

Wish You Were Here

A novel

by

Elizabeth Allen

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'E. Allen', followed by a long horizontal line.

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Being foreign is an interesting pastime. When you can't speak a person's language, something in you shifts. Silence changed me. So did death.

I was changed by the chase of a story. I just didn't think the story would be this.

I decided some time ago that things needed changing. I've never been a fan of change. I haven't really liked the idea of settling either, because things might require change. So, be a nomad or stick with it. I stuck with it. My brother once suggested that the only motivation for me to make a change would be either jail or death. The world has just never seemed serious enough for me to get really upset about my situation. You make do.

I left South Africa two-hundred-and-one days ago.

I left because I felt tired. It's not normal for a twenty-four-year-old woman to feel that exhausted. I graduated from university and suddenly years of plans fell apart. For as long as I can remember, years moved sequentially. Grades became passes, became commendations, became academic titles after my name, became kneeling as I was capped and turned out into the world.

I lay in bed after my graduation ceremony, recounting the congratulations and the handshakes.

And then I woke up. Desperate to write.

I lived on the prettiest street in Durban.

Summers in Durban are stupendous. You waver between hating the city and feeling it's all you'll ever need. The heat becomes unbearable. You forget what it felt like to be comfortable in your skin and days blur into each other as the haze of perspiration makes everything the same.

It was a Thursday evening when I decided to leave. I sat with my best friend on the front steps to my house. It was getting late, but the sun refused to set. The sky had turned from blue to that shade of purple that looks like bruised skin and suggests rain. This was routine, me trying to write all day, she earning money in a responsible job, and us welcoming the evening together. I had rolled my skirt up to my thighs, and tucked the sides into my underwear. The nylon of the skirt irritated my skin in the heat, and red splotches had turned my skin to polka dots. I listened as she spoke about a new assignment, and watched my right knee wobble as I played with the muscle. I remember doing a kind of dance with them, puckering each one and then relaxing them. The jacaranda trees had shed their flowers so the entire sidewalk was blanketed in green and lilac. It feels like you're walking down a paisley scarf when you meet that street in summer.

Then a bee stung my toe. It ached a little, but not enough to demand a reaction. I'm not allergic to bees. But suddenly I wept. Huge teardrops began to fall out of me. I felt like I was watching myself perform, and instead of really feeling sadness I was commending myself on the construction of the scene. I felt a longing in my tears, hope that maybe, I might have found my story.

But stories can't be so empty. Now, I'm filling myself up, because cigarettes and daytime TV aren't enough.

I got to the airport late. The woman at the check-in desk hated me immediately. She did that annoying click with her tongue that middle-aged women do to show disapproval. I had to remove six kilograms from my luggage before being allowed to board. So my black suede boots, hairdryer and extendable clotheshorse were abandoned on the floor of Durban International. They were quite pretty, lying there. All for the sake of metaphor, I guess.

I fell asleep as the airplane crossed the tip of Africa. That view from the air is quite astonishing. Africa, at night, is diesel-black, cracked in parts, little golden shards splintering in countless directions. The uppermost edge claws the ocean, and you feel it might let go and float off into nothingness. It spiderlegs into the sea. It feels alive.

I was woken with a smile and disposable socks. The stewardess straightened my blouse and pointed me in the direction of Belgium, a funny little country which friends had told me offered chocolate and lace but nothing more.

I dragged my suitcases toward the address of my lodging, arranged on the internet for me by my father. At one point I remember being surrounded by a group of schoolgirls, seven or eight of them, dressed in red uniforms and giggling that menacing sound of girls in their early teens as they discover their power to be bitchy. One stepped out of the group and pushed past me, looking me up and down and snorting laughter at my tweed coat as she flicked her golden plaits and summoned her friends. They ran like sophisticated ducklings into a sweet shop, stopping once to look back at me and launch into a second round of hilarity.

My new home is a room in a block covered with sculptures. The room stands at the top of a minute staircase which is cramped and spiralled and feels distorted. Rickety. A single space, with a small kitchenette in the corner and a cupboard-sized toilet and shower. The first thing I did was put my toothbrush in a cup on top of the toilet.

It made me feel something.

There is a small café below my building. My laptop seems vulgar here, so I bought a notebook and a really vintage-looking fountain pen. I got carried away in that first trip to the café. Everything was exotic and important; chocolate, cigarettes, magazines in languages I couldn't read. I soon found more stores like this, and raided them in a frenzy of discovery. That pressure of telling myself 'you'll never be here again' set in even on the first day.

I walked the streets like a mad woman, not being able to communicate, just grabbing what I wanted and thrusting fistfuls of Euros in shopkeepers' faces.

On day twenty-three I had to call home for help with money. I knew I would soon need to find work, but my inability to speak fluent French posed a problem.

I cried every day of my first month away. I began to realize how impulsive I had been, and how idiotic it seemed. I was suddenly very far from the independent and mature person I'd claimed to be. My reasons and justifications blurred into a mess and I felt lost. I walked a lot, trying to find some stability by at least finding my bearings. I consoled myself with phone calls home and watching the weather reports for South Africa. I hung a small pharmacy wall calendar that showed the South African flag. Sometimes I'd catch myself staring at it. Entire afternoons would pass and all I'd done was stare at that flag. You wouldn't believe the deep and intense heartache I felt when I heard Brenda Fassie had died. Suddenly Brenda felt like my best friend. I was mortified.

Then, writer's block found its way into my single-room existence. The terribly impressive fountain pen was problematic. Sometimes it leaked, and I'd sit with oily blue hands stabbing new cartridges into the body of the pen, one after another, until my desk was littered with pieces of plastic and the goop of spilt ink. Instead, I used cheap plastic ballpoint pens which I took from the post office each time I mailed a letter.

Writer's block translates into insomnia for me.

People often ask how writers write. My answer would be by raging and writhing and, well, doing anything to justify the blankness in front of me. Filling hours with a carefully considered system of positions, sitting up straight, rigid, collapsing, lying down, changing position, putting my face into the pillow, kicking the wall, waiting for the blankness to pass. I hate that desperation.

It makes me want to hit myself to just feel something. Sentences become riddles and nothing makes sense. It was supposed to be easier than this.

I hated my decision. I wanted to back out, but there was too much tied up in this trip. I've spent too much time giving up. There has to be that courage in me that I see in others. It has to be there. So I started measuring time in units of writing. A word, an hour. Sentences, days ... Only a few hundred to fill. No matter how dismal my circumstance, I told myself, it wasn't permanent. I'd soon be home.

But I couldn't go home. I didn't know where it was.

The river divides the city in two. It is a cold, bright day and I take up my morning position on the bridge, which joins the two halves of Liege. I feel connectedness extend into everything. The footpaths meet the cobblestone roads, which become the buildings, which join the sky, which falls as snow, and comes back to me in a perfect circle. At times, the bridge seems elastic, stretching and then snapping back, bringing the distant part of the city into focus and then dissolving behind a swirl of snowstorm.

