rest of the group to sharpen up and follow. As if sensing their nerves, the Jack Russell begins to bark neurotically.

"Jules is an elephant researcher," says Chris. "She knows everything there is to know about elephants."

"Really?" I smile at her. "We should talk sometime."

They are beginning to cross. The empty stretch of land on our side of the river will receive them, with its big acacias and dense thicket. The bend of the river where Damian will be building his lodge.

I hear the rattle of a vehicle approaching, and all the strength ebbs out of me.

Stereo Steve is a nickname that started way back in the 1990s, maybe before. We do nicknames in this valley. It's how we tame things: people, animals, breathtaking landscapes. By naming it you shall know it, capture it, reduce it and put it in an album.

Stereo Steve never owned a stereo. Sony Walkman was more his style, and he'd hum and tap and slap his thighs until little Cass and I wished we could be let into the secret. And then there was those times when all the inside music, the music he'd fed himself that we couldn't hear, would spill out into nonsense rhyming songs and stories, epic tales of ridicule and satire, none of which any of us can recall now in any detail. I never knew why people called him Stereo Steve. To us he was just Stefan our dad, handsome in denim and sighted less frequently than a leopard. He liked cars and bikes, used to buy them, fix them up and sell them, but I honestly have no idea how he made money, coz it sure wasn't from the music.

He's unbundling something wrapped up in a kikoi. It's a tin box that one time, probably 30 years ago, contained Danish Butter Biscuits. Some scratched traces remain of the blue and gold gloss. I know what's in it: a scanty record of two childhoods spent on the banks of a slow river with rushing interludes of green and mud. A birthday decorated with wilting bougainvillea pinned onto a bedsheet tablecloth, wild haired naked toddler on top of the wooden bar at Chibembe. Cass, wearing Raybans on a motorbike. Cass with boyfriend 1, boyfriend 2, boyfriend 3. None of Jethro. None of Damian.

"There's not much left in here, Koeks. Your sister raided it at some point. And I gave some of the negs to Jerry a couple of years back. But there's still some goodies – copies mostly. The important bits."

"Thanks, Steve."

"My Stanna Stan."

Carnivore Man and Elephant Woman have taken a stroll down to the dry part of the river bed, where they're peering at droppings or spoor on the dried clay. The silty part is like a beach,

you can dig tunnels. If you are on the clay you are too close to the river's edge and could be chomped. As I watch them, a memory develops. I am 16. I seem older. Damian is 26. Sundowners at the river, and I am with the grown-ups – with them but not of them. He is of them and with me. His hat is tilted at an angle to stop the sun shining in his eyes. He's looking at me as I tunnel, and he starts digging one too. The scrape of wet sand hurts under my nail-bitten fingers. Breathless, I suppose. Eyes locked, I suppose. Maybe not. Maybe I am looking away, maybe I am looking to see if my mother is watching. If my father is watching. My father is not watching.

Right now, he is shuffling through the photographs in the biscuit tin, as far away in time and memory as I am.

He digs until his arm is up to the shoulder in the tunnel, and me on the other side, the same. We tunnel towards each other and then the wall of sand between our fingers sags and collapses. Sweaty fingers, heart crash, the whole 16-year-old catastrophe.

There is no photograph of this moment. No photographs of our pre-dawn meetings, our late night trysts with whisky and Amarula.

"Dad," I break his reverie. There's a sleeping thing inside me that mustn't wake up.

"Stan Stan!"

"Your friend Damian is building a lodge over there. On that protected land where the elephants cross."

"I heard so."

"And?"

"And what, Koeken?"

"How is that ok? Doesn't it bother you?"

"Well, you know. Firstly it's not a lodge, it's a camp. Low impact."

"That's not what I heard. 48 beds."

"Secondly, isn't it better it's him than some rich outsider, or one of those Malawi Patels? The land's gonna go to someone. At least he knows the area, knows the – er, you know."

"The sensitivities? The delicacies?" I'm staring right at him but the nuances are lost on him. He's strumming his top pocket where his pack of smokes lives. "The politics. Yeah. Can't stop progress, my Stanna. Didn't I write a song about that?" He hums a couple of bars, then breaks into spasms of coughing. Each cough ends with a wheeze.

"Dad, that land was never meant to be built on. Grandpa always said it was a critical wildlife corridor."

His long fingers are tap-tapping on the pack of cigs like they do on the body of the guitar. He's frowning against the setting sun. Carnivore Man and Elephant Woman are making their way back up the bank. She stumbles slightly and his arm goes out to catch the small of her back. She laughs and dips her head, the light warm on the side of her face.

"Another beer?" asks my father, sliding a cigarette out of the pack and flipping the lid of the cold box. His accent shows through as a shadow, like it always does when he's on his third. Carnivore Man grins and takes the offered bottle from his outstretched hand.

"You want to share one with me?" He turns to her and as she steps up on the grassy bank she puts her foot on the edge of the tin lid, flipping the meagre pile of photos onto her dusty shoes. A growl forms in my throat, I can't stop it in time and she looks at me startled,

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says, pretending horror and hands clasped to cheeks.

I'm on my knees, picking up each photo and dusting them off.

"Oh my gosh, are these photos of your childhood? May I see?"

It's too much for me and I shake my head, putting them back into the tin.

"Come on, Stanna, show them. Show them the ones of you with your notebook and red shoes on the bar counter at Chibembe. Look at this, guys."

"Oh my God that's so cute! Look at this, Chris. Wow, you guys had such an amazing childhood. So unusual. You should really write a book."

"We're all waiting for that one, aren't we, Stan? I'm assuming that's what you want the photos for, eh?"

There is something so cold at the core of me.

"No, Steve." I manage to flip a big smile on. "I would have to wait until you are all dead."

They laugh and clink bottles and cheers each other. The sun is setting fast and I begin to pack things away.

"How long are you around for, Steve?" I ask him casually, with a familiar lightness, blunt protection.

"Not sure yet. I wanted to pay my respects – you know for your Gran's sake. Will you ask your Ma for me when is convenient to come around?"

I drain the gin and tonic from the bottom of my stainless steel picnic cup. Turning to Chris and Jules, I feel like I am seeing her for the first time. She has a hardness around her mouth which belies the otherwise simpering look, the soft hair and sweetness and cheekbones.

"You seem impossibly young to be doing a PhD." I am using my best client voice, all bravado and fake bonhomie.

She smiles at me. "Not really. It's just the English sun, you know. I expect I will look weathered enough by the end of the season."

I think I narrow my eyes slightly, because she widens hers. "You also look really young, you know. I didn't mean –"

"It's ok. So tell me, is this your first time in Africa?"

"Oh no... I did a long stint in Kenya, working with Cynthia Moss. I am such a fan. I've also been to Botswana, worked with the Institute for Elephant Research there."

"You're looking at human wildlife conflict."

"Yes! Methods to prevent crop raiding."

"Perhaps you should study the impact that that new lodge across the way will have on their behaviour and crossing routes. There will be a big increase in conflict and contact moments once there is a whole tourism operation there."

"Well. Yes. I am looking at what happens with the local people, you know, the community. With their crops. The subsistence farmers."

"The people who will encounter elephants on their way to that lodge will be locals. They are the ones going to work on bicycles. I doubt tourists will be much at risk, at least not in the same way." I mean, for fuck's sakes...

"I take it you are not in favour of Damian's proposed new camp then," ventures Chris, who until now has been watching us without saying anything.

"No." I say it so quietly I can barely hear myself. "No, I'm not."

"Well, if anyone can pull it off he can. Not sure how he got around the Chief. There is such a demand for land to build on. We were looking for somewhere, weren't we, Jules? Went to have an audience with him but, yeah, well, he just kept asking how it will benefit the area. I suppose he means himself. He's a wily old guy isn't he?"

I say nothing.

Stereo Steve is leaning up against the trichelia tree, his battered old binoculars in front of his face. "She's too diplomatic to give comment on His Honourable. She's aware of the sensitivities. Now, by my reckoning, that group of ellies is heading straight for the main road and we should be on our way. You want a ride, Stanna? I could maybe drop in on your Ma if I drop you off?"

I stare at him. Elephant Researcher looks at him, looks at me and says, "We should have a drink together sometime, Stanna? Maybe a coffee?"

"Coffee? Now there's a novel idea."

"I could make you one if you come to my place. I know you can't get a good coffee in Mfuwe."

I want to like her. I really do.

In the car, as we bump our way towards The Shacks, he turns his head sideways to catch my eye.

"Koeks," he says,

"Ja," I groan.

"Don't hurt yourself."

"Dad."

"No, really. This business with the new camp. Don't hurt yourself. There's nothing you can do."

6

It was about 1997, after Njovu Lodge was sold. Cass and I were in Joburg, Zoe was a toddler, and Cass's career started to pick up speed. It was maybe 1 am and we were on our way to 206, the hangout on Louis Botha where everyone ended up as the nights started to peak. Jethro was behind the wheel of his Colt Gallant, Cass in the passenger seat, lighting up a joint and filling the air with sweet choking smoke.

"I can't believe you drove this thing all the way from Lusaka." She leans in to hold the joint to his lips. Her voice sounds thick and dreamy.

"And it was an irie time," says Jethro, in that smooth poet's voice he had.

From where I am sitting, the back suspension so low it feels like we are inches from the ground, I can see the carved outline of Africa, suspended from the rearview mirror, swinging between the two of them. My head is giddy but in a good way, and the guy next to me passes the bottle of Black Label he was holding between his knees. We just met him this evening, at The House of Tandoor on Rockey Street; he cleaned up at a game of pool and seems to have attached himself to our little group. We kept looking at each other. There is something about his eyes, cheekbones and kind of a haunted face.

Eventually it was awkward not to just say howzit when we were both at the bar at the same time. But he's not hitting on me, nor Cass for that matter. He's kinda laid back and in spite of all those tequilas we had he seems rock solid. He is Jethro's age, I guess, which is like maybe 10 years older than us, but none of that matters on a Wednesday night in Joburg in 1997, when the lure of an extended party draws us down the hill from Yeoville and round the bend to 206.

Rockey Street has been getting a little rough. For two years on and off we partied there, golden beer-slaked afternoons turning into tequila-studded nights with enough smear and blur to make us feel like we were all part of an artwork, an extended project to make the world better, to heal the fractured country on the dance floor. But last week there was a nasty fight on the pavement. Two years back, a murder had everyone gloomy, and shops and pubs closed. Rumours of bad drug turf wars and the appearance of Hell's Angels on motorbikes overnight have poisoned the dream.

206 though, is like the mother's lap of the jol. It has Garth at the door, whose face and physique exude the message: party hard but don't be an arsehole.

"Wednesday they have a sweet line-up," says Jethro as he pauses for the lights to turn green.

"The street is not the same anymore," says Cass. "Since that guy was stabbed."

"Ridley," says our new friend, whose name is André. "His name was Ridley. Ridley Wright."

"You mean the Jamaican fellow?" asks Jethro, passing the joint to the back.

"Ja." André takes it, offers it to me, I shake my head and he passes it forward again to Cass.

"You knew him?" she asks, taking the joint.

"Everyone on the street knew him."

"You live in Yeoville, brother?"

"Nope. Pretoria. Been coming here for years though. I played with a band that performed at the Black Sun a lot."

"Oh, you're a musician then?"

"Only part-time."

"And what's yo instroment?" Jethro's soft voice, his blend of accents.

"Drums."

"Oh-keh."

"There's a parking space there," says Cass.

"I see it, Cassandra, I see it." Jethro always said her full name like that, he loved an extra syllable or two. "What kind of music you people be making?"

"You heard of Voëlvry? Afrikaans rock? No? But like I say, mostly part-time. I write about music more than I play it."

A swell of drum n bass spills out from the club.

"Here be some sweet sounds, let's go on in."

André holds the car door and closes it behind me. The night air is velvety. Jethro fist bumps with the car guard and makes some kind of pact. Garth is at the door as usual and he shakes hands with André. Cass gets a wry grin and I get a tilted head that says come on in. No cover, just come on in. The place is pulsing. I'm no good at this kind of throng, though for Cass it's like home ground, she just eases in, and an opening parts for her all the way to the bar – people recognise her and lean in for kisses, she has that thing where everyone feels they're special to her, she gives them that, no matter what.

Past the DJ booth framed in red light, and the bar, where a queue four-deep puts me off, is a corridor that leads to an outdoor space. That's where I'm headed. André asks if I'd like a drink, I say yeah please a beer, and he disappears. Outside is breath-space. I recognise a few

faces, and the smell of dope in the air makes it easy to feel like I could be in Lusaka or Grahamstown or anywhere. Jethro follows me and we find a seat. As always, a few discreet head-turning glances to take in Jethro, the bulk of him. His energy is gentle and gigantic. His dreads go all the way down his back, his face is kind and serene.

I miss him, that easy-limbed way he had of settling back, even in one of those dreadful uncomfortable plastic chairs. I'm sad that Zoe never got to know him as her dad. I wonder how different it might have been. I think of him in his low-slung Gallant, joint in the ashtray, Redemption Song crackling through the speakers. He was addicted to the road, always moving. Gigs to play in Mozambique, family to visit in Zambia. How many people have been killed on that road between Beit Bridge and Lusaka? Still now, when Zoe laughs, I see those warm brown eyes.

André gets back from the bar, carrying a barrage of drinks. Three beers, a small tray of shot glasses and a Coke for Jethro. No lemon, he says, winking at me, but not in a lechy way.

"S'okay. Where's Cass?"

"Dancing."

Jethro grins and nods, that quiet acceptance he had for her, for who she was. "Tha's good," he says.

Tequila, bless it, removes the awkwardness of pauses and transitions. It's a ritual, a something to do, like smoking and like pool. We knock back the clear poison, André and I.

"Trouble," says Jethro with an indulgent grin.

André is beautiful, it seems to me suddenly. He has this hollow eyed look, I feel like he should be in a French movie or something. His chin is dusted with end of day stubble. I want to lean against him.

"Jozi vibes night," he says. "They've had some good line-ups."

A few weeks later, I met her. I had already seen her around and was aware of her mean pool-playing skills. Tiny-boned fire-cracking warrior of a woman. Dark-eyed, multi-colour-haired, wild as the sea. You caught her eye and she held it, and she silenced me every time I looked at her, made me tongue-less. He was hers, you didn't need her to tell you that.

Anyway. Later, like nowadays, she does important work on coastlines and as we know, the people who do that sort of work are busy these days.

I was bitterly jealous of her. I could taste it, I was so bitter. I didn't know what history bonded them together, but he was unflinchingly loyal, as I discovered to my utter humiliation that night when he gently, quietly, rejected me.

"Nonsense, said Cass. "He's a man. He won't resist a naked woman and a six-pack of beer. Go and show him what you got."

Worst advice ever. I'm eternally grateful that he remained my friend and never spoke of it again.

I have just passed Kalowani Pan when I realise that maybe I don't have to go back. Everything about my life in Johannesburg seems unreal. Far less real than the morning dreams that Grandpa sends me.

But here, with the mopane stretching towards orange dusty sky in a sort of apologetic scrubland, it feels for the first time like it would be ok to just say, Reece, sort yourself out. Come join me when you are ready. I mean, we read about those women, or hear about them, don't we? "She just walked out." "She never went back". Obviously, there are far more stories about men who do that sort of thing, but those stories don't raise eyebrows the way the ones about mothers and wives do. *She just never came home.* I reach for another stick of biltong from the open bag between my thighs and everything seems possible.

It's 4 am, sometime in 1998, or was it earlier, Zoe was still small. Before the accident, anyway. I'm in the room where Cass is holed up with Zoe. Our childhood rooms, two side-by-side rondavels that have been joined in the middle by a veranda, gauze-clad and screed-floored. The spaces that held us as teenagers are stretched now. My room has become Zoe's 'day room', housing a cot with a mosquito net where she takes her naps. An indeterminate pile of baby paraphernalia – plastic constructions with things that spin and ring and crackle if you touch them. This is the pile I crash into at 4 am, disoriented by the extra bed in the small round room, and searching for the door.

I've been drinking. Still in urban night-owl rhythm, my ears tuning to the night noises. Or rather, the new night noises – whimpers and breathing, the sudden melodic gear shifts and stuttered purr of a child drifting up from deep REM sleep to the hungrier shallows. Cass is in synch with her baby girl and I am, though I won't admit it, ravenously jealous.

At the bar earlier, my sundowner beer had turned into popcorn and peanuts and Crispin the barman had run me a tab. Clients came back from their night-drives and the cute Canadian dad on safari with his 14-year-old son had bought me a whisky and then another. I leaned

into him, into the stories he wasn't telling me. (I imagined a messy divorce, or the tragic death of his wife.) Neither of them spoke about themselves beyond broad strokes of travel destinations and preferred airlines.

I *regaled* them, though, with tales of honey badgers breaking into the bar and slurping up spilled Cinzano, black mambas found in cutlery drawers and lions careering past campfires. I must have regaled him, because he kept buying me whiskeys. Until, abruptly, they were gone. He took the 14-year-old to bed with a hint that he would return, but the early bush mornings had clearly caught up with him. I burbled to Crispin about who knows what until finally, admitting defeat, I pushed back the barstool and set off down the path that connects guest lodge to staff quarters.

Mother's admonishments are muted by whisky, but still, walking this path at night is like navigating a tightrope of sound. Your ears feel out into the dark, to pick up the signs you're trained to detect. Steady heavy munching = hippo. Cracking of branches being torn off mopane = elephant. Hope that if there are any lions out there they will be deterred by the smell of booze. Grandpa showed us how to shine the torch at night – shine ahead of you on the path for snakes and scorps, sweep left and right to pick up eyes. It's a walking rhythm that conjures him by my side. Except I don't have a torch, I only went for sundowners. Don't need it anyway, my body hears the darkness with its own searchbeam. Echo-location.

And then, there. Hear that? Elephant. Quiet. Stand still. Blood pounds in my ears so hard it squeaks. Shh, there. Yep, that's elephant. It's the group, the mama group. They are browsing through the mopane. Close. Heartbeat swells in my chest, my mouth is thirsty. I should take cover – but where? The concrete lines of the half-built staff house loom at me on my left. A few steps and I am sort of sheltered, underneath the empty frame of what will be a window, and in the corner of a ghostly pre-born room with granulated concrete under my bum. I lean against the raw brick, head spinning from post-adrenalin, giggling to myself. Wait til I tell Cass I hid from the elephants in a half-built house.

But Cass is on another continent, immersed in nappies and sleep counts, her eyes telling of places I cannot travel to with her. A knot breaks open in my chest and tears come, surprised at this location, but bringing their luggage and packed-up hurts.

Then, a footfall even closer, and the soft earth-rumble. Grey-white shapes all around me now in the moonlight, softer than the concrete angles, slower than heartbeat. Mosquitoes whine at me and dive-bomb but I cannot slap at them. It's the small matriarchal herd, the

same that always crosses at the river site. Corkscrew Tail and WonkyTusk are the stupid names that safari guides have given the two leading matriarchs. How many times have I woken in the early dawn as they ghost past my window or pull the thatch off my roof?

But I am not in bed now. It feels like I'm breaking the unspoken contract. You don't touch me in my domain, my little snug hut. (First grass then wood then bricks, I'm safer than the three little pigs). Ok, I reassure myself. At least here it's in the building frame. Human house, human house, I say it silently like a spell, suddenly foolishly, stupidly scared and sober. Little ones with them, and here I am, no torch, nothing. Stupid, stupid.

She moves to within an arm's reach of me, just next to the concrete. Leans. Scratches, rubs herself against the wall. On the other side, the sound of bark being ripped off trees. I am surrounded. These guys are not passing through, they're settling in for a long feed.

Now that I am bored, sober and sleepy, the mosquitoes call their friends. They, too, settle in for a long late supper, siphoning off litres of whisky-rankled blood.

I summon an old skill I learned as a child. The skill of switching off my body-sense and tuning out discomfort. I drift off.

I wake up to a sore bum, a dry mouth, and a bruising need to wee. And a silence where the elephants had been. They have gone. I walk crisply home, the last 400 metres to a shared rondavel. Opening the door, I try to calibrate my bearings in relation to the sounds of quiet breathing. Calculate that I must be in the wrong room, and turn around, only to stumble over a pile of ringing, tinging, grating plastic flotsam. My foot kicks a thing that sings out – "The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round."

"The fuck?" says Cass, her voice wide awake and alarmed.

"Shhh, shh, it's ok"

"Fuck, Ana, I'm going to fucking kill you."

The next day, or rather, two hours later, she sends toddler Zoe into my room with a basket full of her noisiest toys. I look out the window and see the back of her disappearing into the trees.

7

Bush camps are theatres, right?

They have backstage and front of house. Backstage is the stores, the kitchen, the mechanics workshop, the radio room. The manager's house, tucked furthest away from guests so they can't hear domestic things like music playing. The stores are lined with shelves and shelves bearing boxes of custard, condensed milk and lime cordial. There's a booze room, teetering with bottles of vodka, gin, whisky. There are six-packs of tonic water, crates of Fanta, Cokes and Sprite. Guest books and itineraries and maybe a whiteboard with entrances and exits, who checks in when and which guide will be hosting which group of clients. The stage manager's depot.

In theatre, obviously, this is where you build the set, and where costumes shuffle against each other on rails, wigs are taken off and left on blank polystyrene heads. In dressing rooms with too much light, mirrors watch make-up being applied and removed, lips whispering lines on repeat and eyebrows staying surprised.

Front of House is Hello Darling and Fabulous Show and How was your game drive and Did you see a kill? It's where we are big and pretendy and we make each other feel good. Tea and sugar and snacks to keep growling bellies placated and beautiful big prints of unforgettable safari moments. Photographs you too might take if you came back a second time.

And the stage? The stage where stories unfold in real time and we confront life and death at a certain remove so that we can feel strange feelings that were buried inside us and then put away again safely? That's the game viewing vehicle of course. Bums on seats. Enjoy the ride.

"Did you see a kill?"

Why would we want to see a kill? Why is this the measure of a successful game drive? Does it obey the rules of a good drama? Isn't the protagonist a little too powerful? And who is pointing that blinding spotlight at the skittish impala anyway? Ah well, there is blood after all, and it thrills you to hear that creature baying, then bleating, and feeling the shudder of It could have been me, once a upon a time, deep in the ancestral past. So I guess the game drive is more Roman circus than Greek drama. It was fitting that Cass chose one of the politest lodges of them all for her performance.

"Named for the leopards that frequent the majestic ebony grove on the approach to the camp, Nyalubwe is one of the Valley's finest. It offers tasteful luxury accommodation, each chalet secluded from the next with its own view of the Luangwa river and a perfect plunge

pool." She's reading it with such flawless irony I can't tell when she stops reading and starts taking the piss. "You are part of a carefully curated experience, an artwork even, along with all the beautiful *objets d'art* that make this place so gloriously photographable in all its brochures." She hands me the brochure and keeps speaking.

"The viewing deck is fitted out with perfectly positioned tripods that you can plonk your camera down on, and a telescope, trained to the white beach on the opposite side of the bank where warthogs grunt through their rooting activities. In the water, hippos honk at the irony of it all."

It's Day 4 since I got here. Cassandra hasn't really stopped drinking, she's just gone down for a few naps in between it all and she is maintaining her pace pretty well. I haven't told anyone that I admire her ability to keep it smooth. It's a hand on the back of a chair to steady herself, it's leaning against a pole or door frame to conserve energy, and that easy banter that she's always been so good at. Basically, the chick can really hold her booze. Somehow it comes up that I have never visited Nyalubwe Lodge, the camp that once upon a time belonged to the family and was sold

"You've never been?" She is incredulous.

“Well, no, not since it's been redone or whatever."

"You haven't? Ok, we are going. No no. We are going." I both dread that mischief spark in her eyes, and I can't resist it.

We go. I drive. We are wearing our safari best. Cass's safari best is not very fresh, not very ironed and not very khaki. Case's safari best is leopard print pants, the lace-up leather boots that she has had since university days, denim jacket and a handmade Spanish leather bag with blue tassels. She jingles silver bracelets. Her hair is strawgrass windswept and she is beautiful. Me, I am in straw-coloured shorts and an olive green tank top. It's been a long day and I could do with a shower.

There is a boom gate before you get to the Lodge itself. A boom gate? Seriously? Cass is watching me as we approach it, amusement all over her face, nodding at my disbelief.

"I know!" she says, delighted that I am as appalled as she is.

She waves at the man at the boom, who has already opened when he recognised the vehicle – "Ah, Cassandra!"

"Sayonara!" she says and he crumples with laughter, like it's the best thing he's heard.

"Sayonara!" he says and salutes.

She grins at me. "It's an old joke." Then, "Hush, it's church."

I slow the car right down as we enter the ebony grove. Stately muchenja trees taller than a three storey building. An impala darts across the road. Baboons sit on their bums as we cruise past, stuffing ripe muchenja berries into their mouths, staring at us rudely. It does feel like a place of worship. We go up the slope and onto the alluvial plain and approach the Lodge itself. I'm still carrying a little bit of awe inside me from the ebony grove. There's a leafy screen between the main chitenje and a plinth of concrete steps where you park the game viewing vehicle to mount and dismount without having the inconvenience of climbing up anything so inelegant as a ladder.

Cassandra has already jumped out before I bring the vehicle to a halt, comes round to my side and reaches across me and the steering wheel to get her bag out the open shelf that Land Rovers have instead of a cubby-hole. She semi-accidentally leans heavily on the hooter.

"Cass! Fuck's sakes!"

"What?"

"Clients?"

"I don't give a fuck. Wait. Wait till you see what they've done with this place."

Walking through the stately trichelia trees that have been here since I was a girl, I almost glimpse an 11-year old me barrelling towards us, breathy and excited. Or a 13-year old me, with a kikoi wrapped around my waist, heading for a swim by the shady pool.

At first I'm kind of confused. There are pictures on the wall that I recognise. No, really recognise, because they are pictures of me and Cass and my mother and uncle and even my father. Childhood pictures. There's Cass in her denim shorts, bare-chested and hair a wild bleached sparrow nest. There's three-year old me, that photograph with Daniel at Chibembe bar. Red notebook and red shoes.

"I don't understand." I'm turning to her, hurt and accusing like she's the one who did this.

"Look there, look there behind the bar, do you remember that motorbike? You were so fast on that thing." She is using her most carrying voice, the same volume and authority as when she expounds about the gestation period of elephants and the breeding season of carmine bee-eaters. The picture she is referring to thumps me in the solar plexus. I am grinning into the camera, part soft-eyed giraffe, part adventure-seeking rocknroll chick. Leather jacket and cowboy boots completing the look. I must be 17, one year into that deadly romance and smiling at him, coz he's the one holding the camera, I remember it so well.

My head is spinning calculations, and she's watching me with all the glee of an "I told you so". She leans against the big central pole in this be-cushioned, khaki style-fest of a lodge

lounge, festooned with porcupine quill candelabra and winterthorn pods arranged in a gleaming bronze bowl. The big central pole is an unfortunate palm tree. Or was. *Hyphenae*. Vegetable ivory.

Behind the bar, a face I recognise, though I wouldn't put money on getting the name right.

"Samson! You remember Samson, don't you Stan?"

"Ah, Madam Stanna!" Samson reaches an outstretched hand for greeting. At that moment, the mzungu manageress enters the scene, neat safari twinset – not even pressed shorts but an actual skirt with two pleats, and her arms are semi-outstretched and stiff, like a doll holds its arms, all tense action pose. It's clear she wants Cass out of here as swiftly and quietly as possible, because I can see the Clients are already assembling for the pre-game drive tea-fest. A waiter – another familiar face – brings out a three-tiered tray with small triangular sandwiches, fluffy cake dusted with icing sugar snowflake patterns and some round things with toothpicks stuck in them.

Mzungu Manageress glides towards us, hand outstretched, eyes darting between Cass and me.

"And there's the man himself," says Cass, for the benefit of the clients. She's pointing at a big framed black and white photograph. "My grandfather, he's the man who built this camp," she adds, sidestepping Mzungu Manageress with great finesse. "Well, not this camp as it is now, of course. His tastes were a little simpler than this."

I step forward to greet Ms Manager, my training, duty and embarrassment intercepting Cass's need for mischief.

"I'm Angie," she says, gripping my hand and smiling a steely professional smile. "You must be the sister."

"My name is Ana.

"Any chance of a drink, Samson?"

"Cass," I lift my voice, "Angie is going to show us around, please join us."

Angie's face is gratitude and relief. But Cass is not done. She has picked her person. A couple are eyeing her nervously as they approach the tea table. The woman wears a neat pressed olive green jacket and expensive looking slacks. The man has a panama hat, linen shirt, good looking in a Ralph Fiennes in *The English Patient* sort of way. Beeline.

"He had pet lions, see? He taught them to hunt. East Africa has George Adamson, we have James Archibald Kelly. He was a *pioneer*," she says in a dramatic stage whispery sort of voice. "And built a lot of camps, sold them all. Let's see, there was Chibembe, your original rustic wilderness experience, very sad to see that one go, but it made enough money to build

a beautiful all-seasonal Lodge in the game-rich south of the park. He was able to really invest in the *people* of the area, to train up local guides, to educate orphans, because you know when HIV pulled through here it really pulled through. He knew, you see, that only by convincing the local people that wildlife mattered, would he really be able to make conservation work here."

It's such a rehearsed script, but her performance of it is slick, and even Mzungu Manageress is relaxing a little.

"Sadly, you can't always choose the people who will buy the places you worked so hard to build. When he sold Njovu Lodge, he sold it as a brand, you see, and not just a piece of real estate. And the people he sold it to? I suppose they were just better businessmen. Anyway, they bought this place too, just the other day. Isn't it beautiful? Lock, stock and barrel, complete with family photographs. And the brand lives on – the family who was raised with the elephants. The conservationist who raised lions. And that, my dear sister, is how these pictures of us came to be on these walls, 20 years later."

Back at Mom's, the cooking is already in full swing and they don't seem to need me. Aunt Avril is dismembering a chicken with her bare hands.

"It's a trick I learned from a Chinese granny!" she declares proudly when Rose exclaims admiration at the feat. A heap of glistening chopped onions awaits being thrown into the plough dish, which is heating over the coals. Uncle Leonard swigs from a Mosi bottle, his blue eyes dim and watery from the smoke.

"It follows me wherever I move," he says.

Cass hovers at my elbow.

"We're just back from Nyalubwe," she announces.

"Oh yes? Isn't it dreadful?"

"Just listen to what Cass did," I say.

"What, do tell!"

These are the rules. You can't misbehave unless someone is watching. You can't tell your own story. If someone misbehaves in your presence, you have a duty to report on it at a campfire or bar near you. This is why we need each other. Coz we know the rules and the new guys just don't.

At maybe three o'clock in the morning I wake up and I am absolutely certain that the photographs on the walls in that camp, or rather the negatives for those photographs, come from the trunk – from Granny's box.

8

Uncle Jerry is an arsehole. Everybody loves Uncle Jerry.

Sometimes I like to imagine Granny as Audrey, the young mother in her 20s. The war had already started when she met her husband in the sleepy town of Zomba, with its British Empire protocols and dressing up for dinner requirements. She listed the servants for me: Cook, House Boy, Tea Boy, Washer Boy, and even a Tick Boy to remove ticks from the dogs and horses. The latter probably was a mere child, but certainly in the case of Cook etc, the boy appellation refers in fact to a "grown-ass man", as Zoe would say.

Grandpa is the young elephant hunter with his angular good looks. A clerk in the government offices when Granny meets him, he is not yet Game Control Officer, or a safari operator, just a boy with a love for open spaces and a weekend hobby of killing large beasts. Granny was barely Zoe's age when she had the first two children – Joy, and then Leonard. Joy, our mother, was a sallow whiny baby, completely unlike her name.

Leo was feral and full of mischief, prone to wandering off, chasing butterflies or lizards. Because of malaria and all the other named and unnamed threats, she had to stay in Zomba, to look after her fever-prone father. Her newlywed husband goes on ever-lengthening hunting trips, because he too has caught a fever, but it’s bush-fever.

Grandpa would come home with a dark tan on his face and forearms, a surplus of meat on the back of the Jeep and a cache of new stories. 'We followed the wounded lion for days. We sent a phalanx of men in an arc, beating the long grass to flush out the man-eating lion that had been terrorising the villagers.'

Before the first baby came, she worked in the government offices, helping with the filing. She described the ever-duplicating and replicating mountains of bureaucratic paperwork tied up with red tape. 'Yes, real red tape! I had always thought it was just a figure of speech, but there it was, in front of my eyes.'

Even after the second baby, she was a beauty. One thing I've learned is that in these little outposts, people can talk, and everyone knows everyone's business. Boy, can they talk. But only to each other. If it affects you or is about you, you can be sure that you will be the last to know. It's impossible, of course it is, that gentleman callers would have gone unnoticed in Zomba. Her high profile father - the eyes of empire everywhere. But later in Fort Jameson

with all its wild outpost parties... maybe then. A little slip-up, a late night weakness. My dear discrete Granny. Not a word.