Good thoughts. A good day. Day two-hundred-and-one.

My bridge catches the best patches of sunlight, although sunlight is a largely esoteric concept here, because it's too damn cold to be of any real use. The crowd moves around me on foot, bicycles, some with dogs. I am still amazed at the silence. Waves of people passing noiselessly.

Sunday is market day. Stalls cling to the river edge, and I feel the familiarity of Durban fleamarkets. The crowding, crowing of sellers, ferocious and unashamed in their determination to outsell their rivals. I'm back at the beachfront, but in the place of curry powders and tie-dyed sarongs are snow boots, Italian olives and waffles. I enter a restaurant for some respite from the cold which has crept beneath my underclothes.

Small silver bells on the door chime as I enter. I whisper apologies to the room, wishing the bursts of snow away. The storeowner glares at me. An

aging Russian woman beneath a cake of blusher. She grunts and pulls her cardigan closer to her body.

Table in the corner near the window.

I smoke and rest my forehead against the window. I love health warnings on cigarette packs. I keep score for myself, so my habit becomes like a little game of bingo. A pregnancy warning doesn't count and can be smoked without guilt. Harm to children or non-smokers is okay, too. I'm no good with toddlers and the last of my non-smoking friends gave in years ago. When adopting self-destructive habits, you have to be specific about the terms of use.

The box I'm currently smoking reads, "*Roken is dodelik*". Not good. But I reassure myself with the rule that foreign warnings don't count as real. Everyone is supposed to smoke in Europe anyway.

The old woman's smell arrives before her body. Gin and marzipan. She places a mug of hot chocolate on a silver tray in front of me. Served with two biscuits, and laced with cream. We nod to each other, more solemnly than anything else. She clears her throat and tucks a small embroidered handkerchief into her watch strap, then covers it with the sleeve of her grey-blue cardigan.

Grey-blue, the colour of Europe.

I sip methodically. Across the room, two men call for refills. An Asian man in a priest's collar and grey-speckled hair and his counterpart with a cravat and tobacco pipe. Each sits with one leg outstretched into the centre of the room. They tap their feet to a folk song being played by a young boy on an accordion just outside the shop and gaze at the backgammon board between them. They're crying out to be captured. But I can't do it. I can't write.

Then, someone enters.

She is a young woman, possibly my age. She flings the door open and stands in the doorway, staring at the shop's inhabitants. She looks like she is expecting something, some recognition of her presence. We return her stare, not with excitement, but with warning that we expect the room to be returned to its former state. She is more an impostor than newcomer. I'm a fan of people who either don't latch on to subtlety, or just choose to ignore it. The woman stamps her feet, gives a little shake of her blond hair and removes her fur hat – all the time allowing the icy drafts to surge into the room. She giggles. Eventually, the shopkeeper moves to the door, pushes her inside the room and closes us in again.

The young woman grabs the shopkeeper by her forearms and plants exaggerated kisses on each of her cheeks. She then looks around the room, flashes an exquisite smile and says,

"Bon-jour".

Her eyes widen, she opens her mouth and falls about laughing while clapping her hands. Nobody knows how to respond to her. She is wearing a huge snow coat trimmed in zebra skin, red stiletto boots and oversized sunglasses that people buy because they've seen Posh Spice wear them.

The woman moves to a table near me. She lifts a finger to the shopkeeper, who regards her with disgust.

"Excusez-moi can you get for me one coffee please. For – me! I am English!"

She seems to expect congratulations.

"Un café, oui."

The old woman lingers at the table, gazing at her new customer who has happily begun conversing with the old men at the end of the room. She sighs, adjusts the net holding her hair at the back of her head and returns to the kitchen.

As I listen to the young woman speak, I feel something stir. She attacks words, she doesn't just say them. When she speaks, she pulls at two pieces of hair and smoothes them against her temples so they frame her face. She laughs at everything that happens, funny or not. Mostly not. It's more a cackle than a laugh.

She isn't bothered by the fact that she is the only one in the room speaking English. She is the only one speaking at all, in fact. She tells the two old men that she is twenty-three years old, that she is on holiday, that European men are sexy, and that her name is Jennifer.

And then I realize what it is about her that tugs at me. It took me a while. She is at once the most foreign and the most familiar person in the room.

Jennifer has an Afrikaans accent.

A typically nasal, shrill Benoni accent.

Familiarity is a luxury I've long forgotten.

I feel instantly superior to everyone in the room as I am able to impose judgement on this girl because I know about her home. She then tells the old men that she is from Johannesburg, South Africa. I want to leap into the conversation and relay my own facts about my home. Her home. The men look eager to return to their backgammon, but don't know how to tell this mad, rambling foreigner to leave them alone.

Home.

I sit silently.

In the middle of Europe, in a coffee shop in Belgium, I am thrown back to a family trip to Johannesburg when I was nine. Gold Reef City. Sunday morning at Heidi's farmstall, looking at the goats. Biting my sister when we fought.

But nothing of my adult life. Nothing of now. My memories have turned peculiar. When things remind me of home, I don't think of my life as it was when I left. I remember my childhood. Storybook things. Memories which have long been ignored. I think about innocent things. Naïve things that dust themselves off and demand attention.

Home.

Home and the death of rabbits.

The day my father killed the rabbits was humid. Wet. Uncomfortable. I remember lying in bed as day broke, listening to dad moving around the house. His noises were different to my mother's – she would sound her waking with clattering dishes and shouts to the animals.

But dad paced.

He opened doors, then closed them, and then opened them again, checking for hypothetical intruders in the garden.

The sound of my parents speaking quietly in the early morning makes me feel at home.

My father muttered to my mother, made something clang as he moved, and stepped into the garden.

I can still see his figure, standing silent in the purple light of dawn.

I felt sick, watching him from my bedroom window, considering that for the first time my protector-dad might be afraid of something.

Mom was smoking in the kitchen. My pyjamas had grown moist in the heat of sleep and my hair wormed across my childchubby cheek. My mother frowned and tried to neaten my appearance. She ordered me to fetch the breakfast cereal.

She kept us busy all morning. My brother, sister and I stole concerned glances in response to the tension. We didn't understand why all the curtains were closed.

We wanted to play with our rabbits.

Finally, as we finished the last of the potato peeling for dinner, dad entered the house. Very, very slowly. My father was holding a garden spade in his hands. His brow was sandy, crusted by sweat. He nodded to my mother. She said they loved us. But the rabbits were sick. They had to go.

Jennifer leaves once her coffee is finished. Even the walls exhale with relief. We who remain in the room exchange glances - strangers united against the peculiarity. I want to follow her. Cream-skin has formed over my hot chocolate and stuck to the sides of the mug. I drain what's left. I'm not a 'politely-sipping' kind of girl. The mug is returned to its tray and I lick my upper lip, where cocoa bubbles have settled amongst tiny down hairs.

My bill is brought as soon as I begin layering warm clothes around me. I pay what is due and drop an extra two Euros into the old woman's hand. She raises her shoulders, shakes her head at me and utters thanks.

Outside again.

Jennifer is standing across the road at a public telephone. Her hair whips sideways as she scans the road. She holds a small floral notebook, which has a teddy-bear sticker across the front and 'Jenny' written in pink Koki pen. She sees me and beckons me to her, launching into a flouncy, poorly arranged French sentence. I want to see how far this will go, so I listen and barely react as she tells me that she needs to telephone South Africa. Without speaking, I take the book from her hands, point at the number scrawled on the first page and hold out my hands to indicate a question.

"Oui, oui. Afrique. Mi casa. Is that even French? Um, tres bien! Oui."

I bury my face in the telephone receiver; clouds of steam the only giveaway to my laughter.

I can dial South Africa without looking at the buttons. South Africa, 0927... Durban, 31, Johannesburg, 11, Cape Town 21... Codes to friends on lonely nights.

Once I have dialled the number I return the receiver to Jennifer, who listens for a ringing tone and then squeals in delight. We wait for a few moments and then her face lights up.

"Adam? Adam! Adam! *Dis ek. Poepholl! Ek mis jou...*"

She stops talking and stares at me.

"*Merci. Au revoir.*"

I would have listened to the whole thing if I could have. I make to leave, and realise I'm still holding Jennifer's notebook. She has already forgotten me, turning into the telephone booth and pulling her jacket around her face.

And so I whisper a farewell and continue up the road.

As I walk home I am certain that people know what I have done, that the book is glowing through my coat pocket.

But nobody cares, and for once, that's the beauty of this place. For the first time the isolation works for me.

I think we feel we owe things to each other in South Africa.

We don't allow ourselves the isolated existence lived by individuals in the First World. We're trying to make up for our history so we turn everyday routines into desperate displays of our divorce from the past.

Showing my empty wallet to the broom seller outside my house to prove that I can't buy anything from him. Asking the woman weighing my vegetables in the supermarket about her life. Trying, trying, trying to connect. Needing to know the full name of a waitress, even if I don't like her.

No one here needs to know my name.

The postman crouches at the door as I arrive home. He lifts his hat, removes two envelopes from underneath the doormat and hands them to me. I thank him and linger outside as he mounts his bicycle and cycles away. He freewheels down the cobbled slope and raises himself off the bicycle seat. He tilts his face up to the grey sky as the bicycle wheels leave the ground. Then, suddenly, he holds onto his hat, slows down and glances back to me. I pretend I am battling with my key in the door lock, not willing to let the man know I have caught him in a moment of glee.

It takes me longer to reach the door to my flat on letter days now. It used to be a quick dash from the street, on to my bed, and a mess of ripping paper. I'm calmer now, and take my time climbing the stairs. One step at a time, skipping those which have softened under the moisture of mildew and a leaking roof.

I didn't make my bed today. Or yesterday. I probably won't make it tomorrow. I kick my boots off and leave my bag in the kitchen, taking the letters to the toilet with me. These are the luxuries of living alone. My luxuries anyway.

News from home is an onslaught of exclamation marks. They! miss me! so much and can't! wait! for my return!

My mother was never this enthusiastic in person.

As I slide my finger across the tip of the envelope, tiny newspaper clippings flutter to the floor and rest between my toes. It strikes me how funny it is that my mother has written to me on her Big Five stationery. All my life, I've

wondered about the people deemed worthy enough to receive letters on that damn stationery. Finally, I mean something. I mean quite a lot – not just anybody deserves a gold embossed buffalo.

The pieces of newspaper carry anecdotal stories about Belgium. Probably found in those arbitrary side panels that *The Sunday Tribune* uses to fill up space when advertisers are being mean. "Girl Marries Dog"... "Finger Found in Spaghetti"... that kind of thing.

Belgium created the world's largest nativity scene last year. I went to see it on Christmas day, the pangs of homesickness numbed for the hour that I stayed. It's difficult to be sombre in the midst of a fibreglass baby Jesus flanked by Wise Men and African elephants. My mother has highlighted parts of the news articles in green marker and drawn smiley faces in the corners. A Belgian town has attempted to break the world record for the highest number of people in a pillow fight. Belgian and French historians are fighting over who really invented the French Fry.

There seems to be so much time floating around the First World.

I wonder where these things happen, bits of news happening all around me but hidden by the silence.

Then somehow reaching South Africa.

Perhaps in the farmlands.

Perhaps in the tundra that lies between train stations. On-the-way-to-somewhere-land where nobody actually lives but where hooded vandals, or artists, depending on your definition, go at midnight to graffiti the walls of broken-down buildings.

Colour and cobblestone blend together as you watch them from speeding train windows. Objects become each other and remind you of school chemistry experiments. Your face is laid over the scene as you watch it from

your booth seat, so you switch between the land and its reflection made miniature in the view of your eyes in the window.

Surely there can't be anything happening there.

My mother writes of my father and his job. Business meals with academics. She writes of being bored with talk about Shakespeare, and how difficult it is to smile at people whom she suspects may be fondling each other under the dinner table.

Ever since she watched *American Beauty*, my mom has loved the idea of the suburbs as demonic hotspots. She tells me about my brother and sister, who are living in 'the city' and becoming wealthy. My sister, Cate, is pregnant with her third child, and mom pities the first two, who are made to dress in identical outfits to her.

The letter ends with a clipping from an Oprah magazine.

A recipe for the Single Girl's Butternut Soup.

She has doodled hundreds of noughts and crosses, hugs and kisses that trail off the page.

She writes "With love, mom and..." and then allows my father to sign his own name.

This is how things go on the Big Five stationery.

The letter makes me laugh. I've been sitting on the toilet with the lid closed. I move to turn the kettle on, and cover my feet in an old pair of rainbow-striped socks.

While I wait for my tea to draw, I open the second envelope.

Slowly, nervously.

The letter is from a boy. A boy from home.

I recall him standing over me.

Moonlight swamps in from the window behind him and oils his body. Little particles of dust float around him – minute galaxies gliding past on their slow descent to ground and the nothingness of dust-under-the-bed.

I am supine on the sheets, my body as pale as the stars. Creamy. Soft. My belly shudders as a throb of excitement moves from my pelvis to extremities. Charges are sent outward and pit themselves against thuds of heartbeat.

His hand is above my navel, index finger tracing the outline of my secret freckle, which is soft, raised and just left of centre if you face me.

Face on my belly. He peers into my bellybutton, eye pressed intently against the orifice like some fleshy spyhole. I imagine my organs crouched on the other side, like old people, gazing at the stranger outside.

An awkward, snorty guffaw wiggles out of me and hints at my inexperience. He is quiet, caught somewhere between traversing my body and the understanding that my vulnerability demands silence.

While my pelvis tilts to receive him, the moonlight spills from its window-cup and fills me.

By day, girl tilts face to sunlight and is filled from the mouth.

On that night I was moonlight.

The hot water burns my fingers as my hand droops and I knock the cup to the floor. I leave the liquid to pool across the kitchen tiles and scan the letter. Nothing dramatic, nothing going on. He writes in polite tones and makes jokes about the weather. He hides behind puns and references to foreign things which I know he longs to discover.