That time, that Joburg time, at the turn of the millennium, when I was helping her pack up her life, somewhere around her 80th birthday, she surprised us all by saying, "Yes, it's true, a man can never be entirely sure who the father of his child is."

"Granny!" We were all so shocked.

But still, even on his best days, I want to believe that Uncle Jerry is not one of us. Some stray DNA that has no kin with us made its way into the family long ago and whatever that indiscretion was, it dogs us all in the form of Uncle Jerry.

Family apocrypha: Grandpa after the sale of Chibembe (cash, mind you) built the House by the Lake. Put the remaining money in a tin box and buried it in the floor of the pantry. Upon which the great floods of 1976-8 swallowed the house, and the gorgeous 100-year old baobabs, and when the water receded, Grandpa retrieved the tin box full of stacks of dollar bills which, sodden, formed solid blocks of formerly useful cash. Prying the wads apart note by note with his Swiss Army knife, Grandpa tried to get the serial numbers on the notes so that he could go to the bank with some sort of evidence.

Alas. It was his last successful business venture. Material wealth went the way of termite-infested gum poles, camps that get swept away by unpredicted river erosion, nationalised by government, or just plain and simple bankruptcy. Add the ruinous costly divorce and the multiplication of school fees and you have a picture of Grandpa's concerns. His rising at 3am, lighting the paraffin lamp and sitting at his desk in his underpants, with the mosquito net around him to keep the insects from splattering the ledger. He would push numbers around until the sun came up, then start his normal routines. How much of that number pushing was for financing Uncle Jerry's many projects? We will never know.

Did Granny know? Does Granny's box of diaries have any record of any of this stuff? Who knows. Uncle Jerry himself sure isn't sharing anything.

What we do know, is that the pressure to sell always came from him. I start to put it together now. Chibembe. Uncle Jerry and his unknown business partner buy Grandpa out, and we move south, build Njovu Lodge. 1995, Grandpa sells Njovu, ostensibly to finance Granny's medical expenses. Uncle Jerry brokers the deal. Everybody knows the lodge is worth more than they sell it for. The buyers of our beloved Njovu Lodge slowly start to assemble an empire, it seems. They own the family brand now, and when they buy the old

Nyalubwe site to build the Most Luxurious Bush Experience Ever, Damian Coroso is part of the deal.

2006 – Granny's last property in Johannesburg, the one that was meant to be her last-ditch pension plan. Uncle Jerry does the sale and the paperwork for her relocation to England. And yet somehow she becomes bankrupt and bereft, all the money gone.

That image again, seeping up at me. It's the one where I am walking in the bush and something catches my eye under a scrubby thorn tree in this desolate piece of Botswana road, somewhere between Here and There. It's a box. When I open it, family heirlooms fall out of their wrapping: a clutch of jewellery, maybe a locket, photographs and yellow pages, disintegrating. Maybe it fell off the back of an ox-wagon. Maybe the whole party died of malaria, like those missionaries stranded in Bechuanaland.

After Granny left Grandpa, she set up in Johannesburg, dizzy with the relief of leaving the 'bush' behind her. As children, Cass and I would run wild in her gardens, which had no elephants, snakes, scorpions or lions to be wary of. Her gardens were a mix of English colonial and rambling wild. Like when a garden is established and it gets its own confidence and you don't want to interfere too much anymore. It develops authority and you think twice before telling it what to do. I mean, after all, it knows best that this is where the hibiscus will nod across the lawn at the lavender and the geraniums have found their own neighbourhood watch here in the south west wing. The dahlias have banded together like aggrieved women. Frangipani, long limbed alien fingers reaching for a bit of space. Their skin all reptilian, they harboured us in their smooth arms while we dressed our fingertips with flowers. A colonnade of pillars led to the big veranda, clad in some small-leafed ivy with gnarled twisty stems. Those vines were the real patricians. Embedded like old senators who take their vote for granted, closest to the seat of power, the heart of the house. They smothered the pillars with flat green leaf, digging out mossy brick with their toes. I wonder if they are still there, those crusty old bastards. Next to them, the grape vines, occupying the colonnade walkway possessively, clutching it firm in order to dangle more grapes down. But the grapes were always blighted at that house – a folly to try for Cape grandeur on the Highveld. They were small and mean, only the birds wanted them.

The house itself had the feel of a wrinkly old dame who hoisted children into the world, indulged the grandchildren and then sat back, smoothing out her skirts and saying, "now about that cup of tea you promised me".

It all seems so far away. I moved to Joburg to be with her, long after she'd parcelled up that land, first selling the grand over-reaching mansion, then the cottage, then the studio, gradually unmooring herself until there was nothing left. Joburg consumed her like it has me, the twinkly brassy whore, she's ridden me out. I can barely keep myself upright. I have toiled. I have exhausted myself in trying to perfect the holy art of Busy.

Our houses, the ones we grew up in, where she came to visit 'in the bush', those houses were never like hers. Granny reads us the Three Little Pigs. The first house is made of straw. The wolf huffs and puffs and blows the house down. The second little pig builds a house made of wood. We giggle with recognition.

The first houses ever built at Chibembe are built of straw. The walls are thatch, the roof is thatch. We watched old man Simon the master thatcher and his team. First they comb the grass to strip away the flimsy dusty husks. The comb is made from naked nails, hammered into a strip of wood. Drag the bundles through to loosen the chaff; it's harder than it looks and my small bundle makes me frustrated, so I give up and watch them instead. After stripping them clean, they make them into bundles – just the amount you can grip into your hand, then tie with string. These bundles are stacked upright to make the walls, contained between the bamboo restraints, and with spacing the width of a mopane pole. The only cement is the floor – a roughly thrown plinth that holds the poles upright. Grandpa sleeps here, and the walls are alive with tiny insects, shuffling and munching and rustling through the night. Bats fly in through the open eaves and a dormouse burrows into the thatch; sleeping there you can hear them squeaking in their tiny nest. But when I slept there I was afraid. I'd wake at night catching my breath, in my mind's eye the leopard could push the door open, climb in through the open eave and drag me out, easy prey, small and delicious.

The wooden house is much safer. The two little pigs snuggle there at night, listening out for the sound of the drum beat that calls the grown-ups to supper and means it is Way Past Bedtime for us. By nightfall we must be clean and under mosquito nets, it's the one thing mother never laxed on, through all the years of drifting off and away, through all the absent-mindedness, the depressed remoteness and the far-away eyes.

But the wolf comes to the wooden house too. The wolf huffs and puffs and blows the house down and the two little pigs run squealing to the big brother's house which is made of bricks. In the brick house, with the solid doors and the actual windows, the piglets are safe enough to plot the wolf's demise. And it's the little pig, the one whose house was blown down first, who has the idea to light a fire under the cauldron and burn the wolf when he comes down through the chimney.

We have no brick house, no big brother pig to run to, no chimneys, and no glass windows. Even now mother's house is open to the breezes, though there are three layers of defence: gauze to keep the mosquitoes out, a lattice of rebar 'burglar guards' elegantly woven, to keep the baboons and monkeys out, and an in-between layer of chicken-wire to stop the monkeys ripping the gauze. This was all they needed then. Burglars didn't come to these parts, because burglars were from the city. "No-one here would dream of stealing from us," was mother's firm response to my Joburg antsiness about locks and keys.

But now there is a new road, 'built by the Chinese'. Now Chipata thieves can be in and out in a day, with rich pickings of cellphones and cameras, solar panels and batteries. Mother shrugs, long used to attrition and decay. A battered tin trunk is chained to the creosote-drenched pole. Inside, her passport and tools – the things that might get borrowed long-term and not find their way back to her.

Brick and mortar is Grandpa's favourite. In the later part of his life it seemed there was always a bag of cement in the back of the Hi-Lux and the joke was that he was just on the lookout for the next spot, the next place to throw a slab and plant a new camp.

So many camps built and lost, built and sold, built and abandoned. Can we count them? Chibembe 1: straw and tent. Chibembe 2: concrete plinth, wooden panel walls. Mfuwe: concrete foundations, wooden panel walls. Njovu is the pinnacle, the one that would be solid bricks all the way from floor to tiled roof, but he still wouldn't risk bringing glass down the escarpment on that pot-holed corrugated road.

A text from Zoe punctures my thoughts. It's a photograph of a pink cloud swarming across a confused tangle of bodies and police. Placards and raised fists – I saw scenes like these on my timeline. It's only a matter of time before Cass begins to blame me for putting Zoe in danger, as if I haven't tried hard enough to get her here.

Zoe, whose arched eyebrows and mouth full of swear words can cut you down and make you feel like you are the wrongest person on the planet, until her sudden half dimple, that smile that can melt rocks, bathes it all away again. I've missed her, dammit. For the second

time today, my stomach drops away when I think of her. Is she ok? I push the thought away as soon as it arrives, knowing that there is nothing I can do. As far as Cass is concerned, I am bent on destroying her.

I text back. *I know you want to be there in the thick of it but everyone here is asking for you. If it's money you need, ask Reece to buy you a ticket.* Send.

A niggle again, that there is something else, something more that is keeping her so silent and remote. Well, I can't rush back. Anything that is up with her can be sorted when I get back to Joburg. Someone has to hold this ship steady.

As sleep begins to claim me, I'm drifting back to what Aunty Faye had said at dinner.

"When your grandfather and grandmother first met, he was giving her dancing lessons. Or so the story goes."

I imagine my teenage Gran, bored on the dusty bit of road in front of their Zomba house. He sees her one day in a new light, no longer just the child playmate who swings on tree branches. She's leaning against the fence eating a mango. No paring knife and china plate but pulled-back skin and yellow stringy flesh slipping out, juice on her fingers and chin. Brown eyes darken a moment as she takes him in: the well-sculpted face, clean jaw and nose that announces some important but long-forgotten lineage.

Dancing lessons; whose idea was that? Was it her mother's? Watching the pennies refusing to stretch and starting to think about husbands, and the pickings being so slim in these parts. There is only one photograph of that Zomba house in Granny's albums. There is a white-washed wall with a long veranda wrapping the house and a frown of thatch leaning over the front, its shade looming right over whatever flowers might have been growing there.

He's standing there in his good shoes and what were once his good trousers, belt loops thin and dragging down baggy tan-coloured cotton, the belt lashed under his tummy and billowing shirt that flaps its way out of the tuck. I cannot reconcile the dancing teenager with the man I know as Grandpa. My imagination sweeps through generic ballroom steps, a tango, a foxtrot, a waltz, a 1930s showtune. A step one two with your hand outstretched, clasping the air, no partner when he practised at the British boarding school. Did he roll his eyes when his mother suggested a visit with the lovely girls down the road (such a nice family)? Does he trespass for a moment, showing her a Chewa dance learned at the village in feasting and celebration, like the ones I learned as an adolescent, hips moving to a quick drum patter? What Zoe would call twerking. At eighteen he'd already shot more elephants than I can imagine. Did that make him wild and rough and attractive?

There is almost no-one up the next morning when I wake. The cool pre-dawn breeze makes me pull the blanket up around my shoulders and then there's a ripping sound as the sheet splits, tearing where the ball of my foot pressed down on fragile cotton as I pull in the opposite direction.

I hear his admonishment, still reaching out from the dream. Not for the torn sheet but for the lingering in bed. You're missing the best part of the day, he says. I grumble like a child, like Zoe used to grumble getting out of bed in the morning. But outside the baboons are already waking up, jumping out of trees onto the noisy tin roof of the car shade.

Mom's fire pit is still warm; coals are sheathed in white ash. That's the best thing about mopane, it burns all night. I knock the two logs together and the orange burns naked as I blow on it. I'm fixing on recreating an early bush morning like we used to have out camping: tea boiling in the pale green enamel teapot. Where's Mom's camping box? I bump my head on the overhanging thatch of the chitenje, catching my breath in a squint of pain. It passes as I breathe, and I spy the familiar wooden box under a beat-up khaki cushion. Grandpa's victual box – what did they call it? Tea box? Tuck box.

I take out Mom's battered blackened aluminium kettle and fill it up at the outside tap. The logs have flared enough to heat the water. Over the dambo, ground hornbills are hooting softly. The dream of the early morning is still pulling at me.

As I close the lid of the box, a baboon alarm call lifts my attention to the dambo. It's already past what Uncle Leonard calls Dawn's Crack. The sky is ripening. The baboon sentry barks again and I soften my eyes in the way that I learned when I was night-drive spotting as a cross teenager. Soften so that you take in the background and the foreground. Spread your gaze. If there is a leopard in the undergrowth or in the treeline it might let itself be seen.

The baboons are perturbed and escalating their barks, not quite to a frenzy, but enough to make me scan the undergrowth again. A shiver of movement catches my eyes then moves towards me, emerging from behind the fallen tree. As she approaches the steps of the chitenje I start to giggle.

"Aunty Faye. You are the best looking predator!"

She laughs. "I don't know if they are barking at me or if there really is a predator out there. Either way, I thought I should come inside."

She steps into the chitenje and the barking starts up again, only this time from behind us. The baboons in the big trees have picked up the chorus.

"Could be a snake, I suppose." She is sweeping her binoculars over the whole empty floodplain in front of us.

"No, it's you, of course it's you!"

"I can't think why," she says, her leopard-print top glaring out from underneath her jacket.

"Look at what you're wearing!"

She laughs properly then, takes off her jacket to a torrent of baboon barking and then slips it on again. The water in the kettle is hissing and I look at her, hungry for everything she knows and has seen, all the memories she stores in her that she doesn't even think of as memories.

"That's a big sigh, darling."

"I'm thinking of all the buried history. You know the proverb – when an elder dies a library is destroyed."

"Audrey was a library alright. Before her illness of course. Such a beauty she was, too. A heartbreaker. Broke your grandfather's heart, that's for sure."

"I love thinking of all of you when you were breaking hearts and going to parties, and, I don't know, what did you all do when you were young?"

"Fort Jameson was an outpost, there was nothing to do at all."

"Hence the parties?"

"Oh. Yes. Well. The men used to go hunting, down the escarpment to the Valley floor where the big game was."

"Still is."

"Not like in those days. Your Grandpa and her brother Adam used to go on these long trips, no-one ever knew where they were."

"No-one ever talks about Adam."

"True. True, they don't."

A single baboon is still sounding the occasional alarm.

"Aunty Faye. When we went through Granny's things before she went to England..."

"Darling, you mustn't feel bad, she was happy there, it was the very first time in her life she wasn't completely restless."

"That's not what I meant. What I wanted to say was-"

"Do you mind if I get some actual milk? I can't bear this powdered stuff."

"Of course."

She comes back with a small blue carton of long life milk, and her bony fingers struggle to tear along the perforated line.

"Let me." I take it from her and tear it off with my teeth.

"Oh, darling. I couldn't do that now, my poor gnashers. Thank you."

"What I meant to say, Aunty Faye, is that there was a box that went missing. A box of her papers."

"Are you sure, darling?"

"Yes, I believe so. There was a box she spoke to me about. It had papers – photographs, things she was working on."

"Oh, your poor Gran. She was very talented, you know."

"I know."

"She wrote wonderful stories."

"I know."

"It's such a pity she could never really publish anything."

"She wanted me to look at her manuscripts."

"She did? How sweet."

"But more than that. I said I would. I said I would help her. And I'd like to still do it, you know?"

"How sweet of you. Fill up my cup please darling, thank you."

"But that box is – it's missing. It was never on the shipping list to England. It was never brought here. It is not in Johannesburg, because everything from her place was either sold or divided amongst us."

Aunty Faye turns to me, her eyes blue and forgetting.

"But that was fifteen years ago, darling."

"I know."

"Well, where do you think it might be?"

"No idea. Lost and Found at the airport? Do you think it could still be there?"

"You're joking."

"There wasn't anything valuable in it. Just papers and stuff."

"I wonder what they would do with something like that. Leave it in some warehouse to rot and be rained on? Haul it off to be trashed? It's an interesting thought, but unlikely."

"Don't you know someone you could ask, Aunty Faye? You know everyone and they all love you."

"Well." She looks out over the dambo. "I suppose I could ask Mwale, he might know. Or Betty. Yes, that's an idea, I could ask Betty Phiri. But you know, if her name was on it, they would have told me."

"I thought of that. But, she wasn't famous like Grandpa. Maybe they just didn't make the connection."

"I'll ask them who you can ask."

"Thank you."

"Here comes your sister. Now, tell me, why is Zoe really not coming?"

"I have no idea. She is busy, she's studying. There are exciting things happening on campus – student protests. It will seem like a betrayal if she leaves. Or she has no money. I don't know."

Cass is loping towards us, looking bright and all bounced back.

"Morning morning morning."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You are like, all shiny."

"Bananas."

"What?"

"Bananas – best hangover prevention there is. Eat three before bed."

"Really?"

"No. I have no idea. What's for breakfast?"

9

The rhino's head was full of maggots where the horn had been. The hole itself was writhing, crowded with so many different kinds. Bill counted them. Some were white like rice grains, fat and squishy. Others were thread-thin and wavy. There were pinkish ones, yellowish ones and some that were longer, like chopped spaghetti. They were all feasting. Bill photographed them. At that time, there had never been a poached rhino so close to us. So close to the tourist lodges, that is. It was my first, but not his.

"Brazen," someone said. "Right here by the baobab." Which means, even clients could have seen it.

There is a photograph of the skulls all laid out by the Wildlife Offices. Hundreds of skulls, all bleached by the sun. They collected them and stored them, laying them out for photographs. It happened so quickly – in a few years. All the conversations became about stopping the rhino poaching. From those afternoons when it was commonplace, boring even, to see five or six rhinos on a drive. Then it became, "anyone seen rhino lately?" Rare spotting. By 1986 it was too late and they were pretty much all gone.

Staring at the maggots, the sun hot on my back, on my head, and the grown-ups crowded around, counting maggot species, I feel far, far away from myself. October heat pulling my energy away, into the ground, I become hot like the grey sand underfoot. Vultures are watching us from the trees nearby. The smell rises up into the hot wobbly air. Soon there will be a hollow ribcage and streaks of bird poo whitewashing the hide.

There was this one time, when André lived in the other house, the one still so suburban and parklands. Reece and I had had one of our bruising episodes of power struggle. I was driving past, my car full of Woolworths shopping. I saw the Land Cruiser parked in the driveway and pulled up by the gate. He spotted me instantly, stepped out from the garage and opened up.

"Coffee or whisky?" he asked.

"Can you tell it's that bad?" I knew that my eyes were puffy and red.

"We don't ask questions. Come and see my new project."

A shoal of scrap metal flows off one of the workbenches. Welding goggles hang off a lamp, next to a big pair of grey leather gloves.

"Check this. I love scrapyards, a friend of mine out near the Vaal let me pick through his farmyard. He has heaps of stuff. Tonnes!"

There's a sort of steam punk assemblage of sculptural forms taking shape on the workbench. I manage to identify a raging porcupine with nails protruding from a spine formed by an old sprocket. There is a vulture, a shark, a sort of chunky rhino.

"Just having some fun. It helps me relax and think through the next story."

"Only you would find welding and angle grinding relaxing."

“Whisky in coffee at 11 in the morning also helps.”

It's always like this with him. In time my tongue is loosened and I am clumsily articulating my frustrations.

"Reece's world revolves around him. It is always about him, his rehearsals, his latest project, I realise his work is important, and I can nowhere near compete with the salaries he is bringing in, but –"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why compete?"

"I'm just not earning anything. Fuck all. No one is interested in my skills. I don't know how to play this Joburg game, this capitalist shitshow, I don't know how to do it."

"Ana, I always hear you say the same thing. There is so much you can do. You just won't stick to a thing. You did the NGO thing – you were good at that, weren't you?"

"Writing grant proposals for money that never comes will kill your soul."

"You did the cooking thing – home-packed meals, wasn't it?"

"Pickles and jams. It wasn't exactly profitable. I overpaid the suppliers and Reece complained that I was always at Saturday markets. He wanted us to have the weekends."

"Come and join my crew."

"What?"

"Seriously, I need a researcher, someone who can do interviews for me, answer the fucking phone and chase down leads.”

"Really?" My heart was leaping about all over the place.

"I need someone for next weekend coming up. Going to Mpumalanga, we'll be gone Thursday through to the Tuesday. I need to get some footage of some coal mining threatening the wetlands there. It's a catchment area for water for Gauteng – an important story. Not a sexy one, but an important one."

"Honestly, André, if I could do something that actually felt like I was contributing to saving the environment rather than trashing it, I would be so happy."

My heart starts to spin and sing in a thousand directions. Yes, yes, I can do this.

And then a quiet thud lands me back to earth. Zoe. She has gymnastics. A tournament. My throat closes shut. Clamps shut, almost a spasm.

Dammit.

A lot of fuck-yous truck through my head.

"I'll have to check with Reece if he can handle Zoe's lifts and things."

He raises his eyebrows ever so slightly. "Does your sister give you cash for looking after her kid?"

I adjust a cushion on the chair. "Sure. Mostly. I mean, when she can. But, you know, she's my kid too."

He nods. "Well, I'll need to know quite soon. By Friday. I'll send you an email with details about pay and whatever but it would be TV rates – they are ok, not like corporate but ok."

I think of him in his cage in Bertrams. "Can't you help me with this story? I've got the South African connection, the Mozambique connection, but it goes bigger, it spreads wider. I know it does."

"I'm not sure. I think the rhino poaching in the North Park is under control, hey."

"Ok, whatever. Keep your eyes open."

And that photograph of Granny, that I just can't get out of my head.

I can see a vehicle up ahead, outlined in the dust. It's a dark green Land Cruiser like the one Mother drives, except with the canopy on. As I get closer I see that it is indeed hers, askew on top of a jack, and there she is, crouched at the side of the vehicle, wrestling with a wheel spanner. I slow right up and stop next to her, the grey Landie chugging gently on idle.

"Don't go off the road!" she says, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand and knocking her bush hat sideways. "Bloody mopane spike, right into the front tyre."

I glance to the left and see her tracks on the dusty ground, flattened thistles, all the way into the mopane scrubland.

"Looks like you were well off the road, Mom."

"You know, usually I can find a path through here no problem. I know it well. But I was following a red-necked falcon, my eye must have drifted away for a second."

"You've put the canopy on," I remark as I unscrew the last wheel nut.

"Faye and I thought we'd go to Malawi for a few days. To the Lake. I hope you girls will join us."

"Er. Not sure. What does Cass say?"

"I think she's keen. Might be good for her to get away from it all."

Away from what all? I don't say it.

"Where were you on your way to, darling?"

"I was just taking a drive."

She squints at me. Those eyes that miss nothing sweep over the back of the Landie.

"A bag of salt and a bag of mealie meal? You're going to see the Chief. Why?"

I shrug.

"Why?"

"Out the way there, Mom."

I'm up on the load base of the Cruiser, hoisting the spare wheel upright, pushing it so it rolls off and bounces before landing flat on the sand. It's heavy. She steadies it with her foot as it lands and we pick it up together, manoeuvring it into position over the exposed bolts. She hands me the nuts one by one and I spin them on by hand, tightening the opposing ones first. She sits back on her haunches while I lean my weight into the wheel spanner.

"Your grandfather taught you well."

I grunt. She picks up a mopane pod from the sand. It's the shape of a tiny curled-up foetus.

"Why were you going to the Chief?"

I look at her. She's studiously not looking at me, instead prising apart the brittle shell of the pod. Inside, the seed material is like a tiny scrawled brain.

I say, "Damian."

She cocks her head to one side. "Damian?"

"The camp he's building. It's illegal. That land is protected. "

"And you didn't think to talk to us first?"

"No one seems to have any energy to do anything round here, Ma. You can't even see what's happening."

She leans back momentarily and uses the momentum to stand, one fluid movement.

"The Chief is the one who sold him the land."

"What?"

"Yep."

"But I thought you can't buy land here. It's all customary land. No-one can own land or get title deeds, surely?"

She stares at me. "Why didn't you talk to us first?"

"Us? Who is us?"

"Us is the safari community."

"You mean the mzungus."

"No. I mean the people who understand what is going on."

"Ouch."

"Stanna. Things have changed a little bit since you lived here. The Chief, who by the way is very ill, is the one who issued the title deed. A dangerous precedent? Yes, it is. But if you go and pick a fight with him about that –"

"I'm not picking –"

"You will be rocking the boat."

"So everyone is just going to let Damian get away with this?"

"Damian has bought and paid for the land. He cares about the area, understands the bush. He's one of us."

"One of us?" I try to keep my voice steady.

"Stanna."

"No, Mom. It's ok. I understand. Don't rock the boat." I kick the tyre. "There, it's sorted. Don't drive off the road again."

"I don't suggest you go and see the Chief."

"Gotcha, Mom. I heard you. Loud and clear. I won't."

"Why don't you and Cass join Faye and I, we could have such a lovely little trip, it'll be like old times when you guys were kids."

"You take Cass. I'll stay here. I really don't feel like more traveling. Besides, Zoe might still come."

"Zoe won't come."

"Zoe might."

She looks at me again, me wishing I could iron out the choke in my voice. She lifts the tailgate and shuts it, pulling the levers over the clasp, metal squeaking against metal.

"I'll see you at home then."

"See you, Ma."

"You go in front."

"No, you."

"I have a canopy for dust. You first."

She is in my rear-view mirror all the way home.

When I think of those lake house weekends the feeling I remember most was a sense of claustrophobia. The cloying hot air. The mountain behind, shouting at us with a kind of impatience. Is it possible for a mountain to be impatient? Aren't they always smugly solid and eternal? Not this one. I always got the feeling that this particular mountain thought we children were cretinous imbeciles, who didn't deserve to rumble the surface rocks. The echo of the tired baboons, bouncing off the rocks. The fact that if you walked in one direction you hit reeds and couldn't go any further. That the water was often sludgy and muddy and you couldn't see what you were putting your feet on.

What I loved best were the baobabs. They had serenity and grace. And a deep, enveloping kindness. I have always loved baobabs for their generosity.

But our relationship with the lake is neatly sliced in two. Before and after the Flood. Before the flood is childhood and fantasy. The huge fig tree that was run through with caverns and crannies and tiny palatial rooms in which fairies most definitely lived. After the flood is bankruptcy and worried Grandpa with the paraffin light on at 3am.

10

Granny died as the #RhodesMustFall movement was peaking. Within the month, another detonation of xenophobia shattered the equilibrium I had tried to restore in my heart. The radio, electric with reports of attacks, outbreaks that spread, as if it's a virus that travels across the city, multiplying, mutating, exploding. The three events form constellation with criss-cross spoorlines that only I can see – tenuous connections that link Granny, Grandpa, history, Zoe.

I have this weft and warp of questions running back and forth across my mind. I think of her distress, her not knowing where to settle, where to belong. I want to interrogate her, not just her, all these dead ancestors with so much to answer for. I know what they will say, I suppose. "What choice did we have?"

"Let's make a documentary," André had said, all those years ago when he was visiting. We were at the river's edge, the sundowner spot. He cracked a cold Mosi, balancing his camera on his knee. "I'm tired of all my bad news, plundered timber and canned hunting, pollution and coal mining corruption. I'll interview your people, and it'll be a look in to the people who live side by side with elephants and lions. A conversation about conservation."

"Boring!" I countered, but we did the interviews. I don't know how you edit and splice a family like this one. Rhizomic roots threaded from India to Mesopotamia, Chinde to Zomba, to where they got caught up in Fort Jameson and went tumbling down the escarpment with elephant gun and tea caddy.

The event was in one of those new Joburg developments where they have planted olive trees in boxes made from reclaimed pallet wood, and rented out shops with raw concrete fronts to tenants who charge small fortunes for handmade *objets d'art*. It was an elephant event, that much I remember. The wine was free. And good. Not a fundraiser, I don't think, so much as a presentation of somebody's research. I went because André invited me, and because, well – because of elephants.

There were others there that surprised me. I didn't expect that the owner of my local pizza joint was an elephant enthusiast, but there you are – elephants bring people together in unexpected ways. I filled my glass at the table, shyness twisting around me until André came over and introduced me to the man who had just presented his research.

"This is Ana. She grew up among elephants in the Luangwa Valley."

"Whaaat?" As we shake hands the wife looks at me, asks "why on earth do you live in Joburg then?"

That old question.

"Umm, because the coffee is good?" and then the reassurance, "My Mom is still there. I visit once a year."

André grins at me. "Once a year becomes once every second year. And then one day you'll realise it's been five years. And then you'll feel like a stranger when you go back. And then one day it will be easier not to go at all."

"André! Stop it."

"Just kidding."

He wasn't though.

11

I never addressed the letters I wrote to him. I never showed them to anyone. But the need to write them was feverish, the only thing I could do to staunch the upwelling of chaos that happened every time I saw him. In the aftermath, Reece could do nothing right. I dreamed of leaving all of it – the house with the wild-nurtured garden, rain-tanks, edging, herbs that grew abundantly with no elephants to eat them, and Reece, with his dependable cycles of mania and contrition. There was only one problem. André's impeccable code of honour and the absent but still-loved woman he never spoke of.

So I wrote instead.

And I don't know where those letters are.

12

Nothing set the grown-ups on edge like passports, papers and bureaucracy of any kind. The days when there was passport drama are still marked out with flag posts, even though the passports no longer exist. Those days are stamped in my memory like a little violet crest with a date on it.

I actually loved my passport, was proud of its maroon cover and its date stamps. Dad's is the same. Mom's is black for British and uncle chose Zambian. We all have different passports but the feeling in the air when they talk passports and citizenship and entry permits and work permits is the same. A mixture of nerves and tiredness.

Mchinji border crossing, with its faded poster announcing that Malawi is the Warm Heart of Africa (What does that make Zambia, we ask, each time, and each time the answer is the same - the Kidney!)

"It looks like a kidney on the map," Cass explained to me in that high and mighty way she has. Yes, yes, I know. Later I saw it as a foetus, curled up and waiting to be born or crushed.

Passports were good when you had them but there was definitely a lot of jitters around not having them. Like the time Cass forgot hers at school in the brown wooden locker under her bed.

When we were on the bus, she remembered. I had taken mine out and was busy counting the stamps. One for each border crossing, to and from school and home. She looked at mine and made this face, eyes widening, mouth an O. She searched her pockets and rucksack but she already knew it wasn't there. She could see it where she'd left it - in the locker, under the false bottom she'd made to keep her private things safe. The slow dawning on her face of all that it meant. We would arrive in Lilongwe and the hugs would have to turn into apologies and making another plan. Those were the days when Steve would still travel the whole distance to come and greet us, big jacket engulfing us in his cigarette and axle grease smell.

I was stone cold angry with her that day. Not because we would have to overnight in Lilongwe at the Peacock Hotel. Not because we would arrive back home a whole two days later. It was because of Steve, our only dad, and the way she ruined that welcome hug.

It wasn't the last time Cass would pull a passport stunt. She also did it in reverse once – on the way to school. We drove three hours of rattle in the open car, kikois wrapped around our heads to keep the dust from coating our hair and lining our ears. 120 km to Chipata, and

when you hit the tar for the last stretch to Lilongwe it's like gliding into cool water, the tyres thrumming all smooth. Some seasons that road was so rutted and corrugated it took up to four hours, slowing to a crawl on the escarpment. I knew that road like a song. The bits where the red laterite hardened to a corrugated rattle, the way the crates of Coke and beer bottles chimed together, or a couple of spanners loose in the toolbar. There were words to this song too – the parents:

You're going much too fast.

There's no other way to do the corrugations. If you pick up speed you can coast over them.

The under-his-breath swearing that followed the slam and bang of shocks and chassis, was occasionally crescendoed with an Ah fuck!! And when we reached the escarpment suddenly cooler air was decorated with birdsong and the engine whined a little up the hill.

And there was the woohoo as we hit that one tarred section, Steve picking up speed and hurtling across the blissful flatness of it, giving our bones a respite from the shuddering and thumping.

To arrive there after that drive and have to tell us all – I don't have my passport.

I wondered if she knew already, if it was on purpose and she carried the uttering of it all the way to the border post.

What do you mean you don't have it?

I don't. I thought you had.

Shit, Cassandra, what are you telling me, we have to go back for your passport?

Well, maybe Ana can just go to school and I can stay here?

That wouldn't wash of course. Nice try.

No, we had to get back in the car, turn it around at the BP, after a samoosa from the grease-smeared glass display case at Sadik's Snack Shop, and drive all the way back.

I marvelled at her. She didn't seem to give a hoot. It didn't bother her, the silence, all the way back. The cold tension in the car which gnawed into my belly so that I wouldn't even ask for a wee stop, didn't seem to affect her. Or so I thought. Until that time I found out that my big sister was a lot less blasé than I had imagined.

Somehow, I manage to get them to go without me. On the morning that they are about to leave I wake up to a ping from my phone. It's Zoe. The message says "So this happened". And a screenshot of a ticket, or rather a reservation code and an itinerary. Joburg Lusaka, Lusaka Mfuwe. I check the date. It's for Friday: two days away.

"Awesome!" I text back. "What made you change your mind?"