Time is not always the healer it is promised to be.

The letter has thrown me and the rest of the day passes without notice.

I wake and my hair smells of takeaway chips. I rest my hand on my forehead, which is greasy and threatens to burst into a mess of pimples. Already an angry red mound throbs at the arch of my right eyebrow. The brown hair stands erect and the pore of my skin has enlarged. I'm under a microscope.

It's raining again. The temperature hasn't risen above freezing this week. I sit up in my bed and collapse my chin on the windowsill next to me. My bottom lip flares flops into a pout. I press my nose into the windowpane.

Then I spy Jennifer's notebook in the reflection. It lies open on top of the fridge. I have barely cracked the spine, but still the thrill of having it is enough. I will turn the pages. But right now it terrifies me. Guilty terror, addictive. Each time I get milk or go to the toilet, I feel like I am passing a dirty lover. I like it.

Last night's smells make me feel ill. A half-eaten Big Mac escapes its polystyrene and lies flaccid on the floor. All the sesame seeds have been removed from the bun and are stuck to a slice of wrinkled tomato. The meat has been set apart. I eat like a bird when I'm drunk.

I have smeared oil on the pages of my notebook and spilt alcohol on the carpet, drinking Jack Daniels out of a soup mug. My father has always pleaded with me to become anything other than a whisky drunk. He says Janis Joplin did it, and I'll end up overdosing on pills in the middle of the night.

Sometimes the decision to take a shower seems enormous.

I have come to understand my work schedule to be a very good thing. A safe thing. Sometimes I need a shove into the real world, out of the hovel I've built in my head.

On weekends I work at a tourist information booth in the centre of the city. It is easy work, and gives me time to improve my French and meet people as confused about their situations as I am. Most of my time is spent directing people to the train station, negotiating taxicabs and recommending tours to the city's attractions. When all else fails, I direct people to the *Mannequin Pis*, in Brussels. People will do a lot for a photograph of themselves next to a urinating infant.

The city is busy this morning. I settle into my booth and assess my surroundings. Two boys take turns riding a skateboard on the pavement, throwing a packet of bananas to each other as they go. A taxi driver is waiting for passengers. He dozes in his car, and even though his windows are wound up, music pumps into the street-

They don't know what is what they just strut, what the fuck –

The bassline bruises my already aching head and I wonder if he understands the lyrics. Because I don't.

There are two of us who work in the booth. I deal with English tourists and Jim, fluent in French and Flemish, takes care of everyone else. Jim is a little older than me. He's slightly overweight and he doesn't wash his hair. He makes me feel comfortable. Jim doesn't speak to me often, but I can tell he enjoys our exchanges.

He greets me in the mornings by clicking his left fingers and saying "*lapin*". I looked that up, and it means rabbit. I'm still trying to understand that.

We don't share much through language. Each time we come close to understanding, the impossibility of translation builds walls between us and we laugh ourselves into frustrated silence. For the most part we are reduced to nudging each other when people trip on the street, or mothers humiliate their children by scolding them in front of us.

Jim and I wear orange tunics which remind me of car guards in South Africa. We are forced to wear big yellow badges, which show two plastic eyeballs and our names.

'Hi! My name is Isobel. I'm here to help!'

The eyeballs are those stick-on things that we used in arts and crafts as children. Big black beads form the pupils and they jangle around in their sockets as the badge bounces on my chest.

I spend the morning dealing with troupes of Americans, who come through in waves and have heard that George Bush is spending the day in Brussels. I smile and provide answers and marvel at their plastic peak caps.

I pity the tourist cities.

At lunchtime, Jim lopes across to my seat and hands me a plastic bowl filled with bursting-open mussel shells. They steam garlic and white wine and we eat together in silence, using each hinged shell as a clamp to extract the orange meat from the next.

One of my favourite things about Durban was lunchtime at the beachfront, with chunks of pineapple powdered in curry spice and skewered on sticks so juice pours down the insides of your hands as you eat.

When we are finished, Jim takes the bowl from my hands and throws it into a rubbish bin. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and swipes it across his mouth. Then he sniffs, clears his throat and places a small piece of paper in front of me, before returning to his seat.

It is a flyer advertising a party which is happening tomorrow.

The strange thing about Liege's party culture is that it seems to be hidden. It is difficult to find out about events, because advertising is so deeply entrenched in a world of codes and slang references that you have to be at

the forefront of the culture to understand it. New phrases are created before the old ones take root.

The sheet shows an image of a tree trunk, with the face of an old man sketched into the branches. The background is an entanglement of purple and black clouds, which form the names of popular DJs and combine in the shape of a large, distorted body of a frog at the foot of the page. Below is an address and the words, "*Have you passed your acid test?*" No subtlety there.

I've been to these parties before. Jim likes to show me off to his friends, with whom he grows in confidence and becomes talkative. I hold the flyer up to him and nod. He replies by giving me a thumbs up sign and saying, "Sweet", in a self-conscious and heavily accented attempt at keeping-it-cool.

I like him.

I pass much of the afternoon thinking about the party and indulge myself in girlish debates around outfits.

Then, suddenly, Jennifer is standing in front of me. She is grinning and waving her hand in front of my face to attract my attention. I have been staring, unsure if I had forgotten about her or been thinking about her all the time.

"Hey I know you!" She taps my forehead and I don't know how to react.

"He says you speak English?" She points across to Jim, who is looking at us with interest.

"Oui."

I don't know what to say.

"Un Peu."

Jennifer is laden with shopping bags. I can tell by the names on them that she has spent the day in the far corner of the city, where Asian immigrants sell silk and metallic dragons and rice noodles. She has a large pendant hanging around her neck, which is a carving of *Tchantches*, the city's mascot puppet. He is a little old man wearing a cap and polka dot scarf and nobody except tourists really cares about him.

"You helped me yesterday, hun! Do you have my book?"

I don't want to give myself away, but I feel nervous and excited and clamp my teeth together. I feel the wave of tension move along my jawbone.

"Because I saw you there and I thought, hell, I hope you do. I was such a mess!"

I hadn't counted on this happening.

Jim senses that I'm uneasy, and stands, although he cannot understand what is being said.

As I wrap my fingers around Jennifer's book, still in my pocket, I piece together a stuttered explanation in a terribly fake French accent. I tell her that I had looked for her all night, and the book is at my house. Then, without warning, I am handing Jim's flyer over to her. I ask her to meet me at the party and I will return her book.

Jennifer looks skeptical as she scans the piece of paper.

"*Jussus.*"

Yet just as I begin to think she is going to demand the immediate return of her book, her expression changes and she laughs.

"Cool. I'll see you. See... you... tomorrow! But bring my book hey?"

I scratch my head in such an obvious expression of confusion that I'm sure she can tell I'm faking.

"Um, *Demain*."

I smile. "*Oui, oui, demain*. Your book, I will bring."

What am I doing?

"Okay cool!"

And with that, she stuffs the paper into her handbag, pulls her sunglasses from the top of her head to her eyes and signals for a taxi.

That was so easy.

I watch her leave, stretching around the corner of the booth to track the taxi as it disappears up the road.

A customer taps me on my shoulder and asks for help. As I prepare a pack of brochures for a tour of Brouge, Jim looks at me for explanation.

I return his gaze and shake my head, as puzzled about what I have done as he is.

Jennifer.

It's only then that I remember to breathe.

two

The day turns to evening and I gather my bag and jacket as the bells in the city square chime six. Jim and I, loyal to our usual awkward routine, plant kisses on each other's cheeks and part ways.

As I begin my walk home, Jim calls out to me and I turn to see him holding out the party flyer and repeating his thumbs up signal. I nod to him.

"Tomorrow, Jim!"

"Oui oui, to-mo-rrow Isobel."

We assume our messages have been exchanged. We're usually right.

The artist's watercolours are justified by the European skyline. Greys seem too grey and greens a little too off-shade to be real.

My route home stretches along the river and passes a statue of two young children climbing on the back of another larger child, who reminds me of Peter Pan.

Funny how European and African stone differ.

I graduate and my father sweeps me off to the Eastern Cape.

We climb to the top of a hill and look over the city while we stand silently together. White becomes blue turns to brown as a sky joins the road and spreads to bush which is scarred by the steady singe of a sun that stands for too long in the chilly air of a winter sky.

My foot catches a rock loosened by a recent walker, a ghost in this place which feels untouched and waiting for us.

A butcherbird stands on barbed wire in the distance.

A collection of whitened rocks below us marks a grave.

The sun moves downward, taking the cloud from grey to pink, then transparent as it calls for the end of the day.

It is replaced by a moon, white belly in a dark sky with sharpened features.

We walk back toward the town. Our lips have chapped in the blaze of the day, and the dust has taken to our chests, leaving dry coughs and hot skin that make us laugh at one another in the fading orange of a day shared in silence.

I heard Africa described as vast and empty. I heard Europe described the same.

My door needs oiling and demands a heave with my shoulder before it agrees to thud closed.

I strip myself of my work outfit and leave it lying at the foot of my front door.

Laundry is much more of an intention than action to someone who lives alone and can disguise the stink of personal neglect with an effective linen spray and a quick soaping of her underarms.

I scoop up a tracksuit that seems not entirely offensive and dress.

Military style from the 1980s, still worn by fathers in South Africa as they tell their children stories of fighting in the bush war.

I bought mine at a Salvation Army sale.

While I wait for water to boil, I slather marmite on two pieces of bread. My mother sends boxes of South African necessities. Chutney, biltong, rusks. I may have fled my home but not its diet.

Instant soup. Tomato. With a dash of cold milk and a blob of butter, as my grandmother prepared it for me on afternoons while I completed my Afrikaans homework and times tables.

I settle into my bed with Jennifer's notebook.

First page.

Adam. A telephone number and little hearts that link up to each other and are filled with red pencil crayon.

Nothing else.

Slowly, I go to the next page. More contact numbers. Addresses.

Mammie en Pa.

Esme.

Tricia.

Tannie Liska, Oom Chris.

Ouma Coetzee.

Ouma en Oupa Britz.

On the opposite side, a scrawl,

Jennifer Britz. Geb. 14 Maart 1983.

Her identification number, her flight details and an email address.

She's in her second week away from home. No sign of the length of her stay.

Jennifer Britz. She has written her name and underneath it practised her signature. Eleven different versions of her name in dramatic script, with each 'i' topped with a heart.

A dog barks outside, startling me so that I spill soup down my chest. I pull my sleeve over my hand and rub the liquid into the fabric of my top, so that it leaves a dark patch. I yank the zipper closed, right up to my neck and then pull the collar over my chin, chewing the edges of the material as I read.

Third page, the details of a South African modeling agency.

Fourth page, a Belgian modelling agency, here in Liege.

I slam the book shut and laughter moves up from my belly out into the silence of the room.

"Of course!" I'm talking to myself again.

Of course.

I'm surprised I didn't get that one on my own. Girls like me are skilled at spotting girls like Jennifer.

Model girls.

"Isobel? *Bella bella* Isobella?"

A string of insistent raps on my door. Shit.

Mylene is, in theory, my landlady. It takes me a few yanks on the door before it agrees to open.

"There she is! *Ciao bella...*"

Mylene was born in Dublin. The death of her Irish mother saw a teenage Mylene and her Belgian father returning to his birthplace, and starting the beginnings of a woman made whole by a decoupage identity. She has acquired a makeshift vocabulary, French laced with an Irish accent, dotted with a little Italian reference here and there for the sake of romance.

She floats through the door and collapses on to my bed in the melodrama of an ageing diva.

"Fetch glasses darling."

She is holding a bottle of dessert wine, taken with me on alternate evenings, in a routine to which I, unwittingly and silently, have become bizarrely central.

As I fill our glasses, Mylene drapes herself across my bed and strokes her face with manicured hands. Just below my apartment is a florist, owned and hosted by Mylene, and she seems quite taken with me, like her flowers, a romantic little source of income. Her fingertips and the dip just between her

thumb and forefinger are tinged green from plant stems and her compensation is an obsessive painting of her fingernails.

"My dear, what a mundane sort of day. There are so many sad old men in this city. Tired old men with stinking breath and desperate looks, all looking for Mylene to save them with her laughter..."

Mylene likes to refer to herself in the third person.

"...And what can Mylene do, but oblige, *oui*?"

She sighs and flicks the end of her baby finger against her tongue. Then she smoothes down her sculpted eyebrows.

"You are the lucky one, little Isobella. You won't be bothered by men in your life."

I laugh. "Why?"

"Well, you have set yourself up that way."

"What way?"

"You are a thinking girl. *Bella bella*, beautiful girl, but a thinking girl. Always so quiet, never speaking, never able to speak, always scratching through your papers, always writing – "

"Always trying to write, Mylene, never writing. And I'm silent because I don't understand what anybody's saying."

"*Oui*, you see? Easy. You have made it easy for yourself. It is much easier to be thinking than to be adored. Love, *oui*, sex, *oui*, but always this constant crying to Mylene for saving, Mylene for her laughter, Mylene for her smiles. Such boring little old men looking for their mothers. "

Mylene is skilled in the art of unintentional bitchiness.

"Weeping for forgiveness, weeping for safety... it is far better to be like you, to be thinking, to be alone. Strong. But I am not a thinking girl."

I want to say, you are not a girl at all.

"So I take them into my room, one, two, three, four, to feed them when they are hungry and clean them when they are sick, and accept their gifts when they give them... What a poor life for Mylene."

As I go to hand Mylene her glass, I notice that her fingers have moved across to Jennifer's notebook, which I have left lying open on my bed, and she has started to page through the book.

I am surprisingly aggressive in my dash to snatch the book away from her.

"What is that?"