"No change. I wanted to come, just haven't had a minute. Things are next level here."

My thumb hovers a moment, then I type, "Have you told Cass?"

"I thought I could surprise her."

"Yes. They're going to the Lake – bad cell reception there. Let's not tell."

I switch my phone off, put it in my bag and go help them make sandwiches for the trip. As I wave goodbye, Cass peers at me through the back window.

"Are you sure you don't wanna come? Why not, it'll be such fun."

"I don't miss the Lake when I am in Joburg. I miss here. So let me stay here. You guys have fun."

"We'll only be a few days."

"I know. Now go!"

The trees fold around the silence as the Cruiser drives off. It's still early. My phone is still under the mosquito net but I decide to leave it there. My feet want to wander. I want to go to the house by the river. I'm about to set off when I hear the low rumble that lets me know elephants are about. Softly, through the trees, the mother herd begins to drift, bringing their long shadows with them. I pull back into the doorway of Mom's house, watching. They are not in a hurry. If there was a kind of edginess to them when I saw them crossing the river the other day, they don't seem to have it now, but you never know how it can turn. The youngest is still under a year old judging by her size. The cousins or whatever they are, younger teenagers, seem relaxed but not playful. Their ears flap quietly, trunks curled slightly under.

They are passing through, on their way to cross back over the river to the safety of the national park. The two older females are more cautious, and the rumble I heard is to gather them, keep them close. There's that feeling I get when I watch them like this, all alone. I want to join them somehow, to move with them and mingle, instead of being so separate, so on the outside looking in.

The keys to Cass's grey Land Rover are in the ignition. Although I want to walk, the old feeling of sensible fear curls around me and I slip onto the smooth leather seat and drive down the rutted road, through the mopane to the river house.

It is not her house, actually. Just that she is living here now. My hand reaches up to find the key in the same hiding place that I made for it, more than twenty years ago. The battered chicken wire and gauze on the screen door shelters dried mopane leaves and a very still, very

pale ghekho. I don't feel like I am intruding. I am reclaiming. This, after all, was my space. This is where I sat, on those quiet, pink mornings, listening out for the sound of his motorbike.

She has tidied up since the morning with the biscuits. Glasses are arranged in order of size. I wonder if she has done it herself or if there is someone who comes to clean. Like Elina's daughter maybe. I climb the pole ladder to the little makeshift loft. The floor creaks, wooden boards that recognise my weight, creaking the same creaks I remember. Next to the bed and to the right is a bamboo pole frame rigged up with rope and chitenje material curtains. I pull back the cloth to see the clothes inside this closet. It swings slightly. I page through the hangers one by one. Those red jeans are mine. So is that necklace.

I turn away and stretch out onto her bed. Above me the tiny borehole patterns on the gum poles make constellations, script I have forgotten how to read. I'm sleepy, and beginning to drift. Hippo snorts are lulling. I am eighteen years old, and this is my domain, gifted to me for a whole year while Cass finishes up at boarding school. I'm about to slide into a proper sleep when something tugs at my consciousness and I sit up. Something I saw as I was about to fall asleep.

Underneath the hanging clothes, under a folded pile of kikois, the round metal edges of a box that I recognise. It looms into my vision so vividly that I think I must have fallen asleep and dreamt it. I sit up. Pulling back the curtains, I recognise the box that Granny had spoken of. The box that is not, it would seem, sitting at the Lusaka Airport Lost and Found, but is here, in my sister's room, waiting for me to find it.

I'm about to get up when I hear a car engine. It's a Land Cruiser, you can hear the tightness of the engine. Then someone calls, whistles, calls again.

"Cassandra! Cass!" It sounds like Elephant Researcher woman, there's an urgency in her voice. The neighbour. I peer through the top window with something like a groan. She's knocking.

At the door I say "Cass has gone to Malawi for a few days. She'll be back on Sunday."

"Oh, hi Ana. We are missing our dog. We haven't seen him since early this morning. Have you seen him perhaps?"

"Oh dear. I haven't. Sorry."

"I'm so worried. We let him out very early this morning. He didn't come back in." She is flushed and frowning. I have been down this weary road before. Leopard bait.

"Let me help you look."

We head down to the river together in the morning sun.

12

My right leg has power and spark in it. I kick all the way to the ground, metal trigger under your shoe. I even do this barefoot sometimes. Engine ignites. Right hand twists on throttle, clutch lets go, jump forward, let's go.

Throttle. It's a lovely word. It sounds like the engine sounds. The tyres hiss on the sandy bits. There will be bumps but there is also bounce. Take the road that goes past the old workshop, out of camp. Past the thick-trunked mopane tree on the corner and the rut that's from a seasons-old mud puddle. In the rains I'd be splattered thigh-high already. But now it's late season, on the cusp of rains. I can hear the cicadas already and there's hot waves coming off the hard ochre ground. I won't go on the tar with its crumbling chewed-up edges. Stick to the dirt. Turn right at the workshop, then left – it's the road to the pan. Big hump in the middle, keep left. The edges are sandy, pushed there by wheels of firewood trucks and then the game-viewing vehicles on their last stretch homewards.

The road forks like a trident – go straight if you want to go to the pan. Big winter thorns looming. Maybe there'll be elephants looking for the late-season pods. A few warthogs turning up the black earth clods for roots, baboons following after and grabbing insects in their fists.

Turn left to ride under umbrella thorn shade – giraffes that way, but then I'll get to the tar.

Turn right, that's my favourite. Chugging throat of engine. Warm saddle with cracked vinyl, orangey sun-powdered foam poking through (must fix that seat). Turning right is the Nyamaluma road (catch an animal road). Open the throttle over the corrugations. Give it some speed. There was something heavy in my heart when you made that first kick. The engine's throb has loosened it. The wind is lifting my hair slightly, cooling the prickles of sweat behind my ears. My bare calves burn slightly from the carburettor steel.

Open up, open up, down and up through the gulley where we used to dig for clay. Whee, the butterfly bump as back tyre leaves the ground.

Mopane forest flicker on either side of me. Tall trunks, charcoal dark and elephant grey, in places they've burned and left ash corpses on the ground. Tree ghosts become wind in my hair and what was bothering me has gone now.

Take a left. Now it's the winding road, less travelled, snaking through trees. Sudden francolin surprise and guinea fowl flight. Once, long ago, when I was about thirteen I saw roan here, galloping alongside me in the forest for minutes on end. No roan for decades, but

memory slows my eyes, stretches my gaze to the furthest trees. Past the towering baobab and the smell of bats. Slow down for that smacking bump. Speed up again. Then, for no reason at all, slow right down, kill the engine, let the forest silence filter up, wash against my ears.

Feel the stillness, as the motion memory drains out of my legs. Stay there, in the forest, breathing. It almost feels like I'm sixteen again.

13

I go to fetch Zoe at the airport. We shunt past the palm tree floodplain. Past the villages dense with mango tree shade. Past the new development by the school – imported pre-fab classrooms. We slow down past Mike Zulu's place, which now has a workshop attached. Two ex-safari vehicles bear down on the bricks they rest on and a blue minibus with low slung suspension awaits its service. A new shipment of second-hand clothes has arrived at Elinor's cousin's makeshift stand. The bamboo-and-thatch shelter casts a tiny patch of shade over two bent backs sorting through newly opened bales. Oxfam hand-me-downs are big business here, and this stall displays row upon row of khaki shorts, flapping in the dust, waiting to tempt aspirant safari guides to build up their uniforms.

"Every time I come here there are more shops!" yells Zoe, turning her head so that the sound reaches me and doesn't get swept away. Wind is numbing our faces, it's the best feeling and I think of being 15 in the open car, belting out favourite songs.

"Look at that one! *Uncle Please Buy Me New Enterprise*."

"Yes! That's Simon Phiri's shop. Do you remember Simon?"

"No! Stop thinking I should know everyone you know."

"Sorry!"

We flick past the Best Shot Tavern and for a moment I revel in being the one who knows more. I think of Mom and Cass and how they are constantly dropping the names they expect me to know.

"I'll stop, I promise!"

We stop at the market to buy tomatoes and potatoes. The women who know me, who know Cass, shriek at the sight of Zoe, gossiping about who she is, and shaking her hand and chatting to me so fast I can only follow every other word.

"*Mulibwanji*?" They greet her pointedly, shrieking in delight as she shows off her "*ndilibweeno zikomo, kaya emwe*?"

"Buy from me! Best bananas!" I go to her familiar face: lean cheekbones and hollow eye sockets, chitenje wrapper covering a bony scapula. I think she is called Bertha but I don't trust myself to say it. Her eyes feast on Zoe as she packs bananas into a thin blue plastic bag. fift Kwacha she says without flinching. Way too much for a bunch of bananas.

"Sure?"

"Sure. Your sister. I gave her *kongole*. She was supposed to give me forty."

"Ok." I pay Cass's debt and Zoe takes the bananas.

"That's about as far as the internet gets me," she says, slamming the Landie door.

"I know. Good though. Except its more Chichewa than ChiKunda."

"Yeah. I know. Cass said she'd give me lessons but she never does."

I hesitate before starting up the vehicle.

"Cass won't be back til Sunday."

"I know."

"She doesn't know you're here."

"We'll surprise her."

In front of us a child wheels a bicycle with a 20kg sack of maize strapped to the seat. The child is barely as tall as the saddle. She wobbles for a moment, then rights herself.

"Your WhatsApp came after they'd already left," I'm responding to the crease on her forehead. "It was a spur of the moment thing. I don't think they thought you'd be coming. But I knew you would."

"I wasn't going to."

"What made you change your mind?"

She shrugs. Reaching the turn-off, I swing the wheel and we go onto the low sand road winding through the stricken mopane. We arrive into the quiet embrace of The Shacks and their watching trees.

I turn to look at her as I kill the engine. She is in faraway thought.

"What do you want to do? We can go to the Croc Farm for a sundowner, we could go for a drive, go down to the river to watch the elephants cross –"

"Stan."

"Sorry, am I being overbearing?"

"I'm tired."

"Ok, well, it's early. You can nap. Lunch and nap? There's a salad in Mum's fridge. I'm just excited you're here."

"Salad sounds good."

"Are you ok?"

"Why?"

"You look a bit pale."

"I hate flying."

"Ok."

We haven't moved from the Land Rover. A squeal breaks out over the silence; a clutch of teenager monkeys squabbling. Three small vervets chase another one across the path, towards the tap and its coil of green hosepipe. The tap is dripping. It probably has a loose washer.

"I've made a bed for you in the round house. Next to Mum's. I mean, Gran's. Always forget to call her Gran for you."

"I'll stay with Cass though."

"Sure, when she gets back."

"Can't I go there now?"

"I thought you'd want to be here with us."

"She'll be upset. She'll want me at hers."

"Of course. Well, like I said. She's only back on Sunday."

"I wanted to surprise her."

"You will surprise her."

"Will she be pissed off?"

"Well, you know. Maybe."

"Yeah."

"Now what."

"Let's take a pic, we can selfie it, send it to her –"

"Make it worse."

"Yeah." She looks all doleful. "What about that salad you promised? I'm starving."

"Yes of course, sorry. Let's go eat."

She picks at her salad.

"When's the service?" She moves all the cheese to one side of the plate.

"Service?"

"For Gran? For your grandmother? Hello? The memorial, have I missed it?"

I'm staring at her, the strangeness of everything suddenly clarifying.

"Well. There's probably not going to be a service."

"You came for a funeral. I came for a funeral."

"Well. Yes, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"Well, we've been here all week, and, like, connecting and stuff."

"God. This family is so weird."

"There's no burial, you know? There's no - body to bury."

"Yeah. Whatever."

I decide to just leave her to settle, and go for a walk. I hear myself and the string of instructions.

"Keep windows closed because of the monkeys."

"I will"

"Don't go walking off on your own, rather call me first."

"Ok"

"Put your clothes in this cupboard but remember there are scorpions so check your shoes before you put them on."

I hear myself. I hear my mother in myself.

"Jeez, Stan, chill. I have been here for before, I know the drill. I'm not a child."

"I know. I know you do. Sorry. I don't mean to patronise you."

It's a spur of the moment thing but I am doing it anyway. I'm walking an old route, along the river, to the spot where Damian will be building his camp. I want to say goodbye.

There is no one to tell me to be careful, to wear sunscreen, to listen out for elephants, to avoid the long grass. To not go by myself.

So I walk.

The path that the fishermen used to use has grown over. They have been re-routed. The new management at the lodge, racist, patrolling, redirected the foot traffic through the back of the view line, through the dry mopane. Lest the Clients catch sight of a human through their binoculars. Fuck em. I am walking. I cut across the short-cropped kapinga grass. Pause to touch a mimosa leaf, watching it tremble shut and 'play dead'. Never gets old, as Zoe would say. What is up with her?

I have the same leeching, lurching feeling in my stomach. Fuck Cass, why does she have to be so difficult? She's always made her feel like she has to choose. Not fair, not fair to a child.

I'm not a child, she says. I'm not a child.

The path I remember is still there, though hardly used, and grown over. It's a hippo path, you can tell, because it has two tracks and a grassy ridge in the middle. Takes you down into a gulley. Remember when we used to ride our bikes here, how the gully dip is a thrill and you just hope there's not an animal down the bottom. Used to be rarer. There are more and more animals clustered here now. It's safer for them. The bottom of the gulley is still moist, the soft

black clay pocked with giant footprints, mini craters. Hippo tracks and whole ecosystems toiling in there – mud crickets and grasshoppers and worms, drifts of Nile cabbage caught in the tangle of sticks from when it was all in flood, dried up now and spiders making nests in the leaf grooves.

Then I hear "Stan! Stan!" I turn and see Zoe striding towards me. "Wait up!" she calls. She is breathless and panting. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cross."

"You didn't, Zoe. I'm not. I'm just, going for a walk."

"Can I come?"

"Sure."

"It's hot."

"I know but I don't want to go any later because the elephants use this route when they cross. Don't want to bump into them."

"I thought you loved the elephants."

"I do. Doesn't mean I want to see them on foot."

"Why do they cross over?"

"The other side of the river is the national park, protected."

"I know that. So why don't they just stay there? Where it's safe?"

"They love to raid people's gardens and crops. The energy they get from eating sweet mealies, millet, tomatoes... it beats what they can get in the park."

"Doesn't seem fair."

"What doesn't?"

"Why don't the people get any protection?"

"Yeah. It's not. Look there." Ahead of us on the sand, a pair of giraffes pick their way across the sandbank towards the water, their big bony knees doing that half elegant half awkward dance they have. One is an adult, female. The other young, not a baby but a slender adolescent.

"They're going to drink."

I bend to pick up a shred of blue plastic, wrapped around a driftwood twig, embedded in the dried mud. We pause and watch them approach the water, jittery at the edge.

"Ana," says Zoe, carefully splitting a blade of grass with her fingernail.

"Mmm?"

"Remember when I first came to you, when Mama was on the TV?"

"Of course I do. Cassandra Sachan as Madeleine Le Roux! She was awesome. I actually have the whole series on VHS. I just need to get it transferred to DVD."

"Why did you want me and she didn't?"

"Whaaat? Sweetie, we've been over this, what's going on?"

"Why couldn't she just keep me at home and get babysitters and stuff?"

"What's bringing this on?"

"No, I'm just." She looks up. "There's this girl right, she's a friend of mine, she's in the Movement."

"The Movement."

"It is a Movement, Ana, it's big – you'll see, this thing is going to get huge. It's not just about Rhodes and decolonising the curriculum, it's bigger than that – there are fees protests, and – there's so much to address, and it's been going for ages but the leadership is fed up now. Anyway, that's not what I'm talking about."

"Your friend."

"She's going to have a baby, right?"

"Ouch, how old is she?"

"My age. But she's, like, she's just about to graduate, she doesn't have any money or anything. She's black, and you know how in black families sometimes the grandmother just like takes over the babycare and stuff?"

"Er...Yeah." I prickle at how she speaks, all this South African race talk, still irks me.

"Well, everyone in her family wants her to do that, to give the baby to her gogo so that she can work, or study or whatever. But the thing is, she just really doesn't want to. She wants to have the baby, to keep the baby and raise it herself."

"I can understand that."

"But, like, how do you manage all of it? What about her dreams, her plans, her leadership, everything. There is so much she wants to do."

"Look –" I point across the river. On the other side another pair of giraffes has come down to the water's edge.

"I was wondering about Mom, you know. About Cass, I mean. Was it – how come it was so easy for her to make the decision?"

"Oh, Zo. It wasn't. It wasn't like that."

There are things we never talk about. I remember Cass, beautiful shiny tawny-eyed Cass, those headshots of her, and how she'd come back from an audition breathless and gleaming and full of fake modesty.

"Oh no, everyone there was so much better than me," she'd say, until a week later, "I can't believe it, I got the part!" and we'd go on the jol in Rockey Street, and drinks would be on her, and after drinks who knows what else, lines in the bathroom, layered in with joints on the balcony, stumbling home and me holding back her hair as she'd scrape her knee on the pavement, vomit in the gutter and dizzy as we pressed the doorbell to whoever's flat we were camping in at the time. I'd go back to university and get late-night phone calls after a show when she was wired and there was no-one to talk to or party with. When Zoe came the wave she was riding had not yet begun to crest. She was adamant she could do it all. But homing instinct kicked in and she went back to The Shacks, on Mom's insistence. Yeoville streets without Cass were not the same. I missed her easy slide to the front of the queue, the free drinks that flowed to us, the way she would part the room as she wiggled her way to the dance floor.

"Where's your sister?" They'd ask. "Tell her she must come back. A baby? Really, no ways..."

In front of us, the giraffes are stock still. A pair on each side of the river. The air trembles with the afternoon heat. "Cass loves you, you do know that," I say to Zoe. She is quiet, but nods.

"It's fucking hot."

"I know. Let's walk a bit." We follow a hippo path dried into the mud. "I think you were about four when she got that part on TV. She came back to Joburg with you. We got a place together. It wasn't like she chose to leave you. I was just with you more often, I guess. She had late-night shoots, early mornings. We were buddies, you and me. She was doing so well."

Cass in that red SL-500 Mercedes, roof back, mane of hair framing her face, living life like a movie. She'd stop to sign every autograph, laughing with people, posing for pictures in her leopard skin pants. She was so busy, I didn't even see the cracks at first. I hardly saw her. She'd leave the house pre-dawn. Or party all night. Sometimes I'd wake to get Zoe ready for school and Cass's bed was untouched. She never brought any of the men home. I'd meet them occasionally. She'd ask me to lunch and pre-announce him:

"This is the one. He's amazing, he's everything you can imagine."

And Jethro, always on the road.

Zoe kicks the fine powdery sand. She picks up a winterthorn pod, a burnt orange loop which she rattles absent-mindedly. "And then she went overseas."

"She got that movie role. It was a great opportunity. It was good for me too, coz she was earning, and you know how generous she is with money – I hardly worked then. I could afford to just write, dabble, sculpt, do courses. But you know, you kind of kept my hands full."

"I hardly remember that time. I remember being here. When we came here for holidays and stuff."

We sit on the branch of a fallen sausage tree. To our left, the sand-bank levels off into a stretch of white sand to the river's edge. The heat coming off the sand pulses. To our left, the bushes curdle into thicket. This is the spot. Directly in front of us squats a square mound covered in blue tarpaulin. Probably bags of cement. The spot has become a site. Next to it, a pile of gum poles, 20m long and creosoted black. Behind them, a pile of about 30 huge-girthed poles with rough fibrous surfaces.

"Palm trees," I say to Zoe. "A few weeks ago those were probably still growing."

"Where from?"

"You know that beautiful stretch of flood plain when you come from the airport?"

"The Terrain of the Tower Trees?"

"Who calls it that?"

"I do. I had a whole vampire story going on about that place when I used to come for holidays."

I turn to her. I suddenly realise she has her own history and myth and tethering to this place, separate from me, separate from my stories.

"Yeah, well, probably inland from there. Or somewhere else, west of the park. In the game management area."

"Have you seen the plans?" she asks, gesturing to the building materials in front of us.

"Nope."

"Who is it who is building?"

"Damian Coroso."

"Satan Spawn?"

"Who calls him that?"

"My mother."

I laugh. "I didn't realise she feels so strongly about him."

Zoe is drawing lines in the sand with a stick. "Why does she call him that?"

I shrug. "He's not so bad."

"Why you always defend people?"

"It's complicated."

"Complicated like a Facebook relationship."

"Complicated like a first love."

She swivels her head at me. "What? You were involved with him?"

"I was young."

"She never told me about that."

"Didn't she?"

"*You* never told me about that."

"Long time ago."

"Come on. Spill!"

"Ech. No."

"C'maaan!!" Her eyes are all mock horrified and she's smiling at me, poking my ribs with her elbow."

This requires a deep breath. But it's easier than talking about Cass. In front of us a knot of Vervet monkeys play and tumble on the ground.

"I was 16. He was trying to be a wild man. I was already wild, so maybe he thought by having me he could get there quicker. He had a hip flask of whisky, a motorbike, a poetry collection. He seduced me with literature, sunsets, flattery, moonlight."

"You were in like, Grade 10."

"I suppose."

"Didn't your mom and dad freak out?"

"They didn't know. At first. They weren't around much. Steve was always on the road, touring with the band. Mum was, well she's good at ignoring things she doesn't want to see. Anyway, she was on safari a lot. When they figured it out they sent me to Granny but it was too late then. I was hooked."

"How long did it last?"

"It lasted until he got bored, or came to his senses. Or both."

"How long was that?"

"I don't know. I don't need to talk about it really."

Zoe's skin is impossibly smooth. Her hair is a soft cloud above her head. Eyes have Cass's dangerous yellow tint.

"I'm 22."

"I know."

"I didn't know what I was doing when I was 16."

"You thought you did."

She grins. "I guess." Nods. "Yeah. I did." She plucks a straw of grass out of its sheath and chews the end. "You would have killed me. Strung me out and hung me up to dry."

"No, Reece would have."

"Reece would have killed him." We both smile. "So he was what, 20 years older than you?"

"Fifteen."

"Did he break your heart?"

"Yeah. Yeah I guess he did."

Riding our bikes on the river sand at night, the moon bleaching everything white. Drunk kisses under giddy stars. Poetry written on the back of cigarette boxes and left like a trail of clues, a treasure hunt. Everything a 16 year-old heart needs to capitulate.

"It's gross."

"Yep." I shrug.

"And now he's like, rich."

"Owns three sites, one of which used to be Grandpa's. And now this."

"While you guys..."

"Us guys"

"We guys..."

"Are not."

Zoe's hand are soft. Her nails are long now. Elegant hands. I recognise mine. I recognise Cass's hands. Ours are less Mother's. I suppose they will be like Granny's too. I hope it's just my hands that become like hers, and not my mind.

"So what are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"About this – this development. It can't be legit, can it?"

"What can I do, Zo?"

"Come on! Where's the eco-warrior in you?"

"It's all above board I think. All legal. He bought title deed from the chief."

"I thought you can't own land here."

"You can get a title deed for a 99 year lease. The government has to er... gazette the land or something. I think there were a few sites that had title issued back when the park was gazetted in the '50s. Anyway, it's a done deal."

"So your place has title deeds then? Yours and Mom's?"

"No idea. We must do, because after Grandpa sold the Lodge, he said that The Shacks was kept for us."

"In whose name?"

"Jeez, Zoe, we never talk about this stuff, what has got into you?"

"Is he the reason you never came back and lived here like Mama did?"

I inhale. A large male puku struts out of a nearby combretum bush, his horns dipping to the rhythm of his walk. A whistle shrills the air. "Hear that?" I say.

"Is it an alarm call?" Her eyes are wide. "Is there danger? Lions or something?"

"They pretend sometimes, to keep the females close by."

"Typical."

We are silent for a while, watching the puku. Then she says, "I think you should take him down. Fuck him up. Stop this from happening."

"How?"

"Don't laugh. You should. Name and shame. Out him on social media."

"Out him for what? For creating jobs, contributing to the economy and growing the tourist industry?"

"For being a rapist."

"Zoe."

"I'm serious, don't laugh. He's a rapist."

"He is not."

"You were below the legal age. It's not consent."

"Believe me, I wanted it."

"He's going to build a luxury lodge here. Probably cut down these trees coz they block the view or something."

"He won't do that."

"Disturb the elephant crossing site."

"They will keep crossing here. Just like they do at Mfuwe lodge, where they walk right through the reception to get to the cordyla tree."

"Yeah. I saw that video on Facebook. That was cool."

The light is dipping. It's time to head back. She tilts her eyes at me, that sideways look she used to give me when she wanted something, or had a plan.

"Take him down," she says. And then, "Unless of course you still have the hots for him."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Zoe, come on."

"What if it was me?"

"What?"

"If I got involved with some old dude when I was in Grade 10? It would be rape. I damn well hope you'd think that."

"It was a long time ago. Come on. We have to get back. We're going to get stuck on the wrong side of long grass. This is the time when the animals want to come down and drink, I don't want to be in their way."

14

It was in the summer of the anthrax, when all those hippos died and lay bloated with their feet splayed skywards, that our love really bloomed. We met whenever and wherever we possibly could: a bike ride into the mopane forest became a tryst; we'd meet at the crossroads and ride off side by side, into the trees, taking the road that led to the river, to that stretch of white sand blasted by sun that we called The Beach. We'd find a spot with a great view that wasn't already occupied by fishermen. We'd unpack a few picnic items from our rucksacks: a packet of biscuits I'd lifted from the lodge store, maybe some strips of thin salty biltong. A tin of olives and pro-vitas, or an orange, its skin already hard and leathery but the juice inside sour and refreshing.

By June, as the river had begun to retreat from its banks, the first cases were being reported. A hippo floated down the river with crocodiles feeding off it, thrashing the water yellow as they held on to their bit of flesh or skin. Then others, upstream and downstream. The favourite game-viewing spots were studded with carcasses; dollar-paying clients would be herded on their exclusive safari only to be greeted with a tide of stench as they decamped for sundowner gin and tonic.

The safari guides worked it into their patter. Nature's way of controlling the population, they said. Anthrax spores exist in the soil for hundreds of years, then one season the conditions will be such that it is released from the soil and starts to spread. A particularly dry season, some kind of stress lowering what was otherwise a natural immunity. Yes, overpopulation can be a stressor, sure, so that's why the hippos are so vulnerable to it. Damian was a rookie guide then, and I was his sidekick, the one who'd hold the spotlight on night drives.

I bit my tongue against wanting to correct him when he said stuff that sounded wrong to me. Schooled by years of listening to campfire talk, bar-drinks talk, client talk, lunch table talk, the scripted conversations about fauna and flora, habitat and gestation periods were so much a part of my knowledge base that I didn't trust it as knowledge. When someone came along with things they'd actually studied in books, I deferred.

One morning we came across a pack of wild dogs with pups. Clearly they were sick. Within weeks, there were several reported sightings of wild dog deaths. Whole packs died. Wild dogs greet each other with morning doggy licks, and so the highly contagious anthrax spores spread from dog mouth to dog mouth and soon the whole population, already on the endangered list, went from small to practically non-existent.

By September the whole Valley seemed to hang in a stew of rotting animal smell. I had to prepare to go back to school. I can't remember why, but Cass had spent that season away, with Granny, I think. I had had the run of the place to myself for once and it had been glorious.

Our love was still fiercely secret, and the last morning of August, one week away from going back to school, I checked the spot that had become our little mailbox, where we left notes, rolled up and stuffed into the knotty hollow of the tamarind tree. Let's go shooting, it said.

I woke before dawn and got dressed in my cut-off denim shorts, that ochre t-shirt I loved to wear, and boots. Walked the path to the staff houses and waited by his dark green Suzuki. He came out wearing khaki cargo pants with about 15 pockets on them, a forest-green long sleeved shirt, moonbag around his waist, and the felt hat. He had borrowed an extra shotgun for me to use. So in the back of the car was his small .22 rifle – the Winchester he was so proud of, the borrowed shotgun, his shotgun, and a cardboard box full of birdshot cartridges. Clinking in the many pockets of his cargo pants, a bunch of brass.

He drove like a whisky-swilling maniac, not like someone tracking game and merging with the bush around them. We bounced over the gulley dips crossing the floodplain, the green of which had already leeched away. He accelerated towards a group of impala and sent them scattering. He finally screeched to a halt where the road diverges – one way to the river, the other up towards the escarpment. He then drove slowly around the tree, through a gap between two *combretum* bushes and killed the engine. I think he thought he was hiding the vehicle.

"Should be good here," he said. "Let's walk."

So we did. On foot into the thick bush, me with the heavy shotgun and a pocket full of birdshot. Listening for guinea fowl.

When I think of it now it seems like it all happened to a different person. I didn't tell him I had never shot any living thing before, only tin cans and stacks of tyres, Stereo Steve helping me to re-arm the pump action shotgun because my eight-year old arms were not strong enough. When I asked him about it later, he said he thought I was such a hardened bush chick and that I would disdain him if he didn't prove himself by showing that he could hunt.

When a burst of guinea fowl scattered into the air, or a surprised francolin flapped out of the undergrowth, we both cheerfully took aim and sent pellets exploding into the air. The

borrowed shotgun had a horrible kick and I pretended not to care. My ears hurt. It was hot and my denim shorts felt too tight.

"Got one! Two maybe! Come on." He jog-walked to where he thought he'd seen the cloud of feathers drop. I collected the red shells of the spent cartridges and carried them in sweaty hands. He tracked down about three of the maybe six injured birds. Others would no doubt have fed a happy leopard or hyena that evening.

Back at the car, he said, "I have a bushbuck licence."

"Bushbuck?"

"Yeah, come, shall we head down to the river."

Bumping across the hippo-pocked clay floodplain, he shouted over the noise of the engine but I couldn't hear him. I think he was talking about recipes for guinea fowl stew and how to stop it being too tough.

Then he slowed right down, killed the engine. Breaking the line of the bushes, treading out from under cover and into the open, with that gentle head forward and back thrust that they do, was a male bushbuck. Not a particularly well developed one. Average horns, maybe a three or four year old. He handed me the .375. "Safety's on," he said.

If he noticed that I was shocked, he didn't let on. But I was shocked. I was not going to kill a bushbuck. Especially not such a young, russet, tender brown-eyed bushbuck. An impala maybe. Even a puku. But bushbucks are...special. No ways.

He was looking at me, eyebrows raised, encouraging. I lifted the smooth wooden butt of the rifle to my cheek. Drew a bead on the bushbuck's neck. It startled, sensing death the way animals do. I eased off the safety like I had been taught. Draw a breath. Hold it and squeeze. The bushbuck fell. Recoil smacked my shoulder.

"Great shot," he breathed at me. My senses were sharpened and blurred, I smelled his sweat and his cigarettes but my vision was smeared. He jumped off the Suzuki and walked over to the bushbuck. I didn't feel ill or nauseous. I felt hollow, sad. Like the feeling when I first smoked a cigarette. The body was still warm. He kissed me. I didn't want it and so I walked back to the car, lifted the rifle strap off my shoulder and laid the gun down on the back seat of the car.

"Drive a bit closer," he said. "This boy is heavy."

We wrestled it onto the back of the truck, if you could call it a truck. He lit up a Camel and handed it to me. I dragged the smoke into my lungs, handed it back to him. Tiny black mopane bees flew to the corner of my eyes, seeking moisture. Sweat on the back of my neck. I didn't feel like doing anything. He had a hip-flask of whisky in the cubby hole of the

Suzuki. I swirled some in my mouth. It was hot and burned my tongue, my cheeks, my palette. He called me his whisky-swilling, bike-riding, gun-toting girl.

A light breeze broke the stillness and stirred the sweat on my forehead. On the breeze I could smell the rot of anthrax carcass floating down the river.

I am sitting with Zoe in the chitenje. She is on her phone, scrolling away, WhatsApping away. I didn't mean to look but I was pouring water into her glass (it's so hot). My eyes land on the screen. She is messaging someone called Nathan. It says *No I haven't told her yet*.

All at once, I get it.

The picky eating, the tiredness, the listlessness. All the fire in this girl just kind of quenched. The irritation.

I get it. Zoe is pregnant. I go onto her Tumblr page. Nothing.

Good God. Pregnancies. This globe is awash with pregnancies. Failed ones, blooming ones, those that abort themselves, those that produce a delivery, and those that must be pinched shut. There is no space for all of us. Just no space. But still.

I hear the Land Cruiser engine at about dusk. Zoe and I have been antsy and snappish with each other all day. I jump up and run to call her from the chitenje where she has been lolling and reading.

"Zoe! They're back."

She unfurls herself from the recliner with a yawn and stretch. The book falls out of her hand. *The Wretched of the Earth*.

"Quick, they're here. They're stopping at the storeroom. No no they're not, they're driving up to the guest house. Come, you haven't seen Aunty Faye since you were a kid."

She drops her phone. I snag the edge of my kikoi on a nail sticking out of the chitenje pole.

Shit.

We are all fingers and thumbs.

The Land Cruiser door opens and Aunty Faye gets out first.

"Is this who I think it is? Oh my goodness, look at this tall beautiful young woman!"