We're both surprised by my behaviour. I clutch the book to my chest and turn away from her.

"Nothing. Something I'm working on. Nothing"

"You're never going to sell anything if you won't let yourself be read."

"Maybe I don't want this to be read." I'm angry now.

"And that is exactly your problem. *Tres bien*, clever Isobella."

Mylene spits her words at me. She thinks I am a child. She takes her glass from me, picks up the wine bottle and sashays out of my apartment, leaving the door open and upping the drama of her exit.

She's good at this.

I down my wine, and eventually fall asleep with Jennifer's notebook folded in my arms.

Distant ringing of the cathedral wakes me. It's dark outside.

The notebook is pressing into me. I have slept on it and creased the front cover, as it bent and buckled under my sleeping body.

Quickly. Fix it.

I straighten the cover, smooth the pages, and continue to read.

Page five.

"Liewe Here.

Ek vra dat Die Here vir my hulp gee.

Help my om dinge reg te doen.

Help my om mammie en pa trots te maak.

Help my om 'n godsdientige persoon te wees, 'n saghartige persoon.

Maak my veilig.

Help my om die beste dogter te wees.

Die beste sussie te wees.

Help my om Adam se hart te hou.

Help my om my drome waar te maak.

Help my om my land bekend te maak.

Dankie God vir alles in my lewe.

In die Naam van Die Here

Amen."

So, she's a writer.

A model set out to save the world.

At least I amuse myself. Age will never bring Thinking Girls to deny the minute delicacy afforded by the mockery of Model Girls.

I reach out to my bed-side cabinet, and flip open a tub of painkillers. I pop two in my mouth, and drift into a slow, numb sleep as I reread the words on page five.

Just as I pass the limbo stage between waking and consciousness, I can hear myself mumbling the first lines of Jennifer's prayer.

Awake. Party time.

Somehow, within the dead-time of my apartment, I manage to flounder between bouts of insomnia and the heaviest, most sustained sleep I have ever experienced.

I have slept for sixteen hours.

I'm starving. It really is time for me to clean myself.

I bathe and dress quickly. Jeans. A hooded top. Comfortable shoes. I have learnt how to prepare for these occasions. I throw my coat across my shoulders and fill a small backpack with keys, wallet and Jennifer's notebook.

On my way, I stop at Charlie's, a 24-hour falafel takeaway run by a Lebanese family who are curiously all named Charlie.

There's a route to the church through a park. It's long, but there's something in the quiet of a nighttime walk which I like.

There were days when my father needed the aloneness of the birds and a setting sun to truly understand how he was to stay alive in his city, under the heavy and all-consuming title of "father".

With his tie loosened and his shirt made casual by the spreading stains of sandwich dolloped with leftover bolognaise, eaten on his return from work in

rush hour traffic, he would make silent and modest tracks through Essenwood Park where stalls were waiting to be filled by the following day's market.

I don't much mind being owned by a city over which the sky glows orange, the sloping sun peaching cheeks as it drops from our view, beyond what may as well be the edge of the world to us left sitting on the coastline with our late editions of the *Daily News*.

The birds move in a single mass, throwing shadow on the street and drowning out the sound of cars as they, inexplicably and romantically, move in sync with the hub of the day and screech for nightfall from the treetops.

My father only speaks if he can improve on silence.

He would stand in a corner of the park, his weight held by a cracking knobkerrie bought one balmy evening from a harbour hawker, while his leg swung on the roundabout left absent by children called in for dinner by their mothers.

He may have held a cup of tea or a siphoning of whisky, seldom but significantly accompanied by a secret cigarette stolen from my mother's equally secretive hoard at the back of the kitchen cupboards, masked by a Tupperware of self-raising flour.

I was permitted to join him on an evening in May, during a cold spell when the people of the city became excited at the chance to mimic the habit and dress of a real winter and threw a European tone over the day.

We are often silent, my father and I.

We breathed through the evening as the Indian Mynahs bawled above us, pointing their shrieks high into a sky soon to be filled by stars, vacantly missed by those in the city centre.

He allowed me to sip tea with him, and turned away with a head tilting toward the swing set.

It has started to snow again and the flakes cling to my eyelashes so that my vision is a mixture of tearing eyes and shards of light broken up by the cold.

I was once told that a person should never enter a space in Europe with their eyes to the ground. You must be looking up at all times. The most beautiful details appear if you look close enough.

A little stone gargoyle squats at the centre of the church roof. Part of his body has been worn away and he overlooks the square with one eye, wing chipped in places, a partial amputee. The light from a small window near the top of the cathedral casts beams onto the little figure so that he becomes grotesque, shadows falling on his fangs.

Within the lit window, there appears another figure. A man wearing a brightly polka-dotted snow hat and sunglasses is holding a torch out to the street. He looks around, and inhales the quiet of midnight. Then, he looks down to me and nods.

“Abbey Road.”

He whispers the password to me and the window goes dark.

The cold tightens my chest. I pull my jacket closer to my body and jog around the rear of the cathedral to free up the post for the next person to receive the password. This is how these parties work - specifics remain unavailable almost to the point of entry, if you're lucky enough, or wily enough, to reach the point of entry. Enormous groups congregate at each corner of the town square, and await the torch signal. This way, the risk of police interference is reduced. You can't be caught for anything if you don't know anything.

Fortunately, Jim is a veteran at these events and my novelty factor gets me in the know.

There's another man sitting at the back entrance to the cathedral. He is bouncing on his haunches between the ground and the first step and cupping his hands to his mouth to keep warm. He's pulled a Father Christmas hat low over his ears and pinned a Van Halen badge right in the centre.

I give him the password. He replies in French, too quickly for me to follow, and then snorts and opens the door.

I step into half-light so I can just make out the figures of a group of people standing near me. They smile and nod the nods of strangers who are lacking intimacy but bound by being in the right place at the right time together. Through the grey light from the street outside, they point me down a central corridor and wave dust away from their faces as they continue their conversation.

The church has been abandoned, now providing spectacle rather than function. A lovely little religious metaphor. As it stands the church is nobody's property, it's open season, made obvious by the streaks of green paint that run down the walls and frame graffiti tags, slogans and random insults scrawled in marker and paint.

As I move further down the corridor, the sounds hits my chest before my ears and reminds me of listening to activities in a house from beneath the surface of bath water.

A left turn and a flight of stairs.

Slide an old concertina door across its railing.

And I'm in.

Drum and bass. Hundreds of people dancing, drinking, laughing and screaming to each other. The church hall has been stripped of its pews, the

only suggestion of its former self being the altar in which a woman smothered with silver body paint leaps around her turntables.

I hand my jacket in at a makeshift booth, where a man stops working on the orchid he is tattooing up a middle-aged woman's forearm, and hands me a ticket while he matches it to the number on a hanger. Coat number 53.

A huge canvas has been strung across the ceiling so that the room is tented. Ultra violet lights shine through it, bringing a purple-white glow to the teeth of a hundred painted mouths scattered across the fabric. Che Guevara's face floats above the dance floor, dangling over the dancers on an enormous board lined with little white lights. To the left, in a corner of the dance floor, a man is spraying one of the walls. A hood shadows his face and he has tied a piece of ripped t-shirt around his head to cover his mouth and nose. When the lights skim over him, I make out what he is painting. A caricature of the church, top heavy and leaning to one side, and a huge wild fist in shades of red and purple pushing it out of the ground.

Jim is standing next to the bar. He and his two friends, Jacques and Michel, the self-titled 'J and M: Jedi Masters', have their backs to me, lined up against the counter.

I poke Jim in the ribs. I don't know why I always do this to him; I know it makes him uncomfortable and self-conscious about the flab around his middle.

"Lapin!"

The Jedi Masters laugh and put their hands to their faces to indicate whiskers and do a little hop-about dance with each other. I offer my polite laugh, standard reaction to make people feel good about themselves when I can't think of anything to say. I feel I must be wearing the same expression I do when elderly relatives kiss me, or past teachers ask me 'What I'm Doing With My Life'.

Jim kisses me on the cheek and quickly retracts into his own space. He holds my gaze for a little while, then clears his throat and offers his glass to me.

"What?" I sniff his glass.

"Water". Jim nods and raises his eyebrows, indicating that I should drink.

The Jedi Masters laugh at us. They love watching our droid-like communication.

I order a whisky from the bartender. He begrudgingly stops the head massage he is dishing out to a young Korean girl. She sucks on an orange segment, lodging it into her gums and smiling so that she looks like a clown. Then she flits toward the dancefloor, and the bartender stares me down as I drink.

Jim flicks my arm and shakes his head. He is trying to discipline me. It's not often that I get to see brazen Jim. I sort of like being told off by him.

"Slowly, *Lapin*."

"I can handle it. Besides, my dad told me to never be a whisky drunk."

I'm speaking too quickly and he is already confused.

"*Merci*." I mock a formal handshake, to which he responds with a huge grin and then a blush spreads across his cheeks and he snaps his hand back into his pocket.

"Come on, it's just a warm-up", and I pull him into the gap next to me, and order two shots of tequila.

"You are a bad woman." He is smiling now.

"Girl, not woman."

“-Woman.”

“...Girl...”

“No, woman.”

“-Girl.”

“-Woman.”

“-Girl.”

“-WOMAN.”

“Here.”

I hold out the shot glass, which he takes and we toast each other. He follows me as I lick the side of my hand, scatter salt, down the drink and grapple for the piece of lemon to suck on. There is a little spot at the back of my jaw which spasms when I drink tequila. With cringing faces and watering mouths, we both start laughing.

Jim orders a glass of water for me and another whisky for himself so that we are matched drink for drink.

We watch the Jedi Masters, who have worked their way into conversation with the Korean girl. They are transfixed, nodding and smiling their goofy smiles as they perform a side-to-side step dance in unison.

The girl speaks feverishly while holding both their hands, sometimes closing her eyes and keeping silent, then starting up again. She's wearing a pair of black vinyl dungarees, cut off at the point where her yellow-olive thighs part and her underwear begins to show. Her legs are clad in red and white striped stockings, met by a pair of military boots with extra-length rainbow laces untied and being ground into the floor as she steps on them. One of the straps

of her dungarees is left unbuckled, so it flaps down and reveals a leopard print bikini top underneath.

I look down at my own outfit, tug on my bra straps and pull one of my sleeves off my shoulder.

"Of course I don't live in a hut, man, *jislaaik!*"

I stop moving.

With my glass still raised to my mouth, I listen.

Jim beckons me toward his friends.

"No", I say, and shove my hand in his face.

"*Ja* we have all the lions and stuff, but we got cool stuff too."

Her hair skims my arm as she flips it over to one side.

Jim steps closer to me as I turn my body in toward the bar so that my face is hidden. Jennifer and I are standing back to back, almost touching.

She even laughs in Afrikaans.

Jim bends down so that his eyes can meet mine.

"Isobel?"

"Sssshhhhh!" I grab his hand and pull it down, dragging him into a hunch with me.

"Later, Jim, okay?"

He doesn't move.

"You must go away. See?" I am trying to push him away from me.

"What it is?" He is concerned now.

"Jim", I'm whispering, "Not now. Go to your friends."

"But-"

I'm hissing, "Leave me alone."

He stares at me and then walks away, realising that he is not going to get any more from me.

Niceness makes being insolent so easy.

It is my interactions with people that remind me why I am often silent.

"...in a magazine. So I entered, and I won it man, and now here I am. *Sommer* a international model hey! Flip man it's crazy! Oh thank you, wait, wait, *merci!*"

I turn my head and watch out of the corner of my eye.

Jennifer is holding a shot glass, her attention on a man opposite her. He has beautiful black-chocolate skin, and the whites of his eyes glow in the darkness. He holds out his glass and with the group around him, he cheers '*salut*' before downing his drink.

She mimics the toast and drinks hers.

"The last time I drank like this was my eighteenth birthday. I got *vrottronk* then, so watch out hey. I'm a crazy wild person when I get drunk. Like, my friend's brothers used to do this thing when we went out partying, and when we drove home they'd stop on the side of the road and just dive into bushes, what do you call it? I can't remember, but *jussus* they'd just get scratched and *lekker bevok*, and once I did it with them. I did! I swear! I just jumped into the bush with them! Adam, that's my boyfriend, he came in after me and was fixing my skirt and telling me to stop and pulling me back into the car and I just laughed so hard. So watch out for me when I'm *jolling*. I get in the zone man!"

She has her listeners captivated. They've obviously not understood a word and stand with mouths gaping. The beautiful man says something in French and the group laughs.

He beams at her and smacks the bar counter.

"Come, we drink again, you tell us of Africa."

My neck is cramping and I have to turn around.

"*Wel*", Jennifer pauses to take another shot, impressive in her boldness, "I live in this little town – hey, do you guys even know English?"

I guess that their silence means that they are nodding because she continues.

"Okay cool. It's like, this little *dorpie* next to this big place called Johannesburg. It's not that cool, but I have Adam and he's got a car and some of his friends live in the city so we go *kuier lekker* with them on the weekends."

Beautiful man's voice, "Do you have the, the, the monkeys?"

"- And the giraffe?" A girl's voice.

"We got all those", Jennifer replies, "but nobody really cares about them 'cause we've seen them all so much."

I push my hand into my mouth to cover my laughter.

Her hair hits me again. I shut up.

"Adam and his friends do all this *mal* stuff, like on my birthday, that same time I was talking about, one of his friends got these bull *balle* from his dad, who's a hunter-"

Another voice, "what is this?"

“Um, like the, um, like the testisicles hey, like from a bull, like a male cow?”

The beautiful man understands and explains to the rest, who laugh and utter their understanding.

Jennifer laughs, too. “Ja so they got them and they dared each other to eat them, and they did! Well, Adam didn’t ‘cause I said I wouldn’t kiss him if he did, but his friends ate them. They just stuffed it all into their mouths and there was this grey *kak* everywhere. It was so gross, flip man, we laughed so hard hey.”