Faye puts down her handbag to embrace Zoe but I'm keeping my eye on the back door of the Cruiser, watching for the flap to lift up. So is Zoe. When it does lift up, Cass is super cool, her eyes yellow-flecked like a lioness's.

"You came," she says, sliding out the back feet first without dropping the tailgate. "This is a surprise."

"I wanted to surprise you. Both of you," she says, catching my eye.

"Both of us. How cool. And? All well? All well, Zoe? Anastasia?"

"Darling!" Mum is looking at me, looking at Cass, then Zoe, all huge smiles. "What an amazing surprise! We all thought you were too busy fighting a revolution to come and join us."

We're all looking at her now.

"Well, for Gran, you know. She was family, right? Family's important."

"A drink, to celebrate," says Cass, still not taking her eyes off me.

"Come on, you two go ahead, Stanna will help me with the bags and this cold box. We brought some fish from the lake."

"And some Carlsberg Greens!" yells Cass over her shoulder. She gestures to me with her thumb. "My bag is the fucked-up khaki one."

I leave her bag in the back, grab the cold box and sling Mother's bag over my shoulder. As I catch up to them I hear Cass say, "I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived."

Zoe says nothing.

“So when *did* you arrive?” Cass is asking her but looking at me.

"Friday."

"A complete surprise?"

"The sms came the morning you guys left. Just missed you."

Zoe flicks her head back to look at me.

"So, when is the actual funeral?" she asks.

15

When you cross over the bridge and follow the red road into the park, you pass by a borrow pit on the right, with a grove of yellow-flowering cassia trees opposite, on the left. The cassias are not indigenous and they don't belong in the park's ecosystem. It is the site of an old village.

Sam Mwale drives with me to Mfuwe Lodge, which is where he works now. I'm going to ask if we can do a memorial service there. Sam and I don't have much in common, except for the huge thing, which is that everything we know about this place, all our bush lore was taught to us by the same person – my grandfather.

"There are so many more of those trees now," I remark as we drive past them. "I remember when there was just a small group of them."

"Yes," says Sam, one hand on his bird book, the other on his binoculars. "They will keep on multiplying."

"In South Africa," I say, "they are cutting down all the trees that are not originally from there. Like the blue-gums and the black wattle, which they wanted for the mines so that they would have timber for scaffolding. They say now that these trees suck all the water out of the water table."

"O-oh?"

That lilting tonality of ChiKunda – how an O-oh-oh can mean doubt, disbelief, or agreement just with a slight change in inflection.

"Ya. But I don't think they can cut these ones down, right?"

"No. You are right. There was a graveyard here before. Long time ago. Daniel's people were here. They moved when they made the national park. When they drew the boundary."

'They' is Grandpa. He doesn't say that.

"Daniel? The same Daniel who was the Chibembe barman?"

"No. Madala Daniel. The Headman. He was one of your grandfather's great friends."

"There are so many Daniels!"

"Well, there are so many lions. The Daniel story is a good story for Kunda people. We live with lions."

"I never thought about that before. I like it."

"The whole village moved from this place, so that we could make this area for animals only."

"I'm sure people found that hard to accept. Did they understand, I wonder?"

"Daniel, he did. When Bwana explained to him about keeping the animals on one side of the river, and that walendo could come and take pictures, he said ok, so we must move."

"Are you sure?"

Sam glances at me, as if trying to locate my scepticism. "Sure. Daniel understood about the benefits of keeping the wildlife."

"How do you know?"

"Otherwise, he would not have moved his people."

Did he have a choice, I wonder. "It seems like the wazungu are always telling people where to move and how they must live." But Sam is on script. As if I were a client.

"Anyway, for us Zambians, we don't mind to move villages. It's in our culture. We farm, and when the ground is exhausted we find a new place. We are movious people since *kudala*." He slows for a pronking impala on the road. "Only now, it is difficult to move."

"Yes."

"Yes, now..." he frowns as the car hits a pothole. "Now..."

"Now there are too many *walendo*?" I offer.

"Too many!!"

We laugh.

The yellow carpet of cassia flowers is fresh in my memory. I must remember to ask mother what time of year it is that they blossom. I am forgetting so much.

16

3 am and it was a mosquito that woke me. No. It wasn't the mosquito that woke me but it was definitely the mosquito that kept me awake. The first trigger was the feeling of a flooding pad. I know there is a towel underneath me but the soft rupture, the breeching of the banks, slowly spreading, possibly filling and spilling and soaking through onto the towel.

Boarding school – the quiet terror of waking to realise that this bleeding, all the blood has soaked through onto those regulation white sheets. Ears hot with shame as you gather up those sheets in the pre-dawn, wrap yourself in a towel and shuffle to the toilet, where you sit, calculating how best to minimise the damage in time for pre-breakfast dorm inspection when our sheets must be folded back and hospital corners sharp at the ends of those metal institutional beds. That time when even the grey blanket was soaked through. Praying that it would be the kind matron, not the other one. But the matron is not the worst dread, it's all the other girls, the way everyone will now, will always know, already knows, the very secretest parts of you, and nothing is yours, nothing at all.

The times when I was dizzy and light-headed on the sports field, no idea then how much was normal to bleed. Only now, last year, when I research the blood loss, do I realise just how much blood has poured out of me over the years.

There she is – she looks like me. Her brown hair is knotted and dotted with small wild flowers, she sings in the fields, this girl child, she has missed her ride. She won't be coming to earth, not in this body, the one I could have given her. Not with the eyes she could have taken from me, and maybe Reece's bony toes. I stay here. I stop here. What a foolish vanity having children is, wanting them. The world is strewn with babies who will not grow up with half the love that Zoe has. Beautiful wild Zoe calls me mother, why should I want to fill my body with another heartbeat?

I am sure now that Zoe is pregnant. I can’t believe it. All my mornings of peeing on a stick, taking my temperature, the delay, the build-up and then the flooding – each period more of a deluge than the last. And then, suddenly the feeling of release – maybe this is not going to happen and maybe that is ok.

And now this. Just when I have let go of the wish to snuggle a baby to my cheek, just when I have started to embrace the possibility of freedom, real freedom, maybe even a freedom from Reece, from Joburg, from leafy suburbia, now this. Will I be raising Zoe's child now? No. It is time for Cass to take the reins.

At breakfast, the debate is about Where shall we have our special gathering? Much of the pressure is coming from Zoe.

"We have sent an email to all the lodges, inviting them and asking them to bring a platter of snacks to an afternoon tea." Such a simple idea, it wouldn't have occurred to me. But the question is, where?

“How about the bridge?” suggests Zoe lightly.

"The *bridge*? That's a bizarre idea." Winifred, who never says anything, is jolted into comment. Her eyebrows arch at Zoe.

"Why not?"

Cass jumped to her defence. "We used to do Christmas carols there, remember? It's central enough for people to get there easily. We can set tables up along the west side, and cars can still pass."

"I don't know darling," Mum weighs in. "Somewhere quiet, off the beaten track, somewhere picturesque like Lupunga spur or the Luwi river."

"Yes, what about Luwi camp?" See Cass claiming credit like it was all her idea.

"But you know, Granny never really liked the bush. And Luwi is *bush* bush."

“It’s so wild up there, isn’t it?” Mum is dreamy-eyed.

Zoe, watching her, says, "So I thought that the best place would be on the deck at Nyalubwe because it was the kind of crystal and silver service vibe that Granny loved, but when I tried to book, apparently they have clients and can't accommodate such a big party."

"Er, yeah. Maybe Nyalubwe isn't the best idea," says Cass, winking at me.

The conversation circles and spirals. Eventually I propose this: "How about a combination of the two ideas? We take the fine linens and whatnot, and we go and have a splendid picnic at the old Luwi site."

"Zoe, exactly how many people did you invite?” asks Mum. “I ran into Godfrey Mwale at the filling station and he said he is coming to my mother's funeral. I said we are just having a small private ceremony and he says no, we are coming, we must support you. And he is so glad that we have organised something. Who have you invited?" Mum's anxiety looks like it could peak any minute.

"It's a funeral," Zoe says. "Not a party. You don't invite people, they just come."

18

Dear Granny, my letters used to begin. And then I would pause there, pen frozen as all the news that moments before had crowded my head, now flew off like a cloud of ducks leaving the water. Even the wingbeats went silent. Zoe used to thunder her eyebrows at me when I asked her how was school. Too much information to sift. The question was wrong. Usually, it is the question that is wrong.

It has shifted in timbre. It used to be awakening to the presence of the absence. A sucking shock for the first few days, congealing in the heart so that in the weeks after the first hit, you wake to something slightly different each time. After three weeks, you wake and it’s not the first thing you think of but it’s still there, it's become a dull fact lodged in my body.

One morning there's a presence, wafting, almost able to be summoned. Kind of. The way I've heard it spoken of by those who are better versed in the things: You can request that the energy assemble in some way, and it can, with the help of your projection, your energy, be persuaded to form an imprint, a resemblance to the one you knew and loved. With Granny of course it is her smell, she will speak in this language to me. But I am finding something empty in my heart when I try to speak to Granny.

Zoe's words ring in my head. Perhaps that is it. The proper rituals have not been done. In death as well as life she is separated from us, from a place she can call home.

It started with Salima and the crocodile. The red T-shirt and the clothes by the river's edge. The women were washing when the little girl was snatched by the great greengrey Nile croc – not like the one in the Roald Dahl story, the one who could talk and had a big smile. This was one of the silent ones, like all crocs who live in this river. When I try to speak about it, 40 years after it happened, Mother says I wasn't there, on the river's edge. That what I am remembering is the fuss and the chaos of the aftermath. Women wailing, game scouts being called, rifle fire and men wading in shallow water. But the image of that small red t-shirt lying on the sand – is that then a detail that I have filled in?

The croc, dead, was lashed to the back of the Land Rover. This part is clear, it's a movie that replays without warning. The crocodile was huge. In Valley-speak now, we would call it "a fucking big crocodile". This is what these crocodiles are called.

They are going to tow it away. Where to? I have no idea, now, but clearly it had to be removed. Would it be eaten? Taxi-dermied? Left for the lions? Ritually buried because after all that's where little Salima was now interred. The adults are milling around. I am under the sausage tree with Elina but I want to get closer. There is a half-circle of grown-ups. I see Isaac the store man who always gives me biscuits. I dash to him and stand in the throng, someone gets into the Landie – is it Grandpa? The door slams. Engine starts, vehicle starts to move. My blood jumps then and a full body fright slams over me – *the crocodile has started running! It has come back to life!*

There is a roar or cheer from the grown-ups. I wonder if I screamed. Probably not. We had learned by then to take the frights inside. Don't make a noise, you will sound like prey.

I wonder how long it takes to realise that the croc is not running, it's just that the energy of the car has entered its body. The movement of being dragged, white belly across the sand, activates the feet to make it look like it is belting across the camp area, chasing that Land Rover, with little Salima in its belly.

She used to visit me after that. I couldn't say if it was in my dreams or in the daytime, like a friend who followed me to the quiet places behind camp. I'd sit by the big water boiler and the chatter would stream through me. She was wearing the red T-shirt and she knew things I couldn't know.

19

"Please," says Zoe. "I don't want to go to the Croc Farm."

"Darling, that's where everyone is going to be, it's Pizza Night. There's rugby on."

"Rugby!" She groans. "You cannot do this to me."

"Stanna, talk some sense into your charge here. She listens to you. We must go."

Cass will get her way of course. We will arrive at 4 in preparation for the game. We will order drinks, pay a silly amount for a pizza at the bar, choose our toppings at the great pizza buffet spread, and get it baked in the flagship wood-fired pizza oven – the only one in the Valley (not counting the hollowed out termite mounds where people have been baking bread since the olden days). We will watch the big screen and shout at men in shorts while hippos in the river behind us underscore our cheers with their own scornful commentary.

"It'll be fun," I say to her.

"No. It will not. Cass will get wrecked and want to stay late, and everyone will ask me what I'm doing with my life and the men will be revolting."

"We can go in a separate car. I'll take you home the minute you get fed up." I'm watching her closely now. "You used to enjoy a party as much as anyone. As much as Cass. So what's the deal?"

"I'm just not in the mood."

"You can tell me, Zo."

She catches my eye, holds it, looks away. Cass comes back into the kitchen at that moment and her eyes scan me, then her, then me again.

"I have an assignment I have to do. The wifi connection is so shit, I wasn't able to do any research. But it's due."

"It's Saturday." Cass is leaning against the counter top where we have just eaten breakfast. She leans back on her hands and pushes herself up so that she is sitting on the counter. Her arms and legs are tanned. She is in safari guide mode.

"Oh gosh. Ok, I'll come, but just for pizza, then please bring me back."

"Awesome. Hug, please. And we'll go for a game drive tomorrow at the crack of dawn."

"My assignment!"

"You can do it now. Come down to my place, the wifi is better there."

"I'll come too," I say, rinsing my coffee mug.

Her house is tidier than the morning I was there and lay down on her bed. The layer of clutter and neglect that was so pervasive on my first visit seems to have been peeled away; there is a bowl of oranges on the inside windowsill.

I decide to come straight out with it.

"You have Granny's box, don't you?"

"Granny's what?"

"Box."

"Box?"

"There's a box that was missing, it had her papers in it, manuscripts, photos. I've been looking for it for like five years. I thought it was permanently missing. I thought it was disappeared at customs or something."

"What makes you think I've got it?"

"I came here while you were gone. I saw it. Upstairs."

"You came here. While I was gone."

"I just – came to sit here, you know. It used to be my spot once upon a time, remember?"

"Zoe, you are so lucky you don't have a sister." She props the screen-door open with a broken broomstick and drags two chairs out. Zoe slumps down on the soft chair inside, opens her laptop. They stare at each other for a moment.

"What?"

"Wifi code?"

"Oh right. It's bushbaby1. Lower case and number one."

She sits, binoculars in hand and starts to scan the river bank. I sit next to her.

"Cass, how about we unpack it. There's stuff in there she entrusted to me. She said I must edit her manuscript for her. I'm sure there are also photos that Zoe would love to see."

"Do you know, there's been a Giant Kingfisher fishing at that spot every morning for the past month or so. Can't see it now, but it's been there. Must be a great fishing spot. Hey, we must do some fishing with Zoe while she's here."

"Cass. You're being obtuse."

She lowers the binoculars and turns her face to me. "There's no box of Gran's papers, Stanny."

"Upstairs. In your – where your clothes are. I saw it."

"Go on then."

I'm up the wooden ladder, and everything is the same in Cass's room, but the box is not there. She's behind me then, tawny hair and eyes gleaming.

"It was here." I point at the empty space under where her jackets hang. A pair of dusty canvas lace-ups that once were white lies in its space.

"Oh, you mean *that* box? I moved it. There's no papers in it though. I keep my valuables in there. Passports and cameras and stuff."

"But Cass, that is the trunk I packed her papers into. It is the exact trunk. Where are the contents? When did you get it?"

'Um... I think I got it from Aunty Faye, actually. Or was it Leo? Can't remember. Didn't she have a couple of boxes that looked like that? I'm thirsty, aren't you?"

"Can we pace ourselves? We have the rugby this afternoon."

"What do you mean? I'm not going to start drinking at this hour, don't be ridiculous. I was thinking of a lime juice. Zoe? Are you thirsty, love?"

Someone has been in here recently, you can see by the dust - there's a slight scuffing on the floor. I switch my torch on. It's almost impossible to see in the dimness of the store-room. No windows except for that tiny air brick. Is that how the dust gets in? This room was built to withstand weather, monkeys and termites. Except it has not withstood termites. Nothing does. My box of high-school books? Termite food. Leo told me, when I asked for the key. He gave me the key anyway.

The beam catches a membrane of spider's web stretching between the brick and timber shelving and a metal filing cabinet. There's a ragged tear across it, it's not an active spider's web, it's the kind that gets thick and spongy from not being disturbed. I imagine Cass coming in here and dragging the trunk over the threshold. She would have to push aside other boxes to make way.

What *is* in here anyway?

Car parts. Cardboard boxes that have lost shape, bulged, and sighed out their contents. A pile of VHS tapes – wildlife documentaries recorded off the BBC, circa 1988. An old gas cylinder keeps guard next to a crate of empty beer bottles - those are still useful, you can trade them in for full ones at Get Busy Enterprise. I recognise a wooden box in the corner with a padlock on it, but no Granny box.

Kakuli is the name given to the small group of older male buffaloes who break away from the herd when their breeding value has expired and their age and fitness will slow down the big herds. Old and grumpy, they hang out in smaller groups in the bushes, on the margins, dangerous and unpredictable in the long grass.

When we get to the Croc Farm I spot them at the table that is positioned between the bar and the riverbank with a view of the pool. That way they can do 'game viewing' and game viewing. They can keep an eye on the riverbank for wildlife sightings and they can check out the talent that wanders in from the campsite: bikini-ed overlanders, Swedish girls with blonde braids or dreadlocks, dozing on a sun-bed. They are all long past the moment when they might have had a chance. The lapels-and-khaki appeal has worn off, no-one likes a hunting story anymore and so they are left to prop each other up and remind themselves of how good they once had it.

I immediately bristle, aware of Zoe's legginess, her beautiful shoulders and flat brown stomach with its smooth expanse of tender skin. I remember that feeling of predatory eyes on me, and I realise with a quiet shock that it won't happen anymore. Cass bounds over to them, calling to Zoe to come over for introductions. The ripple of recognition as they shift from seeing her as quarry to seeing her as family.

Here is Granny's second son, Uncle Leo. He pushes back his chair to give Zoe a hug and a kiss on each cheek, Holding her by the shoulders and at arms-length to get a good look at her.

"Let's get you a drink!"

"Just water, please."

Here is the old chap we used to call 'Buffalo Bill' looking lighter and silverer than the last time I saw him. Big Dennis with his beer belly and crinkly smile greets Zoe with shyness, and nods and smiles at me. Four beer glasses on the table at various stages of emptiness.

"Sorry about your old Gran," says Tiny Tinus, and they all nod and murmur.

"We'll be there tomorrow, Leo," Bill says, draining his glass and giving Leo his solemn nod.

"Sure, sure. Of course" They all nod and murmur in assent.

"Meeting at the bridge at 2, then we go on to Chichele, right?"

"She was a grand old lady," says Tiny Tinus, so called because of his giant physique and hands the size of loaves. "I'm glad you ous are doing something for her."

"Thanks to Zoe," I say. "We almost didn't. She's organised everything."

Leo frowns at me. I have made the family look bad. "Well, of course Jerry is there in the UK, taking care of things there. Paperwork and such."

"Jerry as in your boet Jerry?" Bill pulls at his moustache.

"The one and only."

"What time is your boet getting in?"

"It's been a while since he was here."

"Well, hell. It has, eh?"

They are almost ruffled. Bill's moustache is moving all over the place.

"Is he still with that – ? " He doesn't say whatever it was he was going to say. He glances at Zoe and grins at me, momentarily awkward.

"That what? You can say it," says Zoe, eyebrow arched.

"I was going to say Chinkie. No offence."

Cass looks at Zoe, at me, at Bill, who says, "you know Uncle Jerry. Always a lovely woman at his side."

"He likes the pretty Asian girls," says Tinus. "Gets them too. Dunno how he does it."

"Hello! Ana! Hello Cassie!" The voice is coming from the poolside of the bar. It's Elephant Researcher and Carnivore Man. She waves at us, brimming with friendliness and smiles. I notice a look pass between Chris the Carnivore Man and Cassie. Just a brief look. If I hadn't seen it before on Cass I wouldn't have taken note. But I have. Carnivore look.

Bill turns to Uncle Leo. "Haven't seen Jerry since your dad's memorial."

Leo nods. He smiles at Cass. "Drink?"

"Grandpa's funeral was amazing," says Cass. "Beer please." She is drumming her fingers on the table. "Do you remember all the kids from the school fund project were ferried in to the park, and all the lodges had provided platters and platters of food – sandwiches, samoosas, cocktail sausages,"

"Finger food."

"Yeah, and the kids from the project just flattened those snacks in seconds, there was nothing left for the dignitaries, we had to radio in to the lodges to send more food."

Dennis chuckles into his beer glass. "Those picannins had never seen anything like it."

Zoe winces. "Do we have to say 'picannins'?"

"I didn't know that story," I say, to smooth out the pause. "I just remember that the food came late, and I had to go and tell the choir to do more songs."

"It didn't come late," Cass corrected me. "We had to organise more coz it got flattened. There were so many VIPS."

"Grandpa would have loved that the kids ate everything, including the former president's share. It would have appealed to him."

"Your grandmother, not so much," grins Tinus.

"Hey, Wiseman!" Bill waves in the direction of the bar "Turn up the volume there! It's nearly kick-off, man!"

The big-screen match warm up talks are on and the players are about to come streaming onto the field. I go to the toilet. Zoe follows me.

"What the fuck?"

"What?"

"What's happened to your spine?"

"What?"

"Picannins? Chinkie? Really?"

I sigh. "Zo, it's a losing battle with these guys. Forget it."

"It was like this last time as well," she says to me. "Anything to keep the peace, eh?"

"Zo –"

"No I just saw something now. I get it now."

"What? What do you get?"

"It's all about how you look, isn't it. Your reputation."

"Zoe –"

"Yeah. That's it. In Joburg, amongst your NGO friends, when it's not cool to be racist, then you can take them on, and post about it afterwards. But here –"

"It's different here."

"Different?"

"People are not racist here, not the way they are in South Africa, it's *different*."

"Wow."

She rinses her hands and turns away without looking at me.

"Zoe, wait, come back."

I look for her at the bar and can't find her. Cass slinks over.

"Where is my daughter?"

I hesitate before having to say "I don't know. She ran off. Upset."

"What did you say to her?"

"Nothing. It was the conversation at the table that upset her."

"Well where is she? How upset is she? Has she gone down to the river? Shit!"

"Cass's maternal instinct downloads a decade too late."

"What? What did you just say?"

There's a roar from the bar area. South Africa has scored.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Cass. Anyway, she's been upset for a while, I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

"What sort of upset?"

"Has she not said anything to you?"

Cass is livid. I've seen her like this before, with that crocodile-cold flat look in her eyes.

I hear the words coming out of my mouth. "I think she is pregnant."

She pivots slowly, fixing those eyes on me, and her lips forming a sort of a smile. "She told you this?"

I shrug. "Ask her."

"Did she tell you?"

"She didn't have to. It's obvious. She hasn't had a drop of alcohol since she was here, she's been picky about food, and moody as hell. I know the signs, Cass. I've been watching for them in myself every month for three years."

She turns and strides towards the bar, swoops on the client binoculars that rest on the edge near the ashtrays and the bird books.

Tiny Tinus is sitting next to Elephant and Carnivore Couple and they crane their necks past her as she momentarily blocks the screen. "Yes! Take it!" yells someone. Tension builds and then a collective sigh. "Knocked on."

Cass storms away from the action and goes to the river's edge where she pauses, scanning the broad sandbanks in the upstream direction. If I'd wanted to blow off steam I would also have walked in that direction. Sand buoying up the sky, a tree-line to head to, plovers scattering in high pitched shrieks, wheeling overhead and then returning. It's what either one of us would have done. Because in valley land sometimes you just need space and a horizon. But there is no Zoe walking on the riverbed.

I leave Cass with her binoculars and head back towards the buildings, away from the bar. Something tells me to go to the reception. It's cool and dark in the office. I duck my head because the doorway is so low. Sitting on an easy chair with her feet up on the coffee table is Zoe. I plonk myself down next to her. She has picked up the *Getaway* mag that was on the coffee table.

"I'm sorry."

She doesn't look at me, just nods and pages to an article on trout fishing in Mpumalanga.

"It's true. I should call people out no matter what. No matter their age."

She keeps paging through the magazine. *Your wildest adventure yet. Explore forgotten Bagamoyo. Okavango Delta off-season.*

Elina is not at her usual station, hunched over the bookings book. "Where is she?"

"She went to find a charger for me. My phone died."

"I know you think I'm a coward."

She studies a sidebar column comparing off-road vehicles for fuel efficiency. In the background more cheering. "Come on, Bokke!"

"We can get through this Zoe. You know that I have got your back with this sort of thing. Look at all we've been through."

She tosses the magazine aside. "I'm not some badge you get to wear to prove your politically correct credentials."

"Is that really what you think?"

"It's not just that. It's your whole – everything. The way you always back down. Look at how you are with the environmental stuff as well – Damian's lodge. All of it. You literally never stand up for what you believe."

"That is not a fair thing to say." I'm choking up, I feel about five years old. "Do you want me to go and talk to them? Coz I will. But Cass is looking for you."

"Oh God."

"Zo -"

"Between the two of you, it's a miracle I'm not hospitalised by now."

"I told her."

"What? Told her what?"

"About your - you know."

"I literally don't know what you are talking about."

"Zoe, it's ok, you can tell us. We are totally ok with it."

"With what though?"

"Why don't you tell us?"

"Oh, my god. What the hell are you on about?"

Then Cass appears in the doorway. She smirks and says, "Your aunt thinks you are pregnant. She says you have all the signs."

"Pregnant? Oh Jesus, no ways. You're kidding, right? Oh. My. God. Mom, no. Stanna, what are you talking about?"

Cassie's face is so utterly smug I want to scratch her.

"How long have you been standing there?"

She completely ignores me. "Zoe darling. Elli said you were here. She said to give you this." Holding out a charger.

Zoe takes it from her, arms heavy and defeated. "I just wanna go home and do my assignment."

"Just now, babe, let's have some pizza first, okay?"

Cass's face is right up against mine and she's hissing at me.

"I wish you would fucking shut up about Granny's fucking papers already. Stop going on about it."

"Why have you hidden them? I know you have got them."

We are back at her house. Zoe and everyone else went to bed, and I drove Cass down to her place.

"You are so stupid," she says. "So fucking stupid. All the bullshit you speak – all the PC stuff. Trying to keep up with Zoe all the time like the fucking Woke Olympics."

"What?

"Yeah, I see you on Facebook, tryna be the most politically correct aunt the young people ever saw."

"Jeez, Cass."

"Queen of the fucking universe."

"Cass."

"No. Wait. Shush. I need to say this. I know you were Granny's favourite little helper. I get that. Iss fine. I don't give a shit about that. But. Lemme ask you this. Did you ever read those papers that she squirrelled away there. Did you? Did you read them? Her so-called book?"

"No. I packed them. It was going to be something I did for her, maybe something we would do together. She was going to be living in Lusaka and I was going to come and sit with her but it never happened because of the decision to send her to England."

"So you haven't read them."

"No. But I want them, Cass. I promised her."

"Oh, come on, this is not about her."

“What do you mean?"

"Seriously? Such bullshit. You just want a book with your name on it. You want to take that stuff and rewrite it? You know what, go for it. But you have no idea. No idea what you are gonna find in there, and believe me – it's not pretty."

"What the hell, Cass? It's her life's work – all her papers, her diaries, how can you decide that you are now the chief curator.'

"Curator? Don't fucking 'curator' me. You think because I didn't finish my degree I'm not as clever as you, but I know bullshit when I see it, and I know fucking racist apologist supremacist bullshit when I see it, too."

"You're talking about Granny's life – her whole archive: newspaper articles, her columns, everything."

"Bullshit. All of that is bullshit. She was a small-time social journalist, careless with who she knew and how she spoke. Careless, probably, with who she slept with."

"Cass!"

"Whatever! Who cares, she forgot all of it anyway, and she was pretty darn good at keeping secrets, which is more than we can say for you."

"What the -"

"Yeah. Anyway. Unfortunately, she got used."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Yeah you do. Does the name Arnie Van Zyl mean anything to you? Korsten Kotze?"

"I've heard those names. Yeah. Why?"

"Top dogs in high places. Also familiar faces around Granny's famous Sunday lunch dinner table."

“Yeah. And so?"

She's drunk and slurry but something about what she's saying is unsettling.

"Lemme tell you," she says. "Ivory, rhino, poaching, money, links, diplomatic bags...djyoo know whattImtalkinabout?"

"You are literally accusing your grandmother of smuggling illegal goods."

"How do you think she paid for four sets of school fees in the most expensive schools in South Africa?"

"And worse than smuggling – what? Poaching?" I'm laughing at her. "You are crazy. You have actually lost it. We are conservationists. We're the good guys."

She snorts. "Yeah. Ok. Good guys with really good morals and values and intentions but really really bad radar for bad guys."

"You have lost me."

"Shame, my sissie. You know you always see the good in everyone. An I know you loved Granny. But she was a racist, colonial...whattssthis. An enabler."

"We know she was racist, that's hardly news."

"Always hated Zoe."

"Not true!"

"Hated Jethro. Why do you think he could never come to a single fucking picnic?"

“She never said that.”

“Course she didn’t. Not to us. But, duh. Obvious. Not that you ever gave a shit. Too busy with your important life.”

"Cass, Granny loved Zoe. She was good to Zoe."

"Lucky Zoe looks white.”

“Cass!”

“Oh come on. Read her books. Apologist. No-one ever talks about it coz it’s too feckn awkward. Yeah. I see things, Stanny sister. I see things no-one sees. We like to look away. Mom, everybody. Me, I been seeing things for long time."

"What? What do you see, Cass?"

"Jerry."

"What about Jerry?" She's going to be getting weepy, any minute now. I can see it coming.

"Fucking Jerry. Poes. I need a drink."

I put my beer in her hand. She looks me straight in the eye, deep in the eyes.

"That Jerry has crooked us blind. You wanna watch that Jerry. I see things. I know things."

"What things, Cass?"

"You watch," she slurs. It's too late for any more coherence. "My Zoe, my Zoe is a good girl. She's a good girl. She's doing good."

"Has Jerry done something to Zoe?"

"Nenenene. No. Not that. Not my Zoe. She's a good girl. But you gotta watch that Jerry. Coming tomorrow. You'll see."

I manage to steer her to her bed and under the mosquito net. She goes down like an obedient child. I lie down on the couch and fall asleep to the whine of a mosquito around my ear.

At some point Granny emigrated permanently to the Past, meaning her colour-rich childhood. India in the 1930s. The boat crossings from Southampton to Beira, to Cape Town. We know now what was happening, medically, that is. A series of mini-strokes called TMIs (Too much information? Asks Zoe? Maybe).

These were shutting off her memory like a reverse advent calendar, adding to her usual forgetfulness.

"She can't form short-term memory anymore," explained one of the doctors.

"It's excellent actor training," joked Reece, after listening to one loop that repeated 15 times, a story about her girlhood. "You have to be fresh and attentive, listening as if each time is the first."

Aunty Faye, who had been her beloved sister-in-law and ally, called everybody to account.

"The money has all gone," she said. All the properties sold. The bad second husband left her nothing, giving everything to his third wife and several grown-up already wealthy children.

But all that happened later. In 2003, three years after the disastrous millennium party, and when the world was in the paroxysms of War on Terror rhetoric, I sat with my grandmother in her Parkhurst home in Johannesburg and helped her pack boxes, trunks, suitcases.

She had moments of brilliant lucidity when she saw quite clearly how to divide everything up. Belle Fiore China, split between her two living children. Dresses that she had kept pristine since the 1960s – black shiny fabric edged with careful beadwork.

"Oh, they don't make them like this anymore," she'd croon, "I only bought the best, you know – good quality made to last."

Well, those would go to Cass of course, because "she's going to be a star one day."

Granny split her selves between me and my sister, assigning Cass and I each a piece that was set to grow, like taking a cutting from a fruit tree. I got the books, the writing desk, some good roasting pans. Cass got a beautiful drinks set: cocktail shaker, cut crystal glasses, a silver tray.

"Now listen carefully, darling, I've saved the most important job for us to do together." She drops her voice to a conspirator's hiss and shows me the trunk. "This is the book," she tells me, waving a blue Manilla folder of printed pages, handwritten pages, newspaper clippings. "I've changed the names to protect the people," she says.

I wasn't that interested, if I'm honest about it now. Reece had invited me to his opening and I didn't want to be late. I had been with her all afternoon and the circular anxiety had filled me up and overwhelmed me.

"Leave it open, over there," she told me. "I'll add to it as I go."

She opened a smaller carved box, filigreed with ivory inlays. "Oh look, a photograph of me with my ayah. Letters from my old Aunt Esther – what do I do with all these things? Well, you've have something to remember me by when I am gone. It's our history, you know."

"You've got lots of life left in you, Granny."

"But this file, darling. This mustn't get into the wrong hands, do you hear me?"

What "wrong hands", I think to myself. Whose hands are the wrong ones? What does she mean? The current government? Other people in the family?

I'd always known there were some vague connections to the apartheid apparatus.

After Granny left Grandpa because the parties weren't good enough in the Bush, she married again. To the Man we don't speak about, the loathed arsehole second husband.

"Broederbond" said Cass once, like I even knew what that meant then. "She knew things. She knows people. The wrong kind of people."

The thing about being the ageing mother of several slightly eccentric offspring is that no-one realises when you are distressed. All her life she was the bad guy, the one who left. The one who rejected the romance that was Grandpa. The one who took her children away from paradise and their beloved father and went to the city. Divorce. Remarrying the man that no-one has polite words for. When her mind eventually started to slip, it must have been terrifying for her – this competent, worldly traveller. Here I am, trying to catch the pieces for her. Fragments of a life.

One of my fragments: I can't have been more than six or seven. *Help me set the table, Stanna.* So I take out the big plates and the small plates, the wine glasses and the place mats. *Please bring me the big platter.*

It's on the top shelf though. I have to tip-toe on my chair. The plate in my hands, the plate not in my hands. The crash on the ground. I want to run away but she comes in – sees the plate and, probably, sees my shame and terror roiling

It's ok, my darling.

We pieced that plate together like jigsaw. Joining the yellow flowers to their green patterned leaves and stems.

My mind has been over and over this. How do you piece together a life? It'll be 'back of the envelope' calculations at best.

The parties! Fine linen and crystal, champagne and gin. Set up the structures of finery, only to have the alcohol dissolve it all. It's the dissolving we are after. Smeary boundaries, kiss and never ever tell.

We hold it all in place until the shattering comes. You want to put the pieces back in place, to make sense of it all. Except with Granny there was no shattering, just a slow loosening of the mind, a scrambling. Or wasn't there? How do I know? Sometimes the shattering is quietly catastrophic. We don't know what someone's private catastrophe might be. What was the thing that made Granny leave? We know there were *circumstances* she hated. The insects, the malaria, the macho game rangers in their knee-high socks, or their affectations of no socks at all. I wonder though what the final transgression was. Was it simply that she realised the lack of ingredients, of schools, the hardship of raising children in this wilderness? Eventually, of course, it was simply doctor's orders. She was increasingly ill, needed hospitals, needed regular check-ups. But she told that story so many times, it almost made you think of the lady who doth protest too much. Was there something else? An affair, a great falling out? Financial ruin? Certainly her prospects were better in the big city, with the prospect of jobs and earning money. But she could have stayed married and far away from her husband, lots of families did that. I long to know about the final straw. What was it that made her finally chuck it in?

And what would it take for me to do the same? After all, I am not unreasonably unhappy.

20

On the game drive I am like a mute child, numb, still nursing yesterday's hurts. Me, on game drives, always the comfort of escape. Wanting to be a good, knowledgeable child. One who knows the birds and trees, who spots leopards and correctly identifies a dark chanting goshawk. I was never that child. There was never enough spotting or enough knowing to get a well-done. Never enough.

Me on game drives: the way my mind unfurls and spools out across the plains. I do not care enough, whether it is a three-banded courser or a lesser spotted something else. My not caring, is it a defence against the not-enoughness, because Grandpa wants us to be experts? And when did Cass figure out that this was the way to success and adult approval? There was that one school holiday when she walked around with a Roberts *Birds of South Africa* under her arm, studying and ticking off her list, and even asking questions.

It was a betrayal. I had never known how to get the knowledge that everyone expected me to have, ready-made. It didn't seem possible to be a learner, to admit ignorance. I would pretend I had just missed the flight of feathers, hadn't looked up from my book in time. The summer when Cass started seriously knowing everything? It was like she slid past me on the race track.

"I know, I know! It's a *pseudolacnystylus mapreunafolia*! she would show off and they would point to the same tree each time, so that the guests could share their delight in the child's fluency and knowledge. It was easier to let her leap to the answer. I would skulk and glower and go back to reading. Eventually they stopped asking me, perhaps sensing how I shifted around and got hot and uncomfortable.

Once I'd given up searching for the names of things, I could release myself into the cloudscapes, the treescapes, riverscapes, throw myself open and let it all flood in. Now, when I am on the back of a Land Rover, open topped, bouncing over pot holes and through gullies, letting the smells wash through me, I am in my element. And Cass is in hers, naming, showing off, being the expert. I am vaguely aware of her giving Zoe the lowdown on oxpeckers riding buffalo's back, while me, I have flown the coop. One minute I am there, my face sketched against a treeline, bum on a bouncing seat, next I have spread like a murmuration, wheeling the thermals. Blink and I am gone.

During the war, she worked for the colonial government in Nyasaland, first as a clerk, then as a decoder, deciphering secret messages from London to the overseas office.

"Oh, it wasn't as exciting as it sounds," she told me. "Most of the messages were incredibly dull and ordinary. Only once or twice, there were a couple of genuinely top secret communications. *Then* I felt like I was helping with the war effort."

Unscrambling secret code. There was that day with André. The photograph.

André. I send him a WhatsApp. *Missing you here in the bundus with my crazy family*. *What do you know about Apartheid military operatives and rhino horn / ivory trade?*

He replies with *Can you talk? Call me if you can. Not WhatsApp. Otherwise maybe later.*

None of the photographs I want actually exist.

21

I remember I had wrapped those letters in a piece of leather and tied it with a shoelace. Doesn't everyone have one of those boxes of momentoes? Photos, letters, old negatives of you when you were so skinny and brown and beautiful though you didn't know it at the time? A card from an old school friend you didn't think you could throw away but you don't quite know why you're keeping it, either. A pregnancy stick with two blue lines, folded into an envelope.

Granny was packing, fragments of her life strewn across the red Persian carpet and arranged in little piles. I was rootless. Reece had bought a flat and I slept there more and more. But this day, it was a lead up to opening night and he had been in one of those periods of flaming wound-up tension. I know them so well now. But we had fought and I had stumbled out with my orange rucksack packed. My bundle of letters shoved in there with clean underwear, a toothbrush, a T-shirt to sleep in.

Zoe was with Cass.

"She hates us," Cass had said about Gran, and simply stopped visiting.

It probably wasn't the best idea, given how prone Granny was to putting things in the wrong places. But that night, helping her to seal up all those boxes (*Ok this is the last time you are repacking this, Granny*), I decided to throw my little packet of secrets in with hers.

It was just an old shoebox. Converse, Nike, or whatever we were wearing at the time. It's not that I was hiding from Reece, exactly. It's just that I was keeping it to myself.

Reece. Big, wild-haired Reece of the appetites, the wine, the word-perfect chunks of Shakespeare that roll off his tongue, and the stories that set up camp in your heart. It was simpler *not* to explain.

An impulse, more than a plan. A stack of letters, a pile of negatives from Stereo Steve. So I just popped them in with her diaries and manuscripts, her own photo albums and accounts of a life lived with servants and polished silver.

I didn't really think it through. I knew that I would fly up to Lusaka to meet her and help her unpack on the other side. I didn't plan on Reece's moods delaying me, or the heat and the flies making her so miserable. Or Uncle Jerry arranging to fly her out to England, so suddenly.

22

Some pictures you are glad you don't have and never saw.

It was 1999. Somewhere on the road between Lusaka and the Chirundu border post, on that nasty bit of escarpment where the trucks, for some reason, drive like the devil, maybe to catch the border before it closes. Jethro was on his way to see Cass and Zoe when his old Gallant crashed with him in it.

He never got there, and the worst was that she wasn't even expecting him because he was going to surprise them. It took a whole week before she found out. It's not that Zoe was that close to her dad, but she knew what had happened.

Years later, when she was about eight and living with me full time, she said to me, one night at bedtime,

"Mom Stanna. I think I'm forgetting what my dad looks like. Have you got a picture?"

I didn't have a single photograph of him. But I dug around and found some fliers of one of his performances. His mellow eyes shine through even though it's a crappy photostat. You can see that look in her sometimes, in softer moments. She never showed Cass, I made her promise she wouldn't.

The elephant is struggling up the river bank and I am on the back of a driverless vehicle. I see that the elephant sees me and I see that the elephant is distressed; eyes wild and ears in mock-charge, but careening this way and that like she might charge properly at any minute. Options flash through my head. I could jump off the vehicle, but then I am vehicle-less with a charging elephant coming at me. I could shout at her and chase her off. Or I could somehow climb over and get into that driver's seat. This may seem like the obvious one but not the easiest. The vehicle swerves, putting me closer to her, open door on the right hand side. I look down at short cropped kapinga grass and sandy soil rumbling underneath me and I realise it is not going that fast; it's a Land Rover after all.

I seize hold of the bar at chest level. It is clad in green hosepipe, sun-faded. I am bumping, heading towards the river when I manage to clamber over and get into the seat. The steering wheel responds to my grip. So does the elephant. She calms down, stands still a moment, then veers away. Just now she will climb the bank and let me pass. She won't charge me.

Before this: huts on the other side of the river. Are these poachers or settlers? Makeshift houses, no tilled soil or burning, but Grandpa is showing me something. Something about burning and what fire will do to this stretch of the riverbank.

But there is something else. A voice is coming through. We used to live here, says the voice. When we lived here... it dies out like radio static but I can finish the sentence myself. When we lived here there were many more elephants than there are now. I think of Grandpa and how many elephants he killed. Hundreds? Several hundred? Johnny Uys and the elephants coming to his funeral. Elephant deaths, human deaths. I am at the wheel. She is not charging.

I don't need more proof. The dreams are not just dreams. Remember the one about the camera being too heavy to carry? Remember the one about cluster homes and a golf course at Chibembe? It is Grandpa who is sending these.

It was Zoe who brought me Reece, if you really think about it. She was about 18 months, cute, naughty and a complete handful. Cass was at rehearsal. She had taken a part in some play, I forget what it was, but she had told me about the director, who was, in her words "dreamy" and "brilliant". According to her he was to be the next big thing. He was doing some adaptation of Ibsen or something. I forget, I forget, I forget.

I was looking after Zoe because I think she was doing a late waitressing shift after the rehearsal. "To support my art habit," as she used to say. Jethro, I suppose, was performing at a festival or something. He used to do this poetry, music and mbira thing that broke hearts along their faultlines and mended them up again. I think he was in Swaziland. Or Maputo. Those were turbulent years, so much changing and shifting. And driving.

Anyway, Zoe had been a total pain that day. Crying for her mom, which she never normally did, but this day was just relentless. I borrowed Granny's car (funny to think of Granny still driving, living alone, even being competent).

She gave me an earful; oh boy did she ever.

“You and your sister! Bringing up a child in that place! (The house in Yeoville) I've heard the reports! Drugs, Nigerians, etc, etc.” She also gave Zoe a whole packet of Zoo Biscuits.

When I got to the theatre, they were in a technical rehearsal. I was waiting in the foyer of the Joburg Theatre – then the Civic. Zoe was hitting the first wave of the sugar high, running up and down those steps. I saw him coming through that set of big black doors from the smaller venue down the side. He was reading a script and not looking where he was going so he basically knocked the child over. She screamed and wailed, he was apologetic, horrified. Busy fussing over Zoe, crouching down, saying he's sorry – not to me, even, but to *her*, when

Cass came through the same doors and stopped in her tracks, taking the whole scene in. Zoe saw her and cried “Mama,” holding out her arms. Reece turned, saw Cass.

"This is yours? I had no idea." He turned back to look at me, taking me in for the first time. His eyes were insatiable.

"Does she belong to you too?" he asked Cass.

"Ana, meet Reece, my director."

"Reece, meet my sister Ana."

He is older than me by ten, blue eyes and a mop of brown-blonde hair that curls a little, giving him a vintage vibe. At first you think it's an affectation, his love of all things slightly dated, makes him seem like he's from another era. His brown leather jacket, hand-stitched briefcase. The motorbike, the notebooks and fountain pen. Old school, and the adultiest adult we know, parents included.

How are things going there? He says on WhatsApp.

Wish you could have come I respond.

He calls.

"Hello, Wild Woman of the Wilderness."

"Hey. How was the show?"

"Reviews have been great. Last one tomorrow." His voice sounds a million miles away. Hearing him, my mind downloads pictures of our house, the carpets that never stay clean, Reece's endless collections of vintage and retro gadgets.

"How are the dogs?"

"Just fine. I have a student who is coming to talk them and walk with them. Things have been busy."

Always busy, Joburg busy. Again the feeling like I am on a raft, he is getting further and further away.

"I have news for Zoe."

"Yes?"

"She's got the part."

"What part?"

"Remember she auditioned for Ophelia before she left?"

Cass never spoke about Jethro after his accident. It's like a shutter came down and that was that. Deal with it and move on. I don't even know what she told Zoe about him, what she didn't. When the question of Zoe's paternal anything comes up, it is squashed quicker than a rebellion in China.

Reece is it, for Zoe. Reece who deposits sneaky rescue funds into her bank account. Reece who orders an Uber for her in the middle of the night. And now Reece, of course, who wants her to be in his latest play.

I'm not having it.

"She's incredible," he says. "Honestly, her audition was electric. You couldn't even recognise her, something happens when she gets on stage.."

"She's not ready."

"Ready? What do you mean ready? She's a natural, she was born ready. She's like her mother, but, even more charismatic. You have to let her."

"What's the role?"

"Ophelia?"

"Ophelia? You're fucking kidding me?"

"Well, it's not a pure Hamlet, so it's not a pure Ophelia. What I mean is, it's like a decolonised Hamlet – he is trying to avenge the ghost of his colonising forefathers, his mother is totally complicit in covering the whole thing up, and Ophelia, rather than being this swoony loon, all hard-done by and wronged, is a bad-ass revolutionary who wants Hamlet to man the fuck up."

"And will he?"

"Well, you know, it's Hamlet. He will dither and second guess and no, he won't. So Ophelia is critical – a re-imagined role. Zoe is perfect for it, you can't stand in the way this time."

"She'll be in Cape Town."

"Rehearsals during vac time. Opening in Cape Town. I've thought it through, trust me."

"So you will be in Cape Town too? Who will look after the dogs?

"The dogs?"

"I don't want to do another winter in Joburg. If you're busy, I'm coming back here."

"So, that's a yes?"

"You didn't need my yes, did you really?

"Always good to have your yes, darling."

"Oh, Reece."

"Yes love?"

"Fuck off. Just, fuck off."

"Of course, my love. Thank you. Thank you for agreeing."

“I’ll see you soon. After the service. Then I’m coming home.”

23

"Let's go through this again," says Cassie.

"It's not going to be anything fancy," says Mum. "Jerry will start, and give a report back on what happened at the home in England. Leo will say something. I will say something. Faye will say something about her favourite sister-in-law, won't you Faye?"

"If I can manage, darling," says Faye, who is never far away from tears anyway.

"The grandchildren can read something – you have that poem you wanted to share with us, Ana? And then anyone who wants to can say a few words."

"Music!" says Cass. “Let’s play some of those cheesy 40s war songs she used to love. Oh, what’s that singer’s name?”

“Vera Lynn, darling,” Faye smiles, “how wonderful. Yes.”

Zoe writes it down. Mum squints at the page.

“Then tea and biscuits and sandwiches and we can all go up to the ridge and scatter her ashes."

The nervous tension in the air is because Uncle Jerry is arriving. It's as if nothing can really get started until he gets here.

Mother is fretting. "We wanted to take the camp tables and chairs early, but Eliphas is not here. I got a message from his nephew saying he has malaria or something. Today of all days!"

"I'll take them." It's a sincere offer. I can think of nothing better than getting out of the way of everyone and driving to the picnic site ahead of time.

"Darling, I'm not sure. It's in the old Hi-lux pick-up."

"Mom, I can drive that car."

"But will you remember the way darling, it's very off the beaten track?"

"To Luwi camp? Of course."

"Oh, I think we'd better ask Leo."

"He's at the airport, Mum. Let me do it. I remember how to get there, I swear I do. I'll leave early, set up the tables, people don't start coming til, what, 12? 1?"

"We said we'd start at lunch time, so that people can finish the morning drives with clients, do brunch or whatever, and then be back in time for nightdrives."

"Perfect."

"We will bring the ice and drinks. You just take the cutlery, plates..."

"I thought it was just tea and sandwiches."

"We need drinks. You must pick up Godfrey at the turn-off, he will help you set up. Oh God, why did we decide to do it at an abandoned campsite, for heaven's sakes?"

"Because it's camp building time at all the bush camps, it was heavy rains this year, so Nsefu is inaccessible, and the other lodges have clients. Besides, it's a beautiful spot."

"She did love going there."

I leave at six, loaded up with camping gear, two sturdy wooden boxes carefully packed with linen-wrapped cutlery and a soft stack of khaki mattresses and cushions. Godfrey is nowhere to be seen. I wait for half an hour, getting impatient. Out of habit, my hand itches to my phone and I swipe to Facebook. I chide myself, feeling foolish and also annoyed that it is even possible to do that here. That we have cell phone signal and a tower and data. I send him a message to say he must come with my mother.

When I get to the gate at the main bridge, a scout in dark green fatigues and a jersey with elbow pads and epaulettes opens the gate to let a returning game-viewing vehicle exit the park. I wait. A faded sign says Welcome to the South Luangwa National Park. Speed limit strictly 40km /hr. Do not feed the animals. Do not leave the road. Do not leave your vehicle. By order Zambian National Wildlife Authority.

The scout looks at the vehicle and walks ever so slowly away from me and the gate and into the small brick wildlife office. She comes out with a big book for me to sign. I enter my name, the registration number of the car, the time. She studies it. $25 for a day permit, she says.

"What? No. I'm not a tourist. We are having a funeral."

She raises eyebrows at me. "Funeral?"

"Well no, um, not exactly a funeral. Um, I am the granddaughter of Mr Kelly. Bwana Kelly? You know?"

She is unmoved. "It's $25, madam."

I attempt some Chinyanja. My grandfather is from here for long long time. *Kudaaala*. She smiles and repeats her message in Chinyanja.

"Ok. Don't you know Cassandra. Cassandra from The Shacks, she is my sister."

Her face cracks into a broad smile. "Oh! You are the sister! *Nikudziwa*! I know your sister, she is a very good person. You should have told me. You are most welcome."

She crosses out the $25 and writes RESIDENT. She opens the gate, stands to attention as I drive through onto the Luangwa bridge. Stop in the middle for the obligatory scan for hippos.

A massive croc basks on the sandbank, its mouth open. Plovers pick their way past it. A hippo lies pink and lazy on the opposite bank. My nostrils catch a whiff of Luangwa mud, a fecund lagoon smell, layered with baboon shit which cakes the thin concrete ledge, a trail of flat splats drying in the sun, studded with shiny muchenja pips. The river stretches out on either side of the bridge, unfailing, magnificent, worthy of a cover of *Getaway* mag, or at least a centrefold.

This is the countryside that Granny simply couldn't find a way to endure, the land that the glitter and glitz of big city Joburg lured her away from. Grandpa's dream of pared down living, close to the earth like an animal, revealed to her bit by bit, until, through the headaches, the heat, the whining of the children, she began to realise that she couldn't do it anymore.

"We did it for our men," she told me once, listing the women who 'made the best of it' in out of the way places. "They had the jobs that Government practically invented for them, the lives that they loved – oh, didn't they just, adventure and dust and guns. While we had to worry about the children constantly getting sick, managing the servants and the supplies. Oh no, it was no kind of life really." And later, the chagrin of "all my children love it here. I'll visit in the cool months. Oh the heat, the heat, how do you stand it?"

A big male baboon sits in the sun, leaning up against the bridge railing, scratching under his arm and yawning to show a maw of huge teeth. I start the engine of the old Hilux affectionately known as Mugabe, because it goes on and on and never gives up. The red laterite road that leads into the park is, to tell the truth, looking a bit tatty. The surface itself is corrugated, but worse than this is that the leaves of all the bushes flanking the road are coated in dust, even this early in the season – telling the story of the hundreds of vehicles that drive through here each week, many of them too fast, with American bums bouncing on their seats; the trucks with building materials destined for seasonal camps that become more and more permanent, each season cheating the rules of no concrete and adding just one more 'semi-temporary' structure. It's depressing.

My mind swamps with layers and layers of memory, regret, nostalgia, images of a twelve-year old me learning to drive on this road, of a sixteen-year old me, eager to show school-friends my domain, a twenty-year old me, yahoo-ing on this road after a night of drinks at the Chichele bar. I'm not here, I'm not there, I'm not sure where I am when I realise I have missed the turn-off.

I realise because an elephant brings me back to the present moment. Sudden careering out of the combretum thicket and she's on the road, ears forward and flapping and head shaking. I catch my breath and my tummy falls away. I hate running into ellies on my own. Hit the brake and clutch, slam into reverse, because she is right in front of me and just as startled as I am. The car whines in reverse, and I'm swinging my head to look behind then in front then behind again. I hear Grandpa's voice clear and calm, saying a mock charge is lots of show and trumpeting. When you see ears flat back against the head and the animal running forward that's when you have to worry. That's what I'm seeing. I have one hand on the steering wheel and elbow half out the window. Reverse is a very slow gear. Sorry sorry sorry I'm saying over and over in my head. I leave the road for a moment and slam hard over a log or a ditch - there's a clunk which doesn't sound good. Then something in me swims to a slow quietness and I find a warmth in my chest. Override. Don't panic. Send love, is what my heart seems to be saying. So I do. I send a sort of pulse from the middle of my heart.

I remember the feeling of lying in bed some nights and waking to the sound of an elephant rubbing itself against the wall of my rondavel, and how close my breath is to hers and wondering if she can hear me breathe. And feeling my heart spill over as I consciously try to turn the fear feeling into a love feeling, the hurty kind of love feeling. I have no idea how much time has passed now but I've covered a fair distance of road and she veers off to the right of the car and pulls up short, tossing her head now and bringing her trunk up as she yells at me. I keep going backwards, the gearbox complaining and a whole lot of nasty grey smoke puddling into the air.

She's gone. I'm shaking and blood is hammering in my chest. I feel daft and triumphant and tearful and I remember that I am supposed to turn off the main road, take the small grey track across the floodplain. I cannot for the life of me remember whether it is in front of me or behind.

My brain is all scrambled up. I should have waited for Godfrey. Not that he would know where the turn-off is. I know the rule – never go anywhere alone; if something happens to you there needs to be one person to return with the story. I needed to be alone. Fuck it. I'm going to Luwi camp to lay the table for my grandmother. That is what I must do and so what if I am alone. I feel that cascade of shivers down my back which means Power On, which means the dead are affirming me. The turn off to the right is just after the big baobab. It's still up ahead. I drive, my head clear now. The road is open and all the colours are bright and crisp. I am here.

The turn off is there exactly where it should be, and it takes me into the back country, away from the riverine habitats. Here the trees are more slender and hardy, they take on a different character. Wooden pears and terminalia with their spiral crown and russet leaves. This is a good sand road, it is one of the firebreak cuts – straight line all the way to the western escarpment. It has survived the rainy season well. But I know that up ahead I will have to cross the clay potholed floodplain and I am nervous about that.

The terrain is just as I remember it though it's been over a decade. The first time I came here, with Grandpa and Mom and the old fundi ChaHari whom he had known since the Kings African Rifle days in East Africa. ChaHari and Grandpa walked the length and breadth of this valley. ChaHari. I wonder if anyone has arranged for him to come today. No one knew the bush like those old-timers. Like John Saili and Iwomba. Iwomba knew herbs and plants, could take away the pain of a scorpion sting. John had zero respect for lions – "stupid bastards" he called them, and yelled at them until they backed off and ran away. "Never run from a lion," he taught me. I've never had occasion to test his advice.

At the crossroads, the plains open up on either side – big sky country. The track on the right goes to the beautiful camp on the Luwi river where Damian and I spent a few perfect weeks building chalets and sleeping under starry skies, the season after the anthrax. It was sold, along with the all-weather lodge, and my heart is still sore for that piece of ground under the deep shade of the Khaya Nyassica trees.

To the left, the road to Luwi, across the bumpy plains. Luwi was not sold, but abandoned, apparently, because the hippo pool had dried up and it was costly to get water into camp. I take a deep breath and swing left.

The back of the HiLux starts up a rattle like a troop of monkeys found a drum kit – a proper din. I remember the crockery, so I stop, open up the tailgate and lift out the wooden box which Mom said contains plates. I haul it onto the seat next to me. Another 500 metres but something isn't right. There's a horrible clunking sound. I stop again, remembering the smack from earlier. Sitting on my bum next to the car, I manoeuvre myself underneath to see if I can see something hanging loose. It sounded bad. Like, don't drive it bad. Maybe a broken spring.

It's hot. The sun is on my neck, my arms are burning. Maybe I should get under the vehicle. It's not like I'm lost in the thicket. There's nothing to panic about, except that the tables won't get set up in time. I can just wait, until someone comes. Until Cass and Zoe, or Uncle Leonard or Jerry, or whoever gets here first. The adrenalin from the elephant charge

has worn off and I am hungry, thirsty, sleepy. The ground is full of thistles. This would have been rhino country before they were all poached out. I wonder about André and his project, and I wonder if rhinos will become extinct everywhere, and wondering about André makes me want to WhatsApp him, and then I remember that I have a phone, and I could contact someone. Except there is no signal here. This is the "real bush experience" and we don't do cell phones this far from the river and the main lodges. If it had been a game viewing car it would be fitted with a radio, but not old Mugabe.

There's nothing to do but sit with my swirling thoughts and drink the warmed up water from the 5l bottle behind the seat. It tastes of plastic. Still, it's a relief to be away from the drama of family and tensions and Zoe and Cass and all the clamour of the last few weeks. Longer than that. Reece and his own dramas and neuroses, his neediness and greediness. I miss him, with a swift, absurdly incongruent pang.

The sun is hot.

There's a clatter and a sound of voices, floating on top of the sound of a car engine. Someone is already on their way. Early. Standing on the seat, I can make out a white closed car SUV, like a Fortuner or a big old Toyota. The kind that has aircon and coil springs that don't just snap. It's coming from the other camp. So, not family. I don't have binoculars. I wait.

It's bumping over the plain. I see that a person seems to be leaning out of the window. There's a thin excited sounding voice. It waves. It's at the crossroad point and they keep coming straight, heading towards me. It's a child. Sitting on the window, top half hanging out at an angle. I'm embarrassed, curious. Thirsty.

They come right up towards me. I still can't see who the driver is, until the car comes to a complete stop behind and the door opens and the driver gets out. It's Damian.

"I don't need help," is the first thing I say.

"But we have come to rescue you!" The child is excited, big-voiced. He has his father's eyes, movements – that restless bird energy. Maybe 7 or 8.

"Oh. Stanna. What are you doing out here? Alright? What's up?" He lifts his hat for a moment to wipe his forehead. His hair is greying around the sides. Face tanned a dark leathery shade of brown, but otherwise he is unchanged. "Fuel? Puncture?"

"No. Not fuel. It's something, underneath in the suspension. I think I may have broken a spring."

"Oh yeah. You can't drive it on this. What are you doing out here? Can I take you back to, er – to The Shacks?"

There's a band of tightness across my chest. "No, I'm... Going to Luwi camp."

"Wwwhy? There's nothing there."

Is it my imagination or is there an edge in his voice when he says that?

"Are you looking for lions?" The child is climbing out of the window and onto the roof. "Dad, can I get out the car now? Does the roof count as out the car?"

He clears his throat. I remember the nervous throat clearing like it was just last week that we – I don't want to remember.

"My kid." He gestures with his head. And a grin.

"I see. I see that."

"You are stranded."

"No. No, I'm not. The entire family is headed this way. We are having a sort of memorial thing for my grandmother. At Luwi. At the old site."

"Riiiight. Jerry told me."

"Jerry told you?"

"I – yeah. Yeah. We were in touch the other day. He mentioned it. Didn't realise it was going to be here though."

There's a pause. I have no words in me, they are all dried up. He says, "There's really nothing there."

"That's ok. I think they know that."

"Do they? It's – it's really not as nice as it used to be. Pool's dried up"

"It's about the memory really. She liked it there. We had some happy times together there."

"Tsetse flies, and..."

"Daad, can I get out? I'm getting out."

“No,” he tells the kid.

"Tell you what," he says. "Come to Nsolo. It's beautiful. You can all come there. Much better plan. There's a deck – a real deck, and a hide, beautiful shade."

"I remember the camp well. Is there a beautiful site left in the valley that you *don't* have your hands on?"

He laughs then, that nervous, throaty laugh. Ancient bile starts to rise in my gut. I can't look at him. I drag my eyes to the child.

"What's your name?"

Delighted to finally have some attention, he stops swinging annoyingly from the roof rack and jumps down, offers his hand to be shaken.

"I am Jasper, how do you do?"

"Oh, you have a handshake. How do you do too?"

"Good, thank you, and you?"

I look at Damian and for a minute it all dissolves and I am just sad. I knew he had a kid, of course Cass keeps me in the loop. Had never met him.

"Jasper, this lady is called Stannastasia. It's short for Ana."

"That's not shorter!" He giggles. He has slipped into the driver's seat and is holding on to the steering wheel.

"Don't," I say, aware of the edge in my voice. He drops his hands onto his lap and looks at me, then at his dad. I try to soften. "It might be broken. I don't want you to get hurt." I look at Damian. "Why don't you want us to be at Luwi?"

"No no no, it's not like that. Not like that at all, just – you know, you know, I would love to offer you a working camp, for Audrey's sakes, you know? Old bat, she had a soft spot for me, didn't she? Go on, admit it."

I just look at him. He could be a stranger. I could be nice to him.

"I tell you what though, we've just had our road graded. The road to Luwi is really bad. I wouldn't even try, really."

I can't believe I am here, sweltering under the sun, with this man and his child. What a chasm there is, between the intimacy of then and the revulsion I feel right now.

"Look, it's good of you to offer, but why don't you go and do whatever you were heading off to do, and let me wait for the others. It's not like I'm stuck or anything."

"But you are stuck. Come, let me take you to them at any rate. Your party is not til lunchtime, right?"

How did he know that? I take a deep breath. "Damian. Maybe you should let me say no."

He freezes. Looks at me. The silence fills the sky.

In his car, the radio crackles. The kid leaps up and goes towards the car with an animated "Let me, let me!"

Damian makes that hand signal that looks like a gun, finger pointing at me and thumb up. "I will radio them and let them know you are here."

I nod. Mostly to let him not be in front of me anymore. I take a long sip from the greasy plastic container. The water steadies me. I'm such a mix of hot and cold, nauseous and tired, angry and relieved. "All the feels," as Zoe would say.

The car door slams again, my nerves jump. Why can't he just shut the door with a nice quiet click?

"Ok. Spoke to Leo, he says Jerry has just arrived off the plane, and Jerry thinks it is a great idea that you move your picnic to Nsolo. He says I should take you there, and we can set up on the deck. They'll just radio the necessary people and tell em about the change in venue."

"I don't want to." My voice is quiet but I mean it. In my mind, I had laid out tables under the big bowed khaya tree with its arc of accompanying trichelias. White linen and silver, just as she would have loved it. "We want Luwi."

"Er, maybe it's not 'we', maybe it's just you."

"I'm not getting in the car with you."

"You're being silly."

"Thank you for radioing the family. You can go now. Back to your day."

"I don't understand. This seems really petty."

"Yep."

He looks at me, confused. Jasper is playing with the electric windows in the Discovery. It's a Discovery. That car is worth two years of Reece's salary. More.

I say, "Yes. It is petty. It's the petty things that matter. This is something I've learned."

"Ok. We can do petty. I will wait in the car until they get here." He leaves me there and goes to his car.

"But whhyyy," whines the child. He is sweet, and curious, and none of this is his fault but my nerves are tighter than pylon wire. I move over to the other side of the car where there is a shadow, getting shorter by the minute as the sun climbs to the overhead position. "Only fools and Englishmen out in the midday sun." I pull my hat over my eyes and listen to the stream of "I should've said" words that tangle and pull in my head like combretum thorns.

You have stolen enough from me. You stole my childhood. You stole my elephant crossing spot. You stole my father's house. You stole the family photographs and displayed them, brazenly, in the fancy Lodge you built, passing them off as your brand. The Lodge that used to be ours. You do not get to steal my grandmother's funeral as well. Tears prick my eyes and sweat rolls down the back of my neck. I can't believe how hot it is for this early in the season. Thistles on the ground around me, so I don't stretch out my sore legs, but hug my knees

instead. I pick one. The purple bluish flower is star spiky, perfect geometry. Sharp flower that will harden into a husk. The sound of his engine starting up. Relief, he will drive off now. But no. It stays there on idle and I realise he is running the car engine to run the aircon. Bastard. It runs a while, then stops. I hear the doors open, slam. Open, slam again. I close my eyes, the fury slowly dripping away. Sun reaches my arms. It must be after 11. There is no game around. I guess it's true that during the rainy season, poachers move in and take out the smaller antelope, warthogs. "Poachers" in inverted commas.

I think of the break-up. The hurt that still nestles in me, all crusted up and sealed. Then my eyes open because the car moves, creaks behind me. Turning my head I see a small pair of feet sticking over the edge of the passenger side floor. Then a face peers over.

"Hello."

"Why are you sitting there?"

"I'm thinking."

"Do you want to think in our car? We have air-conditioning."

"Air conditioning wastes petrol. It's bad for the planet."

"Climate change is bad for the planet too."

I smile despite myself. "You know about climate change?"

"Yes. The seas are going to rise up and the rain is going to stop and the animals will all die because they have no food."

"Woah. Who told you that?"

"I saw it on a YouTube video."

"Please tell your dad that I am fine and I am waiting for my sister and you guys can go, ok. Tell him to take you to the Croc Farm and buy you ice cream."

"Ice cream?"

"Yeah. Ice cream."

It works. He patters off, and I hear the door open and the little voice asking. I also hear the radio crackle again but the words are muffled. And far off, in the distance, I hear another car engine.

24

Of course I lose. Everyone arrives at the same time, full of bustle and energy, under the dictatorship of Uncle Jerry. The broken car limps on the freshly-graded road to Nsolo and when we arrive, Cass and I busy ourselves with laying out beautiful cloths, silver cutlery and glasses. The camp has things like big shiny ice buckets and jugs for water. The occasion is being upgraded from picnic-remembering-ritual to some sort of luncheon. Granny would have approved. No school children bussed in to steal sandwiches at this affair.

"It *is* more practical to be here," Cass admits. Mum floats around, tweaking the curly twigs on the table arrangements. I grunt. The words I am meant to be saying soon are jagged, trying to tesselate in my brain.

"Cassandra! Look at this amazing child you have here." Jerry's voice has a whole lot of bass. He's the kind of man who people make way for in the street. He turns heads. He could be a Mafia boss, peeling notes off a wad and distributing them like largesse. Zoe is not fooled, I hope, though right now, she is in the gravity field and it's hard to resist. Even I am finding it a little hard to resist.

"Ana. How *are* you my dear? Let's see that you get a drink."

"Hello Uncle Jerry." It's amazing how one too-powerful shoulder squeeze can you make you feel like a child again. He drops his voice, hand still on my shoulder.

"You've done such a great job with Zoe. She's turned out to be a lovely young woman. Can't have been easy, eh?" A wink, and then he's gone, leaving me to grin awkwardly at no-one in particular.

Another Land Cruiser appears around the bend and parks under the shade of the leaning *khaya nyassica*. It's camp-building season still, no guests in this part of the park until May, when the long grass shrinks back, making it safe for walking safaris. So the *mzungu* woman in the front seat and the fresh-faced driver next to her are not clients, but still, strangers to me. With them though, a familiar silhouette, stooped but tall, walking with a stick. He lifts his head, which is topped with a white crocheted kufi cap. Cass whoops and runs past me to shake his hand. "Cha Hari!" He has a young man with him, silent, serious looking. Cass has just displaced him as she takes the Cha Hari by the elbow and guides him towards a seat.

"Stan, you remember Cha Hari?" she asks me as they pass.

"Of course." I greet and shake his hand, my heart filling with memories. His face creases into an enormous smile.

“Stanna?” he asks, his voice whispery. He holds my hand in both his hands. His eyes are milky, almost blind. He’s nodding and laughing as he squeezes my hand. “Long time. My nephew,” he says, reaching out towards the young person who arrived with him. He speaks to me in deep ChiKunda and I have no idea what he is saying but I hear names: Madam Audrey. Bwana Charles.” Cass laughs at me and steers him towards uncle Leo and an open seat. The nephew stands by awkwardly for a moment, then takes a seat on the floor next to him. Cass brings them both glasses of water. She is in operations mode, and I’m grateful.

There’s a long leather couch demarcating a lounge area from a bar area, fat with cushions. Next to it, a carved ebony lampstand, generic African curio art. It seems so incongruous. I wonder what Grandpa would think of all this. Grandpa who hated tents and would roll a thin groundsheet out, string a mosquito net from the branch of a tree and sleep under the stars. I remember the first version of this camp. Flimsy bamboo structures with fences constructed from bundles of long grass, rough-hewn mopane poles and stamped earth floors. Paraffin light hanging off a nail in the pole. Bush camps are *meant* to be rustic. The kind of rustic that had Granny sighing and complaining and wishing for running water.

I’m finding it difficult to concentrate.

“Have you ever known it this hot in April?” I hear Aunty Faye’s voice through snippets of chatter.

“Thank goodness for these lovely trees.”

“Such a great site isn’t it?”

“Marvellous what Damian’s done with the place.” People are sitting, murmuring, sipping, looking out at what will be a view of the Luwi river in a month or two when the bush clears. A strange little gathering of family, old timers, a few dear faces and a few strange ones. “Damian’s new caterer,” whispers Cass, nodding towards the fresh face who just arrived.

Uncle Jerry stands in front of us and the mood is suddenly focused, we remember what we are here for.

“Thank you all for coming,” he says, his voice buttery. “I spent last week with some of the nurses and old folk who lived with my mother in the last few years of her life, and I can report to you, that judging by the tales they tell, her spirit was in no way diminished.” He pauses and smiles at us. “You know, my mother was a great beauty in her youth. And she loved a good party. Looking around me here, and seeing the faces of her daughters and granddaughters, I can see that she passed on those good looks to the next generations. Sorry, Leonard, you and I will have to be the thorns among the roses.” Laughter.

There's restlessness behind me, and when I turn I see Damian fiddling with a laptop and a pair of speakers. There's that bloop noise the speakers make when they've paired through Bluetooth. Then saccharine violin blurts through the speakers, and the silky smooth tones of Vera Lynn singing

There'll be blue birds over
The white cliffs of Dover
Tomorrow, just you wait and see
There'll be love and laughter
And peace ever after
Tomorrow, when the world is free...

I feel shaking on either side of me. I glance to the left and see that Zoe is trying hard not to laugh. I glance to my right and see that poor Aunty Faye has succumbed to the tears that have been threatening to inundate her over the last few days.

Jerry is mouthing something to Damian. "Not that one." He makes a gesture that seems to say skip to the next track. "Next track," he says.

The next track takes me right back to the smell of her, powder and green apples and her voice cradling some far-off sweet sadness that I'd never be able to reach.

I'll be seeing you in all the familiar places
That this heart and mind embraces, all day through
In that small café,
The park across the way
The children's carousel,
The chestnut trees, the wishing well
I'll be seeing you, in every lovely summer's day

Something ice cold at the back of my neck, and hear the clink of ice. I turn to receive the glass of whisky that Cass is holding. She winks. I drink. Zoe takes the glass. She drinks the rest.

I'll be looking at the moon
But I'll be seeing you...

It's my turn.

I get up and go and stand next to Uncle Jerry who is saying something about how wonderful it is that the granddaughters could all be here today and how far we travelled and how much Audrey, a soldier's daughter, loved the crooning music of the wartime era.

"My Gran..." I begin slowly, waiting for the words to trickle down. "My Gran was the kind of person..." the words are not coming. I'd been over it in my head while waiting in the hot sun in the broken car. But, how do you explain the feeling of sitting on a soft lap when your eight-year old heart is broken, and listening to long stories that you can't remember, stories of her fierce mother who rode horses across the Afghan plains with silk skirts flying in the wind, and mended wounds with honey and haberdashery, stories of polite society in Nyasaland and unlacing her father's boots, or feeding him quinine when he had the fever?

I look at the faces in front of me, this strange little gathering on Damian's hardwood deck. Aunty Faye, her sister-in-law then loyal friend for decades. There is Godfrey Mwale, sitting next to Uncle Leo and Cha Hari, his round face always smiling. He's put on weight since becoming a safari guide and working all the smart lodges. There's the cluster of *kakulis* all together at a table, their beers at half-mast. Uncle Jerry, I don't see him. Oh, there he is, standing next to Damian, the two of them leaning against the massive palm trunk that props up the centre of the thatched roof. Mom, Zoe, Cass, and Aunt Winifred and Avril, silver hair looking regal. I take a breath, and start again.

"My Gran was a complicated person," I hear myself saying. "She would have loved to see us all here. Well, maybe she would have preferred to see us in Paris, or London. Or at the white cliffs of Dover." They laugh. My ears are hot and I'm thirsty, but the words are coming now.

"Places were difficult for her. The idea of home was difficult for her. I kind of know what she meant when she would complain that she didn't know where she belonged." Murmurs.

"My earliest memories were of sitting on her lap as she told stories to whoever would listen." More laughter. Her chest would vibrate against my ear. If I pulled my head away from her chest I could hear her as others heard her. I could listen to her from the inside *and* the outside.

"The stories she told," I continued, "were the stories of the difficulties a woman might have, whose baby is sick and she is far away from any hospital. Or she is alone at night and the men are in the bush with their guns looking for man-eating lions or crop-raiding elephants to shoot. There were so many stories. And I'm sure people like Aunt Faye there, or Rose, or Winnie, would be able to tell them better than I can, because I wasn't there when you all lived in the places she called dusty outposts. I know that she wanted to follow her husband to

wherever he was posted, and do what was expected of her in those days. And as we know, that life wasn't for her. And, I want to say that there is no shame in that. It's ok that she chose a different place to live, and even though she chose not to be here, in this place, which we all love, it wasn't a failure, as some of us might have thought." Uncle Jerry is frowning.

"I wanted to say that even though she said the reason she couldn't stay here, all those decades ago, was because she was too - what did she say? Too lily-livered to be a game-ranger's wife? It doesn't mean she wasn't courageous. I think my Gran was very brave. I think it was brave of her to live the life she lived, and make the choices she made." I'm clutching for words but nothing is coming out right.

"And I know also, that she had her opinions, and that some of those opinions seem awkward, or difficult to us now, you know. But, I remember one day in Joburg, there was someone who came to ask for a job, to work in the garden. She was renting a little cottage near Zoo Lake. He was Malawian. Isaac, I think his name was." I see Zoe rolling her eyes. "She asked where he was from, and they started chatting. She spoke fluent ChiChewa. They talked for hours. They had all these places in common, people even. What I'm trying to say is..." I don't know what I'm trying to say. Cha Hari has his head tilted and he's puzzling to follow me.

"She was complicated," I offer again, losing steam now. "She was complicated and had a lot of secrets. I feel like she had a lot of stories and a lot of secrets and I will miss her and I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye."

I give up, and go back to the couch, feeling that dipping nausea again, the dizziness that keeps coming back.

"So Ana, tell us what important work you're doing in Joburg," asks someone.

"Well actually," I say, feeling the whisky Cass had just fed me heating up my head, "actually, I will be helping my journalist friend break a really important story about the rhino horn trade."

"Really?" Uncle Jerry leans back in his chair and gives me a big broad smile. He's not so bad, I'm thinking. Uncle Jerry. All he wants really is to help. He's done his best for us. Maybe I've been too tough on him.

"Yeah," I say. "He's cracked it, got it all figured out. Really reliable witnesses, names and addresses, bank accounts, the works."

"You mean," asks someone, "He can catch the people who are behind the illegal trading, or the smuggling? Or the ones who are behind the poaching?"

"All of it. He really has the whole picture pinned down. It's all linked to human trafficking. He's found the nightclubs, where the girls are brought in as sex workers. And the people who own the clubs? Basically, they're paid for in horn."

"Well, it's a horny business," laughs Jerry, and so does everyone else. "And where do you come into it? You gonna do some undercover work? As a stripper? What does Reece say about that?"

I glower, and Cass leans against the pole, cool and seemingly as sober as she's ever been. "Well no. I'm going to help him break the story. He's going to do a documentary, and a book, and they'll come out at the same time."

Then it starts. I don't know where it came from, really I don't.

"Uncle Jerry," I ask. "What do you know about Granny's connections in the Apartheid Government?"

"I don't know what you mean," he frowns.

"I've just been wondering. There's so much about her we don't know, but she had some dodgy friends in high places, didn't she?"

"Not her, exactly," says Mum, in her calm quiet voice, "but that dreadful husband of hers."

"I was reading all this stuff that Andre's been sending me. Articles about the rhino and elephant poaching in the '80s. I never really thought about it before, but all that heavy poaching that happened here, was clearly connected to the South African army, you know when they were in Caprivi, and Angola."

"What's your point, Stan?" Uncle Jerry is wearing that frown again.

"I don't know, it's a wild idea, but I was just imagining Granny and all those parties with people who were, I don't know – *connected*. And there she was, just talking one day, at a party, with her champagne, and she started talking about the glamorous life of a safari hunter's wife, or was it, I don't know, the romantic African wilderness, and you know, one thing led to another and she introduced someone to someone, and inadvertently she was a link in the chain between Zambian ivory and South African militia, even though she never knew it."

Cass's eyes are glittering. I feel like I am drowning, way out to sea. I accept the drink she gives me and I down it.

"My friend told me how, back in the '80s, some of those secret service or whatever, they used to just wipe out whole areas that were teeming with game. It wasn't so much to fund the war or the government, more like people were being opportunistic, you know, and feathering their own nests."

I am drunk. I see André in front of me, his gaunt face, his garage full of metalwork. I see him in his cage in the Bertrams house. I wish he was here.

"Your friend," says Jerry. "This journalist. What did you say his name was?"

Joburg

1

Fasten your seatbelts: we have begun our descent. Zoe is plugged in to her phone. On flight mode, she mouthed at me earlier, her body moving to the beat I can't hear. Those headphones cost about R900. I'm nursing that sicky feeling you get when the highveld palette is already visible through clouds, and you see the chopped up land crisscrossed with fences, gates, tiny blue jewels of swimming pools in people's gardens, and the bracelet of ring roads, the scored out grids; green and red beads getting closer as we zoom into landing and the gear clunks underneath us. I'm choking down the nausea of brown goldmine offal hanging in the air like a peat layer. I'm remembering that in my bag there are things such as keys and alarm remotes and that I have to get a taxi and that probably my credit card is overloaded.

In the bus, Zoe is grinning and sucking a red lollipop, happy to be back in wifi mode. My phone bleeps awake and messages scroll, blinking, jostling. Sms screen, WhatsApp screen, Facebook screen, Twitter screen. What the fuck am I doing with all these screens?

2

The house is in rebellion again. There are new growths, roots creeping out from the walk-in cupboard, sprawling across the passage. There are mossy outcrops across surfaces that should be, could be, clean and gleaming. Reece is blindly, blissfully happy, learning words for some new role that is going to gobble him up again. I haven't remembered what it is though he has told me several times. Oh yes, it's the Hamlet.

I'm drowning. Not the exhilarated drowning of deadlines and adrenalin, wave cresting creative struggle. Fuck no. This is the slow wave, far out at sea. They will dredge the rooms in search of me and only flotsam will remain. Signs of a struggle near the washing machine, where the recycling is piling up. Milk bottles are half stuffed with the thin bits of plastic that can't be recycled, the kind that ends up in whales' stomachs. I've been trying to make eco-bricks this past month but the tide came in and I couldn't keep up with stuffing the bottles. Now they knock up against the walls, multiplying and dividing like mitosis, washed this way and that at high tide.

I sit in my car because it is cold. The radio is on. An upsurge in xenophobia. I sit in my car and I open Facebook on my phone and his face is there and I think that is weird because he is never on Facebook, you only use it for the occasional bit of activism. But there he is, and it is a news article. *Nuus*. And the headline is in Afrikaans and the word *doodgeskiet*. But that can't be right because that means shot dead and then a blanket of chills comes rising up from my stomach and I stagger out the car and my fingers find Cass's number and I call.

"What?" she says.

"We were going to meet for lunch. To talk about the trip."

"It can't be."

"But it is."

It is. It is unfathomably true.

You know when you are driving your car and there's a warning light that keeps coming on, or a knocking noise and you know you shouldn't keep driving but you do and then the noise just becomes part of the background and you get pretty good at ignoring it, and then one day, usually when you can least afford it, but if the universe is kind, perhaps when you have a kind of a gap, you might fix it? Yes. That.

I am that car. We all are.

When the hell is it all going to un-hang together?
Will the wheels actually fall off?
And why, why didn't I get it, at the time?

Being unable to choose between things is the story of my life. Boarding school and missing the company of trees, the footfall of elephants outside at night. At home and feeling the sucking loneliness of it all, longing for the stupid chatter of friends and lessons. Joburg or the bush. Everything splinters into choices that I seem unable to sift through. They accumulate at my back door like flotsam.

I never addressed the letters I wrote to him. I never showed them to him. But the need to write them was feverish. Reece with his moods, the dependable rhythm of his schedule, his six identical shirts. But running back home meant Damian, and I felt like there was no space for me in the world he had claimed as his. With André it was always different. Nothing seemed to need explaining. Or choosing.

They made it look like a crime. *They always make it look like a crime.*

Nothing makes sense.

3

The trolley has a sticky wheel. Every couple of meters it drags and makes an ugly scraping sound but I don't want to walk back through that chunk of shoppers at the entrance. It was a mistake to come here. Every now and then I think it is the most sensible thing to do – come to the giant hypermarket to do the shopping for the month, all in one go. Apparently it is cheaper this way, especially if you are buying 'the essentials' as Reece calls them. By which he means all the things that are really not important like toilet cleaner and tomato sauce and chutney.

It takes ages. Always does, because I read so many labels and I am due to update my glasses prescription. I sift through an entire bank of cheeses searching for one that doesn't have the same price as a bottle of wine. Every pile of fruit, every salad ingredient is encased in plastic. I am not going to buy these vegetables. I will go to the Chinese grocer near my house. The meat section. I push my trolley through there like a drive-by, like the way a Land Rover load of clients cruises the riverbed at dusk, looking for leopards. The way I look at the meat has changed. I feel like the leopard in a crouch, surveying the fare. Hungry and repelled at the same time. I think my iron levels have dropped again. But it turns my stomach too. I hover over the pork section for a moment. Haven't eaten this stuff for years. Kinder to Sows, it says on all the labels. Kinder than what? How much kinder?

The other shoppers are numb too. Fluorescent lighting starts to strip off an empathy layer. Avoiding a traffic jam of three trolleys with toddlers in them, and a group of mothers who seem to have settled in for a long chat, I veer off and end up in the gardening section. I remember the roaches in the kitchen. Die Roach, Die Ant, Doom and other poisons line up on the shelf. (And didn't you drink from the water of a stream, where crickets and scurrying leaf sifters trod on the particles you ingested? Roaches are different, we tell ourselves. They collect all the crap. And there is so much crap. Who knows what poisons they tread on our surfaces. Ah, so we poison them because they carry poison because we have been poisoning them?)

I am eyeing the packets of seeds, wishing there were heirloom ones and wondering why my garden lettuce never made it this year, when she comes at me.

"Mam, can I interest you in a special offer – Roundup Ready; two for the price of one?"

I back away from her. "I will not be buying that," I say, noticing from afar the anger in my voice. "It causes cancer. It's polluting the planet, it's terrible stuff."

Oh fuck, I have burst a pipe, I'm raging at her like every worst hysterical white woman she has ever seen. "It shouldn't be on sale in a supermarket." I'm backing away from her and I'm sure she can see the whites of my eyes. I push my trolley away fast, a fountain of rage, embarrassment surging up and I hear her behind me saying "Yoh!"

I skid past the detergent section, shame billowing up in me, the sea heaving with plastic chainmail, a monstrous new scaly reptilian beast waking up to devour us. Pink and white and yellow flowers are foaming on washing powder packets, blue and white bubbles cascade off too-shiny shelves next to twinkling emerald washing up liquid promising towers of pristine plates for ever after. Then it's baby things, nappies stacked like a high-rise and I see them in the landfills, shredding and leaching and infested with crap-eating worms that are forced to consume the plastic too. A hairpin bend past a forest of toilet rolls and now I'm in Pharmacy: announced by a green with a cross, and a sales basket offering a layer of pink and white boxes – Calmettes; it flashes across my vision and I snatch one up. The square box in my hand reminds me that I can breathe, that I am a person. I stand there, considering my apology. *I am sorry, I know you are just doing your job, it's just that the research really does show that glysophate is harmful to the planet, and to female bodies, and and – you should rather find a different* – God. This is what they mean by privilege. I can choose my outrage.

I abandon my hard-won trolley of goods and leave them for some underpaid person to put back on the shelves. I walk out the hypermarket and beeline for the open air of the parking lot.

It's like a movie. A story about a guy who every night performs this act, an act in which he almost blows himself up, but it's pretend. It's a music act. A curtain of flame is the finale, and then he magically appears on the other side of the pyrotechnics, unscathed. Tonight this act is being filmed, and something different happens. There is a double layer of that curtain of fire. The explosion curtain is set twice, once from the other side too, from the front, so that he is surrounded. And he dies. And it's kind of deliberate, as if the dare-devilry that is part of the act is also a choice to die. And the theatricality of it is so spectacular, so seductive, so much *fun*.

And then it is him, it is André, and he has come back, like a reversal of the magic trick and everyone present can hear him speak, including me, and we can see him as clear as day. I don't try and speak to him, though my heart is bursting to. I notice that he is wearing a younger body, sculpted. "Death suits you," I want to say. His outline is etched against neon and flame. The explosion is like in a video game. Next Level. "Stop showing off," I laugh at him. Then he is gone. Really gone.

5

Cleaning is such a fuck-up. The worst place for banal evil is the cleaning products aisle in the supermarket. Bleaches and detergents, micro-granules, Doom and ammonia. What a mess. Of all of my "I survived without it" rants, the one about my preference for dirt is the one that meets with the least favourable reception. Doom! The manufacturers of that insecticide do not trade in irony. Or maybe they do. Maybe someone somewhere, some brand strategist or whoever has in fact read Rachel Carson by now, and understands that silent shame of the exponential accumulation of poison, in ants, in birds and, finally, our precious mammalian breastmilk. It is too late for them to care. Or if they care, too late for action. Doom! We are all doomed anyway. And our kitchen surfaces sparkle.

Imagine when the insects are gone. I think of Grandpa's gauze screen pinging and crawling with a hundred and twelve species of flying scratching feelering creatures. But he used DDT. Oh yes! In the founding of The Shacks, my conservationist grandfather beats back the bush, claiming his square of domesticity by spraying quantities of dieldrin into the foundations to keep the termites out of the woodwork. And pouring scalding water down harvester ant holes because you know, the colonial myth map must include something called a Lawn, even here in riparian *brachystegia* country.

Mama kept a falcon. No, it was an eastern red-footed kestrel. Or was it a falcon and then an eastern red-footed kestrel. She got all into the falconry thing; jesses and hoods and pedestals and lures. The bird died. We put it down to stress at first. Then word got out and some kids from the village brought a black-shouldered kite. It died. Dark chanting goshawk, died. She had to bite down on the shameful truth that these birds were eating insects that had built up reserves of DDT in their exoskeletons. Poisoned paradise, that's where we live. We made it so. So yeah, we're doomed.

The shock is new once, and then after that it's the shock of seeing that what was once shocking is now old.

We have invented machines to keep the dead awake. Videos and cell phones, Facebook feeds that still jolt us with their faces after they've gone. Facebook feeds that people treat like confessional booths, like direct line messages to God, hear my prayers.

The dead don't listen there. They are in the graves of the quiet spaces. They are by the rose bush. By the lemon tree. I don't know quite how it happened but somehow I think I have slipped through. The river we crossed fugitive, can't escape. Every time I looked for you, you

were on the other side. Time is a river, and rivers run on different clocks. Think of the Zambezi, slow and sluggish, brown and muddy over there. At its source a trickle, a seeping upwards, damp place where prayers can be heard. Then it gathers momentum and import. On the plains it spreads out, flooding and pooling and fertilising, spawning fish and cultures, dances and rowing songs. Maybe already sensing the pull of Cabora Basa and Mosi oa Tunya – thundering gorges and plumes of spray. The mighty Zambezi, says the brochure. Maybe there's something like ambition, maybe that's all ambition is, the gravitational pull of your own light, dragging you towards a contract you made in the underworld. I used to think of the River Styx as an underground place, treacle-black slow, stillness like imperturbable perspex. A single oarsman, on a tapered canoe, disturbing the smudge of the water as he dips and pulls, yet no ripples form. The water closes back on itself, swallowing the shadows, smooth and dense as tar.

But now I know, or am starting to understand – that is not the River Styx. The crossing to the underworld is not geographic, it has no spatial border. We crossed already. It's here we walk, undead in the clamouring of screen-locked souls, hungry ghosts with festering longings, lost. If only we knew we were here or remembered the moment of crossing. If only we knew how it worked, what the rules are.

Time sweeps past, its surface shiny with speed, the flickering on top the only clue to its churning depths. Listen. There are birds here. They know how to get through. Who knew that you never had to cross over, pay the Ferryman at the other side. He came to fetch you. Great mist rolling towards us, ice sheets melting in minutes, this storming cyclonic thunderous unravelling of everything science, Darwin and Attenborough have feebly tried to grasp at, all of it swallowing and hungry while far away the dull-eyed horsemen of the Apocalypse begin to assemble, preparing to mount again for the next leg of their journey.

I am awake now. I might as well get up. Reece will sleep that deep throaty sleep of the early morning. I gather up a candle, a towel, a notebook. The dog follows me into the kitchen, always clinging, this sweet loyal bitch that I can't shake. When did I become a dog owner? Another thing that doesn't compute, this early morning. It all feels like a towering city of lies.

The exhaustion of mid-life. What a tiredness this is. I didn't feel it when we were in the bush. I'm not trying to play it through my head, but it comes unbidden anyway.

We sat there, smiling at Zoe, staring at her like she held the key to everything, to our whole knotty mess.

I said to Cass: "Maybe you just thought it was a bunch of old papers that didn't mean much, and when you emptied the box you put them somewhere. Like, in the storeroom, or, I don't know, Mum's giant tin trunk where she keeps her papers.

"You're starting to annoy me," she said.

“Uncle Jerry,” I asked, “did you ever take receipt of that one box of papers of Granny's? A wooden box with Union Castle written on the side?”

Uncle Jerry's smile is like that of a crocodile on a sandbank.

These early Joburg mornings, the birds celebrating having made it through another night. A few cars streaking through the silence. At this hour, those fast ones are the ones that are still out from the night before, not the early commuters. They will start shortly, layer upon layer of sound, wave after wave until the full unthrottled morning tide of traffic starts grinding into the new week.

Utterly senseless. A whole wash of bodies piling into cars: children to school and suits to jobs; hustlers, hawkers, beggars, thieves, cops, all doing their daily choreography, and news readers to report on it all.

Zoe still speaks of a revolution brewing.

I hate the word ghost. But I do know this: in the first year, there is a greater chance of communication. The airwaves crackle with the static of the deceased's energy, love, unfinished business. It has taken me so many years to accept that I am a conduit for some of this static. Early morning dreams prickle down my spine. Unfortunately that first year is also the time when you are suffering from the madness of grief, the wild hallucinations of self-recriminations and would-have-been fantasies. So it's quite hard to tell the difference between grief-static and actual transmission. Perhaps it doesn't matter. Perhaps it's in the meeting of the two that the truth of what you meant to each other gets a chance to be seen at last. Like, maybe he never knew I loved him, until he was dead.

I wanted to lean against him, that's what I wanted. The way young elephants do, leaning like the world might split. It's only now I know this. He held two halves of me together.

Do they still want things, the dead? That's what I wonder. I dreamed of a sleeping lion in the underground room. That's Grandpa. I only started dreaming of lions after he passed. Grandpa has already done his work and more, so he can just chill and send us the occasional message

of encouragement. With Granny, it will be different. I feel like her leaving now will release an avalanche.

"Burden" was always a word I'd heard her use. "Don't let it become a burden," she'd say. Or even more common: "Don't you become a burden." I'd think of a pack horse. A donkey. Women walking all morning for firewood. Debt burden. The White Man's Burden. Don't be a burden. These are the phrases we'd hear. I'd never thought of it as something tied into your cells. I didn't think of it as this rock that sits on your chest, the ache of shoulders that forgot how to be springy. I didn't think of it as a habit that says "Here don't worry, let me do that. Let me help here. Here, let me. I'll do it. I'd be happy to help. Of course it's no worry."

The Clients, the Clients.

What the hell did they mean when they said "The White Man's Burden"? The work of keeping privilege alive?

"It's tough work but someone's got to do it," the grown-ups say when they open a beer and sit on the camp chair and the sunset is beautiful. Now I am them, Zoe was right.

Winter in Joburg. I can't understand what I came back for. The man at the robots, the broken man, has bent further in half since last winter. And the upright man, the tall one at the corner of Osborne and 11th, the one who swears at cars. I packed him a bag of thick socks, a rainproof coat, a jersey. But he doesn't wear them.

My beloved dead. I know this to be true: Grandpa is rested and able to give help across the veil. But Granny? Granny is the taboo in my heart. There's a clenched secret there, a shame. I don't want to release what I hold here. It's weary and complicated and there's too much of me wrapped up in it. Understanding Granny's pain and neglect is my route to understanding something else – the words that roll off Zoe's tongue. Words like Patriarchy and Decolonisation.

Words that André laughed at. God knows he has left work undone. Is this my work now?

Do the dead still want things? Do they need us to set things right? And what if we can't?

6

It was October before I started to emerge from the haze. Reece had returned from Cape Town and kept devising errands to keep me busy. When the student-led shutdown happened, I had promised him I would go and collect some marking and student portfolios from his office. I thought I'd beat the rush, beat the traffic, maybe go to the library – he lent me his card. On the way to campus I hit traffic. Cars crawling like drugged ants.

The man at the gate let me in as a visitor and I headed to his department but someone had taken his parking space. I drove around and around and when I did finally find a space it was well after 8 and then one of those parking guys came with a big fat notepad and asked where my parking sticker is and I said but I don't have one, I'm on my way to get it and he said well if you don't get it it's a fine and you'll be clamped. So I left campus again, and drove around to the Jorissen side and around and around the block until I found parking. By then it was quarter to nine already, and I was feeling shaky like I hadn't eaten.

I couldn't get back onto campus. I sat in the car, looking at Facebook. I started to see streams and streams of photographs – of crowds, a crowd. A gathering of students. Faces I recognised. Everything was coming from the students. I saw a name I recognised from Reece's chats about colleagues. That chap from the Politics department who sent out a petition a few days ago. Everyone was sharing his status. "We'll stay at the gates." Quotes from Fanon, Biko. The fees increase for next year. Lots of talk about revolution, protest. Student council. Links to Twitter feeds I've never heard of. More reference to Rhodes Must Fall. Fees Must Fall. Email pings. Reece forwarding me stuff about staff being advised to leave campus as there is a student protest "brewing" and talk of shutting off the access gates to demonstrate something about fees.

I had said to Zoe, of course, of course I was going to march. I am determined to be a person who could be counted. Counted on and counted. Down with the patriarchy. Down with fees. My phone was in my hand and all the WhatsApp messages fresh with pictures of picketers with their signs. Fees Must Fall. When I stood up my head tried to swim and my heart made quick panicky strokes. I couldn't stay afloat.

The revolution had finally arrived but I was too tired.

I wanted to be there with her, for her and her friends. Out on the streets carrying their placards, their banners, dodging rubber bullets, getting choked up on teargas, shouting at cops, taking our feet onto the street with wild, determined protest action.

I was in bed.

I did read about it. I read, I posted, I shared, I tweeted, I posted some more, wishing I could've been one of them, up there on the front line. Posting does count, right?

I watched it all on my laptop: recognising all Zoe's friends from school – kids I used to give lifts to and fetch from the movies. Jared was there. Emma was there. Lerato and Sizwe and Viola – they marched, they stormed parliament, got chased away, got – well, Sizwe almost got locked up, but the cops left him because he was down and lying on the pavement. They just wrestled with the ones who were pissed off and shouting.

No-one will care why I was not there. They won't even crucify me for my absence because they don't expect us to help. And couldn't I get there? Couldn't I lift myself out of this bed and tread down the passage, on the cool flooring, slip into my red sneakers, step into the hot air, the hot road. Go join a march. Go picket outside the magistrate's court. Go and sing a protest song. I keep missing the revolution. I will have to settle for this.

7

"I'm coming to Joburg," she says.

"No, don't," I say.

“I want to see Zoe in the play. Maybe I’ll march with her!”

So I start to clear out the spare room. There is junk in there that is so layered and sedimented it has become archaeology. There is a carved ebony bowl from Malawi, filled with keys that don't know their locks any more. There is a shoebox with a sticker on it – *Receipts for filing. 2009*. Well, that's an incomplete tax return I should probably let go of. Here is another box of broken things that need mending: the milk jug from Granny's Belle Fiore tea set. The milk jug makes the set. The spout was knocked off. It's there, stuck on the side with Prestik. All I needed, on the day I put it in this box, was to find a tube of glue and glue it back on. I probably didn't have glue in the house on that day, and so in it went.

I set it carefully on the writing desk. The broken piece fits perfectly, with only a sliver missing to outline a tiny crevice. There is glue in the house now, I know there is. I find some in the cupboard with the mosquito repellent and the light bulbs, electrical tape and a hammer. The glue is sharp in my nostrils. I drag a thin clear C onto the creamy white edge, a thread left behind on my thumb. Wait for it to go tacky, to nearly dry so the two surfaces will bite together and mend.

The top of the cupboard is a shoreline, foamy with dust from an old renovation that never got wiped away. I pull out another shoebox, then another. A flat box that used to house shell-shaped pralines has its lid dislodged as I pull it down. The contents: a birthday card from an old schoolfriend – no idea why I kept that. I chuck it into the throwaway bin, next to the faded receipts. An unmarked envelope falls towards me, something in it. I open the envelope and out falls a white plastic pregnancy stick. Two pink lines means yes. It’s from a lifetime ago, back when a pregnancy was something hard to get rid of, before my uterus became a transit hotel for babies that didn't mean to stay. I throw it in the bin, hesitate, then fish it out again.

They had an auction to sell Andre's things. It was brutal. His camping equipment, his cameras, all sold. I asked about his CDs, his files, his boxes and boxes of mini DV tapes. It's ok, they said. They're safe. Family members I'd never met. Impenetrable.

I bought a grease-stained leather bag that had his maps in it. Paid R50 for it. I took out the one for southern Africa. He'd marked out a route, through Botswana, all the way to Luangwa, to the North Park where the rhino project was. He'd written in pencil on the side, *overnight Francistown.*

"I'm coming to join the Revolution," Cass laughs. "You know, we missed it the first time around, didn't we, Stan? Got there too late."

Then she's in my kitchen asking what's for supper.

When the third bottle of wine comes unstopped, she says, "It wasn't meant to be like this was it? I was supposed to live in Joburg. You were going to be the one to stay in the Valley and do all your conservation work. Save the river, save the elephants." I look at her, unable to tell if she is serious or stirring.

"Anyway," she goes, "you could have done it from here."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. You can live in the city and still be an environmentalist."

"What do you mean *supposed to*?"

"That was the deal. You got to keep Zoe, you got to stay here."

"Deal? Who made a deal?"

"But that *was* the deal, wasn't it?"

"That was not a deal I ever remember making."

"Reece," she says, as he comes into the kitchen, "what have you done to her? She used to be so wild."

8

Once, when Zoe was a toddler, I had asked Cass if she wanted to come with me to Chibembe for a nostalgia trip.

"Are you fucking insane," she said. "With a baby?"

It was round about that time when it seemed like I could never get it together to come home any more, and a gulf had opened up between my present and my past. It was that time when things were going well for Reece and I was playing wife and cheerleader. Every opportunity I had to travel had been thwarted or postponed, until suddenly I felt I was standing on a floating bit of raft and the shoreline was drifting further and further away. What I needed was a road trip, to feel the wind stinging my eyes, to slap tsetse flies away from sunburned skin and let my eyes pull the horizon towards me.

“You're on your own,” she had said and I smarted from it. I didn't know this new Cassandra, fretting about nappies and snack times. Zoe was a handful, sure, but we had endured long car trips with biscuits and shared water bottles when we were just as little. I couldn't understand and neither could she.

It took me 18 years to get back there. I didn't ask her but I knew it was something I had to do.

After Aunty Faye and Winnie and everyone else has flown out, I go to Uncle Leonard to ask about directions. He draws me a map and as he scratches the road onto the open page of my notebook, the names light up a path in my mind.

"You cross the Matizye first, then the Lupande. Have you checked the four-wheel-drive, is it working?"

"Yes." I haven't, but I will. I remember sandy riverbeds with logs laid to mark out the crossing so that you bump instead of getting stuck in sand.

"You'll need it. You in the big car?"

"Yes." Big car means a car with a roof, not open sides, and it has aircon and good suspension. Any other car, even a Toyota HiLux or a Land Cruiser, is not a Big Car.

"Milyoti Gate?"

"Yep, I remember."

"Once you're in Nsefu sector you know it's just straight, you don't turn off. There's that one road at the salt pans that goes to Chipata but you'll ignore that and keep going, through the mopane woodland, till you get to Chikwinda gate."

"Yep." Chikwinda and Milyoti. Barriers marking the beginning and end of the gazetted national park. My memory sparks up a black and white painted pole weighted on one side and tired old government buildings from the 1950s.

"You don't turn off to Tafika, obviously. You just keep going. You remember Mukasanga?"

"Of course." Mukasanga village! The nearest village to Chibembe, place where most of the bedroom attendants, waiters, game guards come from, and the only place in miles where I might be able to find a childhood friend.

Uncle is peering at his spidery marks on the page. His glasses have been broken and are held together with insulation tape, clinging on to the end of his nose.

"Lukuzhye river."

I love the way it sounds on his tongue. The name remembers me.

"There's a big fig tree on your left – it's where Sayer's Grave is."

"Yes! I wanted to stop there. I never used to know who he was, but when we were kids we picnicked there and then it was so weird, I found a post on Facebook the other day, by his granddaughter – isn't that funny? She was looking for information about Buck Sayer – that was him, right? And then I found an article about him. Apparently he was an elephant hunter and he used to come down from Fort Jameson. Would Granny have known him?"

"Buck Sayer. Early days. Before her time. Killed a lot of elephants, then an elephant killed him." He squints at me for a second. "It was me who posted that article, you know."

"Ah, I forget what a man of the world you are, Uncle. You're a Facebook stalker."

He chuckles, then scratches a tiny hut on the page, next to the road. "And then of course it's the Chibembe turn-off. There's really nothing there now, except I believe old Boniface Zulu is watchman. I mean, there are a couple of tents, but apart from the old kitchen block, the rest fell in the river."

"I know that, Uncle."

"Don't miss the turnoff and go all the way to the North Park."

"I won't."

"You're not going alone, are you?"

"I'm borrowing the big car."

"No. Sam Mwale needs a lift up there to take some stuff to his family. He asked me this morning. He is from Mukasanga. Take him with."

"I'm sure I'll be fine."

"He needs a lift," says uncle in the tone that closes down arguments.

“So here we are again, Sam.” I smile at him as he puts his 10 litre cooking oil container in the back, and a bag of mealie meal. He climbs in next to me.

“Thank you, thank you.” Sam is one of those people who has always been around. He started as a mechanic at Kapani and Grandpa trained him as a safari guide but I've never got to know him beyond the niceties of lodge life: conversations at tea about wildlife sightings and bird life.

"All these years, Sam, and I never knew you were from Mukasanga."

"Oh yes. My whole family."

"Did they work at Chibembe?"

"Yes of course, Mwale the bedroom attendant. Isaac Zulu the chef. All of them."

We are only in Nsefu and I have run out of things to say. My mind is spilling out onto the open plains, roving, searching for fragments of the five-year old me, the ten-year-old me, the pieces that were scattered. Dips in the road and leaping impala slam me back into the present.

"Ah, you can't go over 40 here. There is always a new bump." Sam opens the rucksack at his feet and pulls out a sweaty plastic container. He peels a baked sweet potato and offers it to me.

"The only kids I ever saw were from Mukasanga. We're the same age, aren't we? Would I have known you then?"

"Ah no, my father came Malambo side when I was very young."

I am sort of relieved when I see the towering triplet muchenja trees that mark Mukasanga village. The stark bleached maize fields nearby and Mother with her binoculars in the old Land Rover looking for red-necked falcons. I remember that as you go down into the dip of the gully the air is suddenly cooler. I slow to a stop. Children rush to the car calling "Muzungu, muzungu!" Sam laughs, then says,"Let us go together to Chibembe. Always I hear about Chibembe but I have never been there. I will come with you, then you leave me here on the way back."

I smile. I shrug. I drive on.

"Milyoti gate. It's just the same."

"Yes, just the same."

A scout in uniform ambles towards the car with a log book where you fill in name and car registration.

"No stay, I will do it for you," Sam says, and gets out the car. Five children cluster around the car again, elbowing each other and giggling.

"Sweetie?" asks the youngest of them, hands outstretched. We drive on.

Lukuzhye river. I say it a few times and so does Sam. A winterthorn leans over the white, white sand. I spotted a genet in that tree once. Grown-ups wild and drunk in the open Land Rover singing “Hotel California”. Then suddenly the turnoff is there, and I am surrounded by the mopane trees that sing cicada song, and the only thing that is different is a crunchy road that has been packed with shards of grey rubble.

There is nothing left of the camp itself. The only building still intact is the old kitchen, solid concrete hulk sideways on to the river as if shrugging off what happened to all the other buildings. The heavy duty slab made of solid blocks – the one the cold room used to stand on – is still there, as imposing and stubborn as the man who built it almost fifty years ago.

The cold room. We used to slip in there to avoid the October heat. It barely held enough cool air to preserve a tomato but at least it wasn't a steady hot blast. Lettuces wilted and packs of meat dripped blood into the polystyrene boxes that encased them. We carved pieces of that polystyrene off to make fishing floats.

Everything that existed on this side of the grass fence is still to be cleared. This was staff quarters and behind the scenes. My domain, where I cajoled Iwomba into giving me pieces of cake and leftover pawpaw, and spent hours watching Enoch the mechanic breathe life into diesel engines.

I tread along the riverbank, 100 metres upstream. Alluvial silt under my shoes receives the imprint. I am definitely here. But where is here exactly? The wooden chalets, creosoted against weather and termites – they are gone. So are the solid plinths they rested on, black varnished each year. Gone. The majestic muchenja trees, gone. The A-frame. Gone. I pick up a smallish square of painted concrete, immediately recognising that shade of green. My eye travels to a concrete shelf covering a hole in the ground and a fragment of pipe. The old swimming pool pump. On the river's edge, tipped over at the bottom of the drop-off, the curved edge of the swimming pool's base grins up at me like a crescent moon. In the old Chibembe, the pool was set right back, far away from the river bank, up against the campsite. So here, the exact ground I am standing on, would have been campsite. The part behind the

creosote wood chalets and the muchenja grove. There's the big termite mound where we weren't allowed to go because of cobras. My head tilts, dizzy, grasping for bearings.

The swimming pool was round and deep. There was a metal pipe ladder to climb yourself in and out. The water was greenish. Insects with long stick legs skate on the surface. It's called a water boatman. I am allowed to swim but Cass still has to have arm bands.

There is no photograph of five-year old me who doesn't want to come out of the water and Daddy saying ok one more minute, over and over, the expandable one minute that children can squeeze from their parents when they are electric with delight. We have no photos of Cliff Bishop, the ex-hunter with one leg, who taught me how to swim. He'd unstrap his wooden leg at the knee, a curve in the part where his leg nestled in, such a private little curve made just for him. I guess he liked being in the water, I think now. It buoyed him. He was patient with me, holding my tummy when I kicked.

I was taught to swim in a round pool by a man with one leg. And the punchline Grandpa loved: "She still swims in circles!"

I am spinning now, like the car wheels on the river crossings, so I go back towards the kitchen buildings. My grandfather was a fan of cement. There was always a bag of it in the back of his Land Rover. "For ballast," he used to say, but I think it was in case he decided to build a camp somewhere on some afternoon walk.

Beyond the kitchen block, the lines of a trichelia call to me. The one by Grandpa's grass house. First we had a grass house, then a wooden house, now we have a concrete one. We are like the three little pigs, says Mom.

Smoke dwindles upwards from a fire, and from inside the blackened ruins of the old manager's house, a figure emerges. My heart rises to meet this wisened version of a round face I remember from 40 years ago. Boniface Zulu was a bedroom attendant, fire-stoker and serious-eyed waiter who offered baked beans and flying eggs. We used to squeal behind him, saying "flying eggs, flying eggs!" I greet him in Chinyanja.

"Boniface, do you remember me, I am Anastasia. Ana. Stan." I flip through all my names, disoriented and trying to settle on the one that he will know me by.

"Yes, Madam," he says across the gulf between us. "How is Madam Joy, your mum?"

"She's fine, she's well. We just lost our grandmother."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear about Madam Gaudry."

"That's ok. She had a long life."

In the pause, a small wind comes up and stirs the leaves of the sausage tree, with its horizontal branch that you can sit on and swing. *Kigelia africana*.

"Don't sit on there, a sausage is going to fall on your head." We used to pick the sausages and wrap them in cloth and paint faces on them. We carted them around as heavy dolls, which gradually grew wrinkled. A baby turned into a grandmother in a month. And here is Boniface and I know nothing about him, his grandchildren, his hopes, dreams and fears. A memory of him teaching me how to fold napkins arises, hovers between us for a moment and dissolves as I stare into his eyes. There is no way of knowing what he remembers about me or what I might have meant to him.

"The Luangwa river ate our camp," I say, my tongue finding Chinyanja words.

"Yes," he says, his face serious and unsmiling. I used to think he was cross with me, comes another stray thought. But this is just how he is. "It is all gone." He gestures to a pile of rubble. "We are turning the buildings into stones, to make the road."

The road we drove in on, shards of mortar packed over the cotton soil. My heart sinks again. This is what made Chibembe impenetrable for so long: the fact that in the rains it all turns to bog and sludge and no one can access it except by boat.

"They say we must clear it all, they will be selling plots," he says, looking slightly confused.

"I know. They told me." I can't tell him about the advert on Facebook: the glossy video advertising a cluster home in the heart of "the Real Africa", golf course and club house and body corporate and $100 000 for each plot.

"But who will buy it?" he asks.

"Let's hope nobody." I laugh. He doesn't.

"Which one was my house?" I ask, but I have seen it already. There by the trichelia and the ant-hill. The walls are gone but the foundations leave a floor-plan. Was our bedroom really so small? And here, the veranda, where the grown-ups stayed up late and laughed manically into the night. And there the sandpit where we found lion prints one morning, next to the bucket and spade. There is the back of the house, the secret section where we had a graveyard of lizards and beetles buried in matchboxes. A toilet, severed, lies at an angle, waiting to be chipped.

I put my left hand against the bark of the trichelia and a soft communion happens. We are here, we are here, we are here, says the tree. I sense their underground roots and fibres, connecting under my feet. When the river swept by in full torrent and ate its sandy banks, it

took the lodge, but not the staff quarters. Not my house. The tall sentry muchenja trees are gone, but the trichelias with their curvy maternal arms are still here.

I have to let it go. I know that. My eye grabs a pile of pebbles that came from the plinth of the first house, where we all slept when Cass was tiny. The grass house with the concrete floor which has been pulverised. I pick out a rose-dust pebble, its bottom half mounted on a tiny pedestal of mortar. Then I pick up another and another and another until my hands are full of pebbles and I have to take my long sleeve top off and wrap them up in there. If I have no photographs of this house, then a pebble will tether me to it. I pick another, then another. The scramble for Chibembe.

Sam is watching from a respectful distance. I can feel he wants to go. I take some pictures, but my cell phone battery is dying. I drop my haul of stones, embarrassed.

On the way back the Big Car bumps over the hollows in the road that house rainy season puddles. Who will buy Chibembe plots and hire the prescribed architect to build them to certain specifications and eat at the clubhouse and report to the body corporate? As we approach the green canopy that marks Sayer's grave I notice that the tall muchenja tree on the side of the road is on fire - that long smouldering fire that will take a week to burn the tree.

"What?" I cry out, my voice catching. "Who burns a muchenja tree? Why?"

"We don't know." says Sam.

I pause with the big fig tree on our right.

"Saila's grave," says Sam.

"Oh you know it?"

I tell him the story of a granddaughter looking for information of her father's life or death. She says her father was very small when Sayer died.

"Saila," says Sam, "he was killed by an elephant. They buried him here, right where he died."

"Oh," I say, "so you know the story?"

"Yes we know the story."

"So, the family doesn't know the story but you know it. So it's like the story stayed here."

"Yes," he laughs. "It's like the story stayed here. They will have to come and fetch the story."

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Settler: writing about wilderness, wildness and ancestry in the Anthropocene

To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.

Samuel Beckett 1961[1]

Introduction

It's something of a family joke. My grandfather wrote a book called *Return to the Wild* (Carr, 1962), an account of how he raised two lion cubs, taught them to hunt and reintroduced them back into the bush in what was then Northern Rhodesia, in the late 1950s. My grandmother wrote a book called *Not for me the Wilds* (Carr, 1963), shortly before their marriage came to an end and she left the 'wilds' of Zambia for the bright lights of Johannesburg. Both books are memoirs, both written in the 1960s, within a year of each other, and both are very much a product and reflection of their times. My interest in them is personal, not literary. When I proposed this project at the start of 2018, I vaguely knew that it would in some way be a sort of reckoning, a weighing up of two legacies, two very different influences in my life.

Return to the Wild is one of three books written by Norman Carr, all of which fit quite easily into a category that we might call the game ranger memoir. His second book, the *White Impala* (1969), recounts adventurous tales of being sent to shoot two man-eating lions in a village in Nyasaland, of being appointed an Elephant Control Officer by the Northern Rhodesian Colonial Government, of walking for several days and nights to Fort Jameson to 'sign up' for service when he heard via bush telegraph that war had been declared on Germany in 1939. All of these adventures were in their way a fulfilment of his early childhood dreams of being a man of the bush, following the stories of hunting and tracking the 'great swathes of wilderness' of 'the interior', tales that he heard at the feet of adults

[1] From an interview with Tom F. Driver, 1961. "Beckett by the Madeleine".

when he was a child in the small town of Chinde, at the delta where the Zambezi river joins the Indian Ocean.

His third book, *Valley of the Elephants* (Carr 1979), is dedicated to telling 'the story of the Luangwa Valley and its wildlife'. It details the perspective of a poacher-hunter turned conservationist and is partly a memoir, giving narrative detail of setting up a bare-bones rustic tourist operation in the Luangwa Valley, and partly a lay-scientific description of the ecology of an area that he had come to know and love intimately.

> The Luangwa Valley, which I reluctantly left to do my bit for King and Country and which had worked its magic on me, was never far from my thoughts during my campaigning so when I returned it was like returning to the arms of a long-awaited mistress. Meanwhile I had married so inevitably there had to be some conflict. No man can expect to serve two mistresses with impunity. My divided loyalties survived longer than most. (Carr, 1979)

Grandmother's books, within the family mythology, represent a betrayal of the hagiographic mythos of our beloved patriarch. Her books were a rejection of the romance of wilderness. Studded as they are with passages that read as embarrassingly racist, accounts of 'savages', servants and silverware, along with her uncritically joyous acceptance of the Apartheid milieu in her new life in South Africa, her texts remain an awkward inheritance for her descendants. We avoid the subject of Granny's unresolved story. And yet, Grandmother was loving, feisty, humorous: like many, a person whose life story reveals much about her times.

> The long grass on the verge of our clearing began to sway and rustle and the tops of the elephants' grey backs could be seen undulating above it…I was fascinated by the look on Norman's face. His eyes lit up and his whole being became alert and animated…He had talked to me a lot about his precious 'jumbo'. This was my encounter with my rival, my husband's grey mistress, the mistress that lured him away from me for forty weeks of the year for the next fifteen years. (Carr 1963)

Their divorce was never much discussed. I knew vaguely that it had happened at a time when my mother was vulnerable, that it involved a separation, not just from her father but also from the wilderness home that she, too, had become so attached to. The story of their separation was always explained in terms of the two oppositional book titles which

summarised the problem as it was experienced: he couldn't live without the bush, she couldn't live in the bush: the ultimate in irreconcilable differences. There was far too much humour and British 'pluck' on both sides for there ever to be a 'woe is me' narrative on the matter. And this was borne out by the timing of their respective deaths. Norman Carr passed away on the 1st of April, 1997. 18 years later to the day, Barbara Lennon Carr died, a synchronicity that feels perfectly and poetically apt.

Reckoning with legacy: the problems of writing 'wilderness' in the present moment

All of these details are true: the point of departure for the fiction. When I started on this project, I knew that I was going to write some of this family ancestry into an imagined storyline. In the spirit of Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, the intention was to take the bare bones of family mythology and fragments of historical fact and let them take fictional flight in a chronicle that would, in some way, be a kind of reckoning. In my proposal, I declared that I would attempt

> an experimental piece of writing that migrates back and forth across the borders between fiction and non-fiction, fictionalised memoir, and imagined family history. The work would be composed of a mosaic of textual fragments that together form a rhizomic narrative of spoor trails and forking paths. (Schulz, 2018)

Ondaatje's masterful cat and mouse game has been described as an attempt to create for himself a mythic, exotic reputation while throwing the reader off the trail with poetic diversions, 'an illusionist's trick through which Ondaatje distracts his loyal reading public with red herrings so succulent that we spend so much time savouring them we lose his trail'. (Press, 1999)

Press describes this 'sly mixture of documented fact, educated speculation and pure fantastical invention,' as a deliberate confusion of 'truth and fiction, and public and private spheres of knowledge'.

> *Running in the Family* magnifies this technique by telling so much in its flamboyancy and autobiographical cues, but keeping so much at a distance from the reader in its fictionalization and its very deceptive 'authenticity.' (Press, 1999)

I have no such ambitions. For the purposes of this essay, the relationship between family history, fact and fiction is of secondary interest. What I was really fascinated by was how, in relation to the 'Wild Man of Africa' image that my Grandfather fits into, my grandmother's story was so thin and elusive, despite the vividly penned autobiographical details set down in her two memoirs. Partly, this is due to how her experience and indeed her voice was silenced within the broader family myth-making enterprise, one that was both subtle and effective. I hoped to be able to grasp at the mirage that was her story, and what her life might have meant.

The reasons for this are both personal and political. I imagined I might be able to extract a kind of core sample that would, through layers of lineage and ancestry story, reveal something about the way colonial settler families in southern Africa have forged mythology around place, landscape and wilderness in order to lay claim to, set down roots in and inscribe their own identities onto the land. There are two very different ideas about home-making at play in their respective stories, and my other, perhaps more primal impulse, was the need to document and remember my own personal relationship to the extraordinary place which I bonded to as a child.

The difficulty I was to face in doing this was quite clear. It is impossible to engage the legacies of my grandparents without confronting their issues. From the perspective of 2018 and 2019, in the context of the rapidly unfolding environmental crisis we find ourselves in, and with historical shifts in consciousness that render their discourse troubling at best, I was wary of falling into their same traps. Above all I felt I had to guard against the tendency for the writing itself to fall into tropes of romantic nostalgia and wilderness mythology, found in so much White African memoir or landscape writing. My dread was that I would write a 'when-we' book. 'When-wes' are the old-timers who prop themselves up at the bar and remember, through the fog of their frosted beer glasses, how much better it was in the old days.

Writing about nature and wilderness in southern Africa in 2019 is necessarily and rightly overlaid with political questions about land restitution, with a slew of considerations around ownership, custodianship, indigeneity, belonging and access. Conservation discourse has grappled with these concerns, but remains mired in contestations around decision-making, corruption and community participation and is often in tension with national policies. Alongside a great many of Africa's protected areas live people who remain excluded from their customary or ancestral land, forbidden access to hunting rights, and deemed to be illegal poachers if they transgress the laws protecting wildlife. While there has been a strong

movement towards sustainable use from the 1990s onwards, in which Community-based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) projects advocate for local communities being custodians of the wildlife, these have often stopped short of deeply interrogating the role of indigenous cultural practice in wildlife conservation, and true participatory governance remains problematic.[2] Perceptions remain that while wilderness areas are protected for the sake of conservation, that tourism brings jobs and is good for the economy, these benefits do not always trickle down to supposed beneficiaries, whose agricultural livelihoods are threatened by the proximity of animals such as elephant, buffalo or kudu,

My grandfather's own position was that local communities living alongside protected areas must be both custodians and beneficiaries of the revenue that wildlife generates. Although not the subject of this essay, it is worth noting that for a time the South Luangwa National Park was a flagship success story for CBNRM.[3] Describing himself as a 'poacher-turned conservationist', my grandfather had been an avid elephant hunter in his youth, and while his attitudes towards conservation have been described as 'ahead of their time' and progressive, he was nonetheless a firm proponent of elephant population control through culling, and his attitudes towards both community conservation and wildlife management were clearly paternalistic.

Looking at these perspectives from the present moment, it is impossible to ignore the broader global picture of extinction and species loss, of globalised illegal wildlife trafficking, and the looming implications of climate change. The concerns of over-population of elephants and whether or not to use concrete when building lodges within the national park, seem dimly quaint in comparison to the prospect of living in a world which, according to growing consensus, should be designated as a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene, so radically have humans altered the climate, biosphere and 'planetary machinery'.[4] (Carrington, 2016).

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[2] For an overview and critique of a several such projects, see Milupi, Inonge & Somers, Michael & Ferguson, Jan. (2017). A review of community-based natural resource management. *Applied Ecology and Environmental Research*. 15. 1121-1143. 10.15666/aeer/1504_11211143.

[3] The Admade project and the Luangwa Integrated Rural Development Project (LIRDP) were, in the 1990s, seen as successful models for community-based conservation projects, and the interested reader can follow the work of Richard Bell and Brian Childs to understand these case studies in more detail.

[4] The term Anthropocene has been used since the 1970s but became current in about 2000 when chemist and Nobelist Paul Crutzen used the term at an international conference, to draw attention to the scale and impact of human activity since the 1950s.

While it is tempting to regard my conservationist grandfather's views on ecology and his simple anti-materialist philosophy of low-impact-living, as antidotes to the 'progress at all costs' paradigm that has led to such wide-scale abuses of planetary ecosystems, his legacy is still deeply implicated in the kind of anthropocentric thinking that has led us here.

How would I write about nature, land, wilderness and 'the bush' in a way that would not lay claims of ownership and possession? How could I in a sense unpick the inherited stories of conquest, hunting and imperialism, to find a different way of representing 'the bush', or communicating the experience of relating to the land as a third-generation settler colonial granddaughter? How to avoid the kind of romantic, nostalgic pastoralism that was used to justify entitlement to land ownership in my grandparents' generation, ideas that influenced them, and in many ways, were passed down to me?

These concepts crystallise around a central question:

How do we write about nature in the Anthropocene?

The idea of naming an entire geological epoch the Anthropocene, due to humans having altered the very geology of the planet, has been much disputed. Peter Brannon, in *The Atlantic* (Brannon 2019), calls the enterprise 'a joke' and an example of supreme arrogance. In his view, the impact of human existence should rather be called an 'event', in the same way that great catastrophic occurrences such as the first mass extinction are simply a small layer of impact but hardly a geological epoch. Brannon argues that 'the idea of the Anthropocene inflates our own importance by promising eternal geological life to our creations'. Nonetheless the term has become shorthand for indicating our understanding of the current scale of human impact, with arguments that extinctions, nuclear activity and carbon depletion will leave a geological signature on the earth's crust.

The very idea of the Anthropocene is too big, too terrifying and too unwieldy to be grasped in the form of a novel. I was aware from early on that I wanted to write a book about *inaction.* Whenever I articulated this in those words, I knew by the polite blankness on the face of the supervisors I told it to, that such a book probably sounded very boring. As an aspiring novelist with a background in playwrighting and the dramatic arts, I know of course that action is what drives stories. 'Action is character,' we are fond of saying in the rehearsal room, or, 'without action, there can be no drama.' Dramatists are concerned with dramatic arcs, tension and pace. The polite frown on the supervisors' faces was consistent with my own misgivings. And yet there are plays in which nothing happens, and characters who are

paralysed by indecision, the most notable being Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, or Hamlet, whose search for 'proof' before action seems poignantly relevant in the era of climate emergency and denialism.

What I meant when I said I wanted to write about inaction, was the kind of inaction that we are all guilty of, that makes our complicity in the so-called Sixth Extinction event unfolding around us even harder to bear. As we share our cat videos and numb ourselves to headlines of disappearing worlds: the collapse of ecosystems, the 'insect apocalypse' and Trump's undoing of the National Parks Service's protection measures, inaction seems to me to be the very condition of our mute, helpless clicktivist witnessing of what goes on around us. Living in the Anthropocene is overwhelming.

I don't think I am alone in experiencing this kind of debilitating helplessness as we watch wholesale or at least large-scale destruction play out on the screens of our phones. We literally hold it in the palms of our hands: the stripping of ancient forests, the acidifying plastic-filling oceans, the tumbling of glaciers. Novelists, it seems, can barely keep up with the pace of devastation, or cannot find adequate narrative structures to contain the enormity of it all. Abi Andrews suggests that the fact that the Anthropocene is 'eerily absent from contemporary narratives despite being perhaps the defining feature of our contemporary condition', is because it is such an abstraction, a *hyperobject* (Morton, 2013 in Andrews, 2018), the implications of which are too huge to grasp. Because we become accustomed to changing conditions incrementally, we suffer from a 'shifting baseline syndrome', so that 'the intact forests of your grandparents' generation [are] forgotten for the heavily mediated paths through wooded parks of your childhood.' (Andrews, 2018)

My concerns in this work then were reckoning not just with the demise of southern African wilderness, but exploring on a deeper level our relationship with earth, and the peculiar passivity that has come to characterise the urban middle-class clicktivist environmentalist, grappling with supermarket packaging at the same time as mutely watching a mounting tally of species loss. We decry environmental crimes even while purchasing new SUVs for the annual holiday to the bush or the beach. Depression brings paralysis, stasis, stagnancy, but also the impulse to heal. Was this simply to be a story about a character who seeks to restore her broken relationship to nature and the wilderness of her childhood? It did seem as if I was to be writing a journey story, not leading towards action necessarily, nor towards finding voice, but perhaps a 'returning home' story, or perhaps a movement towards understanding the nature of the stasis that has captured us.

It became clear that it is necessary to confront the established ideas of wilderness that my grandparents were embedded in, and to seek out different ways of understanding what wildness and wilderness could mean in the present moment.

Definitions: wilderness and wildness

Snyder's definitions, 30 years old now, point to how wildness is so often positioned as something in contrast to 'civilisation' or humanness. The word 'wild' in the English language has some of the following meanings attached to it: if we are referring to animals that are not 'tame', they are undomesticated; if crops or plants, uncultivated; if individuals, we use words like unruly, uncivilised, unrestrained, with behaviour that is perhaps violent and chaotic. (Snyder, 1990). Wild, then, is often posited as oppositional to civilisation, order, culture and restraint.

For Snyder, to reclaim the word 'wild' in such a way that we can say what it *is*, rather than what it is not, releases animals from the dichotomy, so that they can be 'free agents, each with its own endowments, living within natural systems'. Plants released from this binary can be left alone as 'self-propagating, self-maintaining, flourishing in accord with innate qualities'. If land is wild, then it can be 'a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine.'

Societies that are wild, according to Snyder's logic here, are those

> whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem. (Snyder 1990, p.17)

Individuals then, rather than being 'uncivilised', might be understood as 'unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. Proud and free.' While wild *behaviour* can be connoted in terms of 'fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, 'bad,' admirable.' There is a sense of freedom, spontaneity and expression in this definition, one that is unconstrained by the manners, ettiquettes or 'politeness'. Wildness and freedom are often closely linked, if not equated. (Snyder 1990, p. 17)

Wilderness, in Snyder's terms, is a place where wildness is given full expression,

> a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order. In ecology we speak of wild systems. When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all the members are present at the assembly. To speak of wilderness *is* to speak of wholeness. Human beings came out of that wholeness, and to consider the possibility of reactivating membership in the Assembly of All Beings is in no way regressive. (Snyder 1990, p.19)

But the way in which wilderness has been understood in the 'civilised' imagination, and consequently exploited and abused, stems from the other side of the dichotomy: 'wilderness has implied chaos, eros, the unknown, realms of taboo, the habitat of both the ecstatic and the demonic.' (Snyder 1990, p.18). The history of American frontier conquest and dominion is echoed, of course, in the parallel development in Africa.

In the broader understanding of colonialism and imperial conquest, such understandings of wilderness are deeply problematic. In *The Myth of Wild Africa* (Adams & Monroe, 1996) the authors set out to show how

> Europeans invented a mythical Africa, which soon claimed a place of privilege in the Western imagination. We cling to our faith in Africa as a glorious Eden for wildlife. The sights and sounds we instinctively associate with wild Africa – lions, zebra, giraffe, rhinos, and especially elephants – fit into the dream of a refuge from the technological age. We are unwilling to let that dream slip away, and perhaps appropriately so. (Adams & Monroe, 1996)

The explorers who traversed Africa

> wanted to believe in a virgin land, unsullied by human hands. Yet, this Africa never was. Indeed, nowhere does the vision of Africa depart further from reality. Man has been an integral part of the African landscape for over 2 million years. That people lived in Africa, however, was irrelevant to the West; what mattered was the wilderness. (Adams & Monroe 1996, p. xiii)

Jack Turner, writing from an American perspective and meditating on Thoreau's contribution to the concepts of wildness and wilderness, points out that as 'wildness' became a problem to be solved, human intervention in the form of bureaucratic control, 'scientific studies, state and federal laws, judicial decisions, political compromise,' results in a 'diminished' wilderness. Then 'wilderness becomes an area, a special unit of property treated like an historic relic or ruin'. He mourns that 'nibble by nibble, decision by decision, animal by animal, we have diminished the wildness of our wilderness'. (Turner 1995, p.334)

Thus wilderness becomes commodity and commerce, nature becomes business, and the wildness of Thoreau, Muir and Leopold in America becomes endangered. In Africa, the tropes of the 'empty interior', the untamed wilderness of my grandfather's imagination, are still alive and well in the tourism industry where brochure and marketing copy aims to conjure the perfectly curated safari wilderness experience.

> Abi Andrews points out that seeing wilderness as some pristine Eden keeps alive the dichotomy of where humans are, and where humans aren't, instilling the idea that 'nature' is a place outside of us... Once the frontier of Wilderness is crossed, it becomes corrupted, undone, its 'virginity' taken (with all the patriarchal undertones this entails). A corruption of its purity then entails its demise; it is no longer integral (which is another too-big story, and another excuse). (Andrews, 2018)

If wilderness is a place where wild nature thrives, where 'the pastoral hasn't reached yet' (Andrews, 2018), then it can be made extinct. Wildness, in contrast, is seen by Snyder and others not as a place but as the nature of the world itself – 'the norm, not the exception' (Brown, 2018, p. 17). 'Wilderness may temporarily dwindle,' writes Snyder, 'but wildness will not go away. A ghost wilderness hovers around the entire planet.' (Snyder, 1990, p.22). Humans themselves are wild creatures. Our breeding and growth has never, for example, been controlled in the way that elephants' has. (Brown, 2018)

The concept of wilderness that I seek, then, is one which can rest outside of a binary opposition, one which is closer to Snyder's idea of wild, healthy and functioning habitats, which humans are part of, rather than separate from or a threat to. This wilderness is a place where wildness thrives and 'all members are present at the assembly' (Snyder, 1990, p.18), including humans. It is a place where humans and elephants might be able to co-exist.

Writing wilderness: the romantic pastoral and the game ranger memoir

Nature writing is a broad category and it is not my intention to propose a taxonomy, but it does reflect a progression in how humans have related to the natural world over centuries. From the pastoral raptures of the Romantics, to the scientific classification of the Enlightenment, curiosity travel writing, National Geographic and the blustering mania of hunting exploits, it is possible to track the ways in which humans have related to the natural world and wilderness over time. As collectors, recorders, or immersed poets, it is in language that we forget or restore our relationship to nature.

Christian Hummelsund Voie, whose PHD thesis focuses on nature writing in the Anthropocene, writes that traditional nature writing forms a 'narrative of retreat', while nature writing in the Anthropocene creates a 'narrative of confrontation'. (Voie, 2017, p.2)

In classical American nature writing such as that of Walden, Thoreau, Annie Dillard, nature is a retreat; it provides escape from the cares of the world, where the writer can dispel anxiety by being present, observant. Here nature acts as balm, and its qualities are lyricised or exalted.

In Africa, wilderness writing can be seen to play a stark role in colonial expansion. By writing of vast open unpeopled spaces, the appropriation of land and shooting of the herds could be made to seem more palatable (Wylie 1990, p.44). The explorers, collectors, big game hunters and travellers who wrote of the 'empty interior' were not stealing anything, they reasoned, because it did not belong to anyone, it was, quite simply, wilderness. (Remembering that 'wasteland' is sometimes a synonym for wilderness.)

The land was, to them, unoccupied but also unghosted, because these travellers had not yet made any spiritual connection to these unfamiliar biomes. Settler narratives nevertheless did romanticise connections to the land in the project to belong, own and profit. 'The bush' has been commoditised, romanticised and exploited. Dan Wylie's book on elephants in southern African literature collates a spectrum of examples: a comprehensive overview of how this kind of writing reveals in text what was happening on landscape: fascination, exploration, decimation, and finally a sense of nostalgic regret at the 'loss of the great herds'.

In a way, my own biography and experience in a southern African context forces me to look through the lens of big game hunting tales, African childhood memoirs, the kinds of wilderness tales I heard around the campfire and bars of my childhood. These are balanced by the discourse of conservation: the 'sustainable use' and the 'wildlife must pay for itself'

arguments which, while more pragmatic and perhaps even scientific, are no less rooted in an anthropocentric world-view.

Finally, a form of nature writing which both appeals and repels and which I thought I would adopt with caution, is the diary, which Hedley Twidle has written about as a relatively 'minor form' but with potential for 'bringing into dialogue those modes of reading and writing that might broadly be termed "postcolonial" and "ecocritical"':

> In southern Africa the diary as meteorological record carries with it, as we shall see, a long colonial history as a navigational and conceptual aid – first on sea, then on land – for apprehending the trackless, the unfamiliar, the other. (Twidle 2013, p.30)

From the outset, I knew that I would like to at least in part, explore this form, whether as part of the Grandmother's legacy, or Ana's way of processing the world around her. Caution, because it seemed a fertile breeding ground for the kind of nostalgia that I was trying to avoid.

Nostalgia and solastalgia

One of my central concerns in the novel is memory, and the way in which the mutability of memory distorts family histories, and because I am fascinated by the way in which the unresolved past lingers into the present, creating a kind of paralysis of inaction, I had to create a character who was both susceptible to the grief of solastalgia due to her own attachments and memories, but also increasingly aware of the weight of her colonial 'baggage', particularly through Zoe's activism and involvement in the decolonising movement in South African universities. She needed to have enough of a blind spot to her own 'nostalgia' so that her 'ranting about the world', (to use the words of one supervisor) came from a place of genuine grief, but also in a sense, shows up her complicity.

Svetlana Boym, in 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents' (Boym, 2007), an essay in which she abridges her earlier work The Future of Nostalgia (Boym, 2001) makes a distinction between what she calls 'restorative nostalgia' and 'reflective nostalgia', two concepts that in my imagination can be dealt out to describe Grandmother and Grandfather respectively.

Boym defines nostalgia as

> a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.

> Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface. (Boym, 2007)

Restorative nostalgia, in Boym's analysis, emphasises the nostos part of nostalgia (home) and 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home'. Reflective nostalgia tends more towards the feeling of longing – algia – and rather than attempting to recreate the lost home, delays reunion or return, perhaps aware that the reality of home will not match up to its past ideal.

Grandfather never, in my memory, spoke of the past with the kind of romantic nostalgic longing that Grandmother did. For her there existed an idealised, aspirational image of England as Home – cucumber sandwiches, daffodils and flowerbeds, the Sunday Lunch and country garden aesthetic that were imported into colonial settler culture and lifestyle with a kind of rabid faithfulness to the original ideal of England. She attempted to recreate these ideals in her domestic settings.

Of the two types of nostalgia, Boym cautions that the unreflective or restorative nostalgia is dangerous and 'can breed monsters.'

> The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. (Boym, 2007).

Far from being an anti-modern sentiment, she notes that 'the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition'. I am interested in looking at how it is also at the core of the colonial settler condition, and, perhaps more importantly, how in mourning the loss of ecosystems and wilderness, it would be wise to avoid the tendency to nostalgic sentimentality in describing a connection to landscape.

I wondered if the kind of nostalgia that I noticed as so abiding in my grandmother, was uniquely characteristic of the settler colonial mentality – that the imagined loss of a homeland (England), and a sense of displacement ('We are always wandering') was partly

what caused a rapacious, consuming attachment to land, in the way that erased the ownership claims of indigenous inhabitants. [5]

The nostalgic blind spot, a complex of projected dispossession, is overlaid on the convenient need to write native inhabitants out of a legitimate claim to being custodians of this land because they were, according to the dominating settler narrative, somehow less able to conserve it properly. [6]

In this context, the idea of solastalgia is also difficult: in the world of the novel, it is obviously not only the settlers, or Ana, who will be experiencing a sense of loss.

The term 'solastalgia' was coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe the feeling of angst and distress when a treasured home or place of solace is destroyed by environmental damage such as mining or deforestation. (Albrecht 2005) In the novel, Ana's grief is as much for the lost childhood home as it is for a failure to find home or belonging in the present. Her deep identification with the land approaches a kind of fervent, mystical sense of unity. But in the present, this identification can find no foothold.

'We are colonials!' my own grandmother wailed at me. 'We don't know where we belong.'

New nature writing and rewilding

In 2019 then, how does one write about nature in Africa in a way that can avoid or subvert the nostalgic pastoral? In his introduction to Granta's edition on The New Nature Writing, Jason Cowley speaks of the 'moral enterprise' of a new type of nature writing in which the writer is no longer using the wilderness 'as a screen on to which he wanted to project his longings and needs' but rather seeking to 'find a language, free from cliché, in which to describe and explain in all its complicated particularity a landscape undergoing

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[5] This is a phenomenon that is repeatedly discussed by J.M. Coetzee in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (Wynberg: Radix, in association with Yale University Press, 1988)

6 Adams & McShane explain in detail this attitude. 'In the colonial era, game scouts and wardens were the scions of wealthy landowners. Their main interest therefore lay with protecting the land from the rural villagers, who then became (in the eyes of the park authorities) poachers.' (1996). This is echoed in Mwelwa Musambachime's essay on colonialism and the environment in Zambia: 'Even though the general consensus was that the rifle and the gun used by European hunters, settlers, colonial administrators and missionaries decimated game, the African hunter was still perceived as a villain.' (Musambachime 1992, p.12).

irrevocable change'. He observes that a new generation of (in this case British) nature writers 'don't simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodize and commune: they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect.' (Cowley 2008, p.9)

Cowley writes that in commissioning new nature writing, Granta was seeking contributions that were 'voice-driven, narratives told in the first-person' where the writer was present in the story. 'The best new nature writing is also an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue.' (Cowley 2008, p.11)

Voie echoes this in his PHD thesis:

> Where traditional nature writing would tend to posit a separation between pristine and humanized environments, the nature writing of the Anthropocene emerges from the awareness that environmental impacts have reached a scope where no such distinction can be made. (Voie 2018, p.iii)

Voie's observation is that in Anthropocenic nature writing there is a stark

> narrative of confrontation... a dystopian tendency in the genre, in which descriptions of nature are increasingly characterized by the writer's concerns over what is happening to the landscape in question, and what the future might hold in a world where industrial humanity is affecting all ecological processes. (Voie 2017, p.iii)

Grounded in solid environmental science, these texts are less concerned with the 'spiritual connections with the environment,' seeking instead more 'material and functional understandings of the role of humanity in the complex organic and inorganic dynamics that maintain the world's ecosystems'.

This new nature writing extends to what Joyelle McSweeney calls the 'necropastoral', in which the classical pastoral is exposed, 'like the occult', as having 'always been a fraud, a counterfeit, an invention, an anachronism'. (Joyce, 2017)

I started with the question what kind of nature writing is appropriate for writing in the Anthropocene? If we close the aperture on this question, it might be to ask, as Gregory Normington does, 'what might fiction that puts humans in their earthly context look like?' (Normington, 2018). 'For decades,' he writes, 'environmentalists have been wondering how our rapacious species can live enduringly with the planet that sustains it.' We must, he argues,

‘widen the circle of our compassion to include the non-human’. Deep ecologists, therefore, speak of the need to ‘dethrone ourselves’ as human species, get rid of illusions of supremacy and ‘acknowledge our kinship with the rest of nature’. (Normington, 2018)

George Monbiot’s notion of ‘rewilding’ is, in part, a response to this call. Normington writes that

> ‘Rewilding the novel’ means more, or should mean more, than adding a few mentions of animals and plants to anthropocentric narratives. It means acknowledging in our fiction where we come from, where we are going, and what we have lost and are losing on the way. It allows for abundance and jubilation but also desolation and loss. (Normington 2018)

If ecological rewilding is about relinquishing the constrictions of control over nature, and allowing wildness to return to the commons, then we could also allow ‘our stories freedom from the constrictions of narrative convention, from the enclaves of genre and ideology.’ The ‘rewilded novel’ should remind us of our earthbound nature and ‘absorb and reflect the wildness in our natures.’ It should caution us that

> what awaits us on a denatured planet is loneliness and grief. It must not be sentimental: the wild contains violence and horror, but also interdependence and a startling capacity for self-renewal. (Normington, 2019)

Having been uniquely positioned through my biographical circumstances to write about living as ‘part of the food chain’, as my grandfather might have put it, I embarked on an ambitious project to try to account for both a sense of personal dislocation (living in the city, away from a charmed life in the ‘enchanted valley’) and increasing feelings of loss and grief as, with each visit ‘home’, I witnessed the encroachment of capitalist tourist ‘progress’ enacting a kind of predatory consumption of the very commodity it was selling. This, in turn, is set against the backdrop of global planetary climate change.

It seemed important for the purposes of the story to set the book in 2015, as #RhodesMustFall set in motion a necessary process of decolonisation. What has happened on a planetary ecological scale in the five years since those events, is enough to dwarf those moments, and while I considered expanding the timeframe of the novel, ultimately it felt better to keep it limited to a compressed period of time, the period in between #RhodesMustFall, and #FeesMustFall, rather than introducing further complexity. On the surface, the two movements might be seen as representative of the two opposing forces acting

upon Ana in the unfolding narrative: on one hand, her wish to honour her grandmother, despite the world that she is inextricably part of, namely white settler colonialism and the unspeakable shadow of Apartheid. On the other hand, Zoe's youthful and disruptive energy, which Ana wants to take on board, including the begrudging impulse to examine her own privilege and her own wish to 'join the revolution', which is at best a nostalgic sense of having 'missed out on the last one.'

Somewhere between these two movements, Ana's own sense of urgency and loss is also displaced. For her, the 'revolution' would be to stop impending ecosystem loss, or at least prevent the building of a new lodge. Her sense of disconnection from the social movements around her and her failure to march with Zoe is another layer in her own complicity and inaction.

The carrier bag theory of fiction

Abi Andrews, in her essay, 'A Novel is a Medicine Bundle' which is part of Dark Mountain's *Rewilding the Novel* series, reminded me of the possibility of structuring fictional narrative in a way that does not need to rely on a swiftly moving trajectory but can linger, and accrue details and side-narratives, similar to what I was intuitively doing when writing *Settler*.

Andrews references Ursula le Guin's 1986 theory of 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', which in turn draws on anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's assertion that for Paleolithic and Neolithic humans, it was not the spear, rock or missile that was the first tool or invention, but rather, the vessel: a basket, something to gather food into and carry home.

> The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains. (Le Guin 1986, p.165)

Of course, from a story point of view, this is as tricky as my wish to write about inaction: 'It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk...' (1986, p.165). When hunters returned bearing skins, ivory and meat, it 'wasn't the meat that made the difference. It was the story.' (1986, p.165). After millennia of stories about 'bashing, thrusting, raping, killing', Le Guin proposes that we seek another kind of story than the 'killer story', namely the 'life story'. Differing from the view that the natural

and proper ingredients for story are the linear shape of the arrow's arc, conflict, and a hero, she suggests that

> the fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us. (ibid p. 169)

I find this liberating, if only as a modest justification for my own tendency to accrete and collect, for the writing to gather more storylines, more characters, more tangents, more dead people. On one level, I would like to think of *Settler* as an attempt to rescue precious mementoes from the burning building.

What I found in this endeavour, in writing about nature, wilderness and the wild, and with an acute awareness of how planetary systems are deeply threatened, is that there were two principles at play, which were in tension with one another. One is that I was writing about absence: cataloguing the disappearing, grasping at memories of favourite treasured landscapes, revisiting old campsites, turning much-repeated stories over and over, only to notice that there were so many rememberings, so many tellings, that original events or stories seemed also to be lost. There is nostalgia here, as well as a kind of grabbing, the fight against forgetting. Albrecht's solastalgia has the emotional overtone of what the Portuguese call *saudade*, but more than nostalgia, there is a kind of helpless spectatorship, a grief not only for what is lost, but also what might continue to be lost as this rapaciousness goes unchecked. The sadness is for the children, as well as for our own lost childhoods. Gary Snyder writes in *The Practice of the Wild*, 'Wilderness will inevitably return, but it will not be as fine a world as the one that was glistening in the early morning of the Holocene.' (Snyder, 1990, p.22).

The second principle, in writing about wilderness, wildness and nature in the Anthropocene, is writing presence. It is through the sensory immersion with nature that the text has to function as hook to draw the reader in. I sensed that my antidote to the problem of writing a 'when-we' book, or a book in which the central character has too little trajectory (if the trajectory is too concerned with the past), was to focus on the detail of the relationship with nature – the observed natural world, the sensory immersion into how this character experiences the bush, and how this experience, whether remembered or in the present, can be rendered present through the writing. This 'writing the presence' is a different kind of cataloguing and collecting from that which Darwin and Linnaeus and Thomas Baines did as

they tried to fill the cabinets of curiosities. This is more like, seize what you can from the house as it burns. When the waters rise, what is it that you will save?

I noticed that the observer-mind, so inculcated in me as a child, became Ana's obsessive archiving and recording. This noticing of detail is partly an immersion in the now, and partly the 'carrier bag' kind of nature writing that I believe le Guin was referring to. It's the naturalist's diary of the scientific expedition, but rather than collecting for the sake of data, or research, or taxonomy, this collecting is a kind of hoarding for what might happen when it's all gone.

Spectralities: presence and absence and the present absence

When it's all gone? Indeed it seems that in writing about nature in 2018 and 2019 one is writing spectrality – the spectre of what has been lost as well as what might remain, what the world will look like when, in the words of Robert Berold, 'The economies have turned into casinos, when the ecologies have turned into zoos.' (Berold, 1999).

Perhaps it is to do with Scranton's call to 'learn to die' in the Anthropocene (Scranton, 2013), but one of the big preoccupations that recurred for me in writing *Settler* was ghosts and hauntings. There are ghosts of place: lost camps, sundowner spots, trees. Existing places are also overlaid with hauntings, whether these are the intrusions of memory or actual people: the text is haunted by both Grandmother and Grandfather, two poles that represent two different worlds for Ana, and between whom she shuttles as she grasps for meaning. The lost places, old relationships and haunted places are continuously demanding to be seen and answered to.

But there is also the spectre of that which does in a sense remain, even in its absence. There is the way that memory continues to poke through consciousness unbidden. Memory itself becomes the untameable, the wild. We are at its mercy.

In the introduction to their collection of writings about the 'spectral turn' of the last century, Del Pilar Blanco & Pereen note that 'The ghost, even when turned into a conceptual metaphor, remains a figure of unruliness pointing to the tangibly ambiguous.' (Del Pilar Blanco & Pereen, 2013 p. 9). Ghosts are wild.

The ghost as conceptual metaphor has been written about in relation to issues of memory, trauma and historicity (2013, p 15) but can, as del Pilar Blanco and Pereen point out, be 'stretched' to encompass a spectrum of ideas, including, I think, ecosystem destruction – the idea of the lost landscape, and the haunting of place through memory. This

creates the paradox of invisible visibility, where a body not materially 'present in flesh and blood' yet demanding to be noticed, is a disruptive paradox, an unruly one:

> The specter is always already before us, confronting us with what precedes and exceeds our sense of autonomy, seeing us without being seen, and demanding a certain responsibility and answerability. (Blanco & Pereen, 2013, p.33)

Martin Shaw, in an interview podcast in *Emergence Magazine*, (Vaughan-Lee, no date) offers a thought from Carl Jung on the 'the lament of the dead'.

> If you can't hear the lament of the dead in the way you respond to certain challenges, you've cut off all your ancestral connections. And I would volunteer this as a thought: if you don't have ancestors, you have ghosts; and you end up living a very haunted life. … So stories – your capacity to tell a story, to let a story work through you, will help you articulate the lament of the dead. I'm not talking about seances, you understand. I'm talking about knowing the ground that you stand upon. (Shaw, Vaughan-Lee)

This 'knowing the ground you stand upon' is what Shaw elsewhere describes as being not so much from a place as of a place. And, 'you can only start to be of a place when there are bones of your family in the ground.'

The wildness of story and myth is a huge part of Shaw's teaching and work – the unknowability, the earthiness of myth that has to have 'mud and blood and antler bone' in it. Shaw describes himself as not a writer but a mythologist. While I wasn't dealing directly with myth in writing *Settler*, I did find that there was a particularly messy intersection between story, place, landscape and this idea of wildness in the sense of uncontrollable unruliness.

In the process of writing, I tried to fictionalise people, not places. I kept the places 'real', i.e knowable and recognisable to the people who live in them, whereas the characters are for the most part made-up people. I found that by fictionalising the people I had greater scope and freedom to explore the complexities of their relationship to the land, beyond my immediate experience. I wanted to be faithful to the spirit of what the place means to the people who live there, to reproduce some of the typical social interactions, but for the sake of the story, I needed a cast of characters that provided a specific set of generational dynamics.

Although vulnerable, the ecology of the Luangwa Valley is real and lasting, and I wanted to reproduce its ecology, including its human ecology, without getting too locked into individual dramas. Still, these fictionalised folk might, in some instances, seem recognisable to the real-life 'Valley People' who are themselves colourful story-worthy, unruly beings. Many writers have written eloquently on the unruliness of the memoir-fiction divide, and it was interesting to me that the 'dead' characters, the ghosts, as it were, were the ones who most resisted being fictionalised, in other words, tamed or controlled. Perhaps this is because they are no longer subject to physical change, or perhaps I was unconsciously wanting them to be part of the wild landscape.

In Kunda cosmology, spirits of the dead may easily assume the form of wild animals, particularly elephants or lions. According to my adolescent imagination, it would be possible to tell the difference between a spirit elephant or lion because of how they would return to trouble the living. Their behaviour would be uncharacteristic. After my grandfather died, I really did have a sudden onset of elephant dreams, recurring nightly in a way that seemed insistent, requiring that I pay attention to some matter that I couldn't quite understand.

Coming to terms

This project, at its core, if it has a core, is a project of coming to terms. The layers look like this: coming to terms with middle age, with not having children, or not having reached the pinnacles that early adulthood promised. Coming to terms with the end of a maternal lineage. Coming to terms with the bewildering environmental changes that beset all of us and which has already morphed into some kind of post-human dystopia. Coming to terms with loss, dying, failure and how to communicate with the range of spectralities that these losses leave behind.

Returning to the 'grandfather narrative' in this book, I was, on reflection, concerned not only with trying to understand the role of my settler ancestry in this work, but also with a level of 'undoing'. The obituary published in the *Independent* online begins with the startling line 'Norman Carr shot his 50th elephant on his 20th birthday when he was a government elephant control officer in Northern Rhodesia.' (Ten Kate, 1997)

Who even knew there was such a job as an 'elephant control officer'? In going on to describe this part of his life, the writer of the obituary replicates the language of white hunter and colonial protector mythology:

> It was a dangerous but necessary job, for the local tribes depended on what they grew and, if marauding elephants destroyed the crops, the villagers faced hunger and real hardship. Carr was one of four such officers in the country. Of the other three, one died of drink, one after being mauled by a lion and the tombstone of the third reads 'Killed by his 350th elephant'. (1997)

The legacy of my grandfather – in our family mythology, in the imagination of the tourists who came to listen to his fireside talks, and in the way in which his videos and photographs have been 'leveraged' by the marketing companies that promote the tourist lodges that still bear his name – is redolent with the kinds of tropes that prop up the myth of the benevolent hunter-adventurer turned conservationist, the romanticism of 'vast open tracts of wilderness teeming with herds of game'.

His thumbnail biography might read something like this: 'elephant hunter employed by colonial government as elephant control officer converts to conservation through tourism and local beneficiation. His shift in attitude towards elephants, and indeed his career shift, reflects the change more generally in conservation thinking from the 1950s through to the 1970s and 1980s, namely a movement towards protection, 'fortress conservation'. (Wylie 1918, p.142)

As Ana, the novel's narrator, struggles to come to terms with 'the mess we find ourselves in', her dismay gives way to apathy as she watches the landscapes of her childhood continue to be stripped of resource, wildlife, timber and forest. Her grandmother's death and Zoe's increased activism in the call for decolonisation, set her to wonder if there isn't perhaps a connection between her grandparents' respective stories and the rampant destruction around her – even if the defining feature of her grandfather's story was conservation? The struggle with her sister Cass is also a kind of reckoning or coming to terms, as they fight for the right to own their own perspectives on family history and their grandmother's legacy.

Coming to terms is, I think, slightly different from reconciliation or 'making peace'. The process involves struggle. It is messy. I don't believe it consists of an easy, graceful surrender or acceptance of 'what is'. 'Coming to terms' necessitates uncomfortable compromise and an acknowledgement of complicity. Part of what I had to come to terms with in this writing project, aside from the thematic material that I share with Stanna, was the idea of failure. Writing the Anthropocene *is* failure. It is impossible to reconcile the idea of our own extinction with the very 'hereness' of embodied experience.

In the essay ‘We Broke the World’, Scranton challenges the reader to contemplate death and extinction:

> One cannot visualize or conceptualize *nothing* except as a *thing* or some *thing*’s absence. And so just as we are phenomenologically and cognitively biased toward presentism, which comprises both a strong belief that the future will be much like the present and a tendency to forget how different the past was, so are we biased toward what we might awkwardly call “presence-ism,” which is to say, a belief that whatever exists *is* and *was* and *will keep on being*. (Scranton, 2019)

Participatory consciousness

If we are here, then, we might as well be here fully, and seek a different way of *being here*. Adopting a participatory relationship with the observed world, we start to find a different way of being. In the Deep Ecology movement, writers such as Arne Naess, Gary Snyder, Paul Shepard and others have tried to articulate the experience which Thich Nath Han has called ‘interbeing’ (Thich Nath Han, 1987 & 2017) In acknowledging deep interconnectedness, it’s possible to surrender to a state in which we might allow a dissolving of subject-object relationships. To an extent, this is what happens in the text whenever the elephants appear. They render the settlers irrelevant – causing everyone to stop what they are doing. We cannot pass because the elephants are there.

This participatory, immersive consciousness has been written about by Lous Heshusius in the context of educational theory, as a way to transcend the self/other divide. She sees the ecological crisis as being about the ‘nature of our consciousness, which has wrongly believed in a separation between internal and external reality’. (Heshusius, 1994, p.17). A participatory mode of consciousness, then, results from the ability to temporarily let go of all preoccupation with self and move into a state of complete attention. (1994, p.17) This state of attention which dissolves separation between the observer and observed is something which Ana remembers from her childhood, perhaps. A time when she was able to access this mode of consciousness, a kind of devotion to the ‘beingness’ of the natural world. This becomes part of the complexity of her nostalgia, and indeed her scorn of the upmarket tourism lodges which offer an experience of the bush that she feels she has privileged access to.

Landscape in form and structure

What reflection on the above issues as well as the writing itself has produced for me is a writing riddle: how to allow the landscape to penetrate the text, or rather, to be absorbed into it? I think there are instances when this happened quite naturally. It occurs in the images of spoor, tracking, reading the signs. It occurs in structure: the text meanders like the Luangwa river with its oxbow loops, depositing swathes of fertile silt to be sifted through, digested. Up country, away from the river-line, the bush turns into *brachestygia*. Here it is easier to get lost, (look for the green to find the water, says mother). The text is like thicket, labyrinthine like Borges' *Garden of Forking Paths* (Borges, 1941). In an excised section, Ana gets lost in the bush, trying to find an old campsite. This path looks like that one. I was here before. Now I know why they cut notches in the trees, to mark the way we have travelled, so that others can follow. So that we can find our way back. It is not 'the road less travelled,' this. It's the road that bears so many spoors, trails, and markings that, like history and memory, it is also haunted.

Lineage and ancestry is another way in which wildness expresses itself through motifs of tracking animals in the bush, reading signs and spoor. Investigating colonial heritage, Ana comes up against her family's and her own culpability in relation to the threatened destruction of the ecosystems and landscapes they have fought to preserve. This tracking and following of spoor is a lateral, horizontal movement, it takes place across space, on the surface of the text and in its structure. The other metaphor that occurred to me, particularly in the early phases of writing, was that of drilling for core samples, which pertains to time and is a vertical movement. On a page in a notebook from early in the process of writing *Settler*, I find this:

> Scientists who do core samples of ice in Antarctica, or a patch of soil in the Amazon, get a deep perspective on the vegetation, climate, soil, through millennia, past the ice age. Imagine if this could be possible for a family history. If by drilling deep back into one's ancestry, we could somehow unpick the mess. Perhaps it could be possible. Perhaps. But only if the spoor hadn't gone cold. These spirits who bother me, and demand attention, how can I satisfy them?

The idea of the core sample had limited value though, because ultimately I lost interest in the idea of a deep reckoning with ancestry, and became more involved in the fictional relationships between Ana, Cass and Zoe, which again is more lateral. Where I do think the vertical, time-depth movements happen are in the way that memory punctures the flow of thoughts of events, taking seemingly random diversions back in time.

Elephants are both real 'players' or characters in the novel as well as a symbolic or thematic strand. Mythologised for their capacious memories as well as their strong familial bonds and matriarchal herd structures, elephants are a recurring motif to evoke ideas around family and kinship down the maternal line. Elephants are Africa's original path-breakers and track-makers. Explorers travelled elephant paths which in turn became thoroughfares, routes and roads. They also become symbolic of the commoditisation of nature in Africa – as the illegal ivory trade escalates, their numbers dwindle and anti-poaching activism is an increasingly dangerous calling.

In the Luangwa Valley, human-elephant conflict is a daily reality. Subsistence farmers have their crops and livelihoods destroyed by elephants. Elephants have played a key part in Ana's family history and in her own biography. There is a tension between the way in which elephants are romanticised and mythologised, and the daily struggle of sharing space with them.

Like humans, elephants have a significant impact on their environments. I recall my grandfather pointing out the permanent damage to mopane forests, where elephants can reduce the trees to a scrubland of stunted trees, while a forest that has not had elephants feeding off it retains a majestic, cathedral-like canopy. As a child, the paradox would spin my head: do you manage the population through culling, so that the carrying capacity of the land is in balance, or do you take a hands-off approach to nature management and let the land itself dictate population control, for example by not supplying broad enough habitat and food so that the elephants would, over time, die off due to starvation? Do humans, in other words, control the wildness of the wilderness and 'manage' the boundaries, populations and other forces (through controlled burning, for example), or 'let nature take its course'? (Carr, 1979; Hanks 1979)

Tracking the story

I bring the elephant control debate in at this point in the essay, because it reminds me of the sorts of decision-making struggles I underwent in the process of this writing project: when to allow wildness and when to exert control. It felt important to allow the unconscious mind, what Natalie Goldberg calls the wild mind, (Goldberg 1990) to have freedom (wildness), to dictate structure, form and choices as to what to leave in and out. I was drawing from dreams, freewriting and the kind of flow that happens in the early hours of the morning, but I was also, I suppose, working through personal conflicts in my own psyche. Even in the editing process, it was a matter of needing to balance intuition with logic. There were several 'forks in the road' when it seemed necessary to impose decisions about form or content. One of these was whether or not to frame some of Ana's musings as blog posts or Facebook updates, as distinct from the interior confessional style reminiscent of diary entries.

The 'rhizomic narrative of spoor trails and forking paths' I had originally proposed was already a seemingly bewildering collection of texts and stories gathered from memory, notebook entries, dreams, anecdotes, imaginings. I decided instead to set up two main modes in the writing: the public, external world of family, set in bars, lodges and mother's kitchen, where it is awkward to talk about nasty things like climate change, apocalypse and eco-destruction caused by your neighbours, and the more private internal world of Ana's musings. I felt this to be appropriate as part of the 'inaction' theme: a reflection of how, until quite recently, climate emergency or the immanent end of the world was not something we discussed at the dinner table. Ana's ruminations are private, and in the mostly dialogue-driven family scenes, the unspoken subtext contributes, I hope, to a sense of unease.

Another of those decisions was how to handle the thread regarding Andre, whether his wish to pursue the rhino documentary, and to involve Ana in it, would be taken up as a major narrative thread. In earlier proposals, his death, a suspected assassination, was to be the catalysing event that would propel Ana to take action, jolting her out of her stasis. But I know from experience that stasis is more complicated than that. His presence, or absent-presence is a continuous reminder to Ana about the unchosen path. The timing of his death as it stands now seems both incidental and important – it becomes too late to choose.

Martin Shaw, speaking of stories, myth and connection to land, says 'First thing we gotta do is trail the stories not trap them.'

> In actual fact, every day that we get up and eat our oatmeal, and we go off to work, there are competing stories within us trying to be told. And actually to have a tuned ear to be able to listen to myth in the way that you're describing, requires a kind of discernment, to know within you all of these different stories that are trying for primacy – which ones do you attend to, and which ones do you actually tune out?' (Shaw)

Conclusion

I come back to spectrality, because the hauntings don't stop, won't rest, won't be put to bed. Why would they? If, as Chewa cosmology would have it, the dead reside in the bush, in the wild graveyard spaces that are neither cultivated nor swept, then their habitat, too, is being destroyed. The dead need their trees.

The final story in *Settler* is an account of returning to the Chibembe campsite, now derelict and being cleared for redevelopment. This account is probably the 'least' fictionalised scene in the book, based on an actual journey I undertook in 2018. On that journey, I passed by the huge fig tree that Buck Sayer is buried under, a distinct and somewhat mythic landmark that intrigued me as a child. I recorded the journey in a notebook, hesitating before including it as part of *Settler*, until it seemed that this story was a key that unlocked other stories in the text.

In writing *Settler*, my hunch was to follow a thread that critiqued romantic preservationist ideas of conservation, preservation and wilderness mythology, not just to apprehend their shortcomings as a way of 'saving the planet', to use an unhelpful phrase, but also to examine their complicity in the kind of destructiveness that has come about in human relationships with wildness and wilderness. I'm not sure I have done that. My hope, however, is that readers will be able to fetch their own story by reading the signs that catch their eye and following spoor in the bush of the text.

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