The group follows Jennifer’s cue and laughs.

“That guy, whose dad’s a hunter, he’s like the only English speaker in our town. Everyone makes fun of him and calls him *soutpiel* but I talk to him in English so he doesn’t feel left out, plus my English is really good so I don’t mind.”

She stops talking at the same time as the bartender offers me another drink. I shake my head frantically and wave him off. He calls me a name which I can’t hear, and don’t much care anyway.

Another girl speaks and I twist to look at her. She is wearing glasses similar to the pair I have for writing. I quickly return to my position, though, because Jennifer has shifted and she could see me if she turned slightly.

“We get no people from Africa in Liege. I never know any person from South Africa before.” Her words are weighty and considered as she translates each one in her head before speaking.

“Ja well that’s why this is so cool, so I can teach you about my country hey! And then you can visit me one day too! I get an elbow in my back, and then

another, and a flick of fingers and I presume that Jennifer has pulled the girl into a hug.

Teach them about her country.

They fuss over her and laugh too hard at her jokes. Sometimes they stop her to ask for an explanation and then thank her and repeat new English words to each other.

I want to tell them that I studied language for six years.

The group grows bigger as friends are invited to meet Jennifer. She learns names and giggles and kisses cheeks like she is a celebrity. She tells stories of our country and when prompted she spouts incorrect facts which go unnoticed and then grows bored and changes the subject.

"We even get Gucci, hey", she says.

It's funny, this outsider thing.

How foreignness can make you interesting. How your foreignness becomes you. How what is real becomes what is fake or the other way round and nothing matters besides the adventure of the ongoing now.

No rules apply when you're wandering through contexts.

"But now listen, I'm meeting this chick here, she said I must come get my address book. It's such a mission without it." Then she describes me to the others.

She calls me 'fat-ish'.

It seems Jennifer's listeners have become her recruits.

They crane their necks and set about searching for me.

Time to move.

I am stalking away, wringing my hands and considering that we should be made to undergo tests before we are allowed to represent our countries, however informally.

'Fat-ish'.

Then Jim steps into my path.

"I'm sorry, I was rude, Jim."

He smiles and holds a small pill out in front of me. Small, yellow with a butterfly imprint.

"Okay?" He asks.

I nod my head and pop the pill into my pocket for later.

I'm perched on the stone steps just outside the church entrance, in shadow in case a member of Jennifer's book-hunting crew discovers me. People step over me to get in to the party. I light a cigarette and watch the smoke blend with the steam rising out of me in the cold air. I blow smoke rings then poke my finger through the centre of each one, stirring them into the night.

I can't stop thinking about Jennifer, and how my friends would mock her, and how ready I would be to mock her, and how mockery means nothing when you are alone.

I've had my glass tucked into the sleeve of my tracksuit top. I take a sip, and then lodge it in a crevice between two stones.

There is a small cemetery outside the church for ministers who have spent their lives in its service. Churches are always slightly amusing to me, having been raised in a family where attendance was governed by special occasions,

or who was willing to climb out of bed on the odd Sunday morning. It was only when we each turned sixteen, that my brother, sister and I were let into the secret of our parents' atheism, and were offered assistance as we set about forming our own sense of faith, no longer bound to the Christening ceremonies which our parents conducted in the name of responsibility, foundation and obligation.

The cold is making my nose run, and I wipe it on my sleeve as I skip off the step and tread through the rows of gravestones.

Seaside towns hold secrets. Something in my father changes as we approach Scottburgh. He speaks softly, with less authority than in our home. He is moving into his past. To his boyhood. He is searching his memories, and, it seems, leaving us behind. He is looking for his own father.

The gates to the Scottburgh cemetery have rusted over. There is no area to park our car, so we leave it straddling the roadside and grassy verge. It seems people visit the dead on foot here.

Dad unlatches the gate and ushers us in. We are afraid to break the silence, not wanting to offend those resting. We are the only visitors.

His father rests in a lot under the family name with his wife, as requested. They lie proud but not showy. No porcelain statues, no angels or banners to intimidate. Simply their names. Tasteful. Modest enough to know that memory is marked by the mind and experience.

We walk to his childhood home. It has been destroyed and rebuilt, but he describes the original structure for us.

Over here is where he and his cousin were put to work as punishment for stealing mangoes from the neighbour's tree.

Here where he was made to smoke an entire box of cigarettes, and then promise he'd never do it again.

Here, where he broke his arm by falling over the verandah railing, practising his Elvis impersonation for the town's Christmas pageant.

Here his mother sat by the record player and cried, listening to Billie Holiday on the day of my grandfather's death, until they made the music stop and put her to sleep.

Here he hid bottles from her as she drank more and more in the weeks that followed the death.

It is time to leave. My sister complains about the heat. Mom wants to get home to the dogs. My father stands in his seaside town. His eyes narrow. He turns away and takes a breath. Then he returns his focus to us, with a smile. I smile back and wish I did not understand him as much as I do right now.

I realise that I have stopped moving, and a group of men a little way off are standing, smoking and watching me. I should find Jim. I check that Jennifer's notebook is still in my backpack. It sits right at the bottom, shaded by the red glow of the bag's insides. I check that none of the pages have folded in on each other and when I am satisfied, I head inside.

The dancefloor is packed. People leap on each other.

Jim is standing right in the middle. I join him and look up toward the DJ. She is watching the dancers, her hand poised above the dials, waiting for the perfect moment to break a new rhythm.

A screen has been set up behind the DJ box between two gilt angels. On it, a giant eye rests, opening occasionally and blinking, then resting again so you

are not sure if what you have just seen really occurred, or whether the evening is beginning to get to you.

Both, I would say.

A water station lies to my right. Inside the Lady Chapel, the Virgin stands over an altar filled with candles, previously lit as prayers were uttered, now flickering as hands reach in for water bottles and pieces of fruit which rest on ice between the old donation boxes.

A siren builds. Then, a second of silence and four notes ringing over and over and over again, and mixing with a heavy drumming.

I see her again.

Jennifer and I are separated by a group of people.

She is standing in the centre of a ring of dancers, a group of men wearing identical orange overalls. Her legs are clad in thigh-high stiletto boots made of purple plastic that looks like it is smeared with oil, catching the light in hundreds of shades of greasy blue, indigo and black. She's overdressed, in a matching jacket and skirt of black and grey tweed. Her skirt just skims her thighs and swings in a ring around her as the pleats are wound into her spinning.

She dances out of time.

While the rest leap together, she claps her hands to each side of her, and tries to become a latino-bellydancer-anything-exotic fusion of what I guess she has seen on television. Occasionally she lets out a squeal and grabs one of the men close to her, twining her fingers into his and pumping him up and down in a peculiar dance.

Some might call this a polka.

I know it's *sakkie-sakkie*.

I'm trying to mask myself and find Jim, who has disappeared into the dancing. When I spot him, he's entertaining Jacques and Michel with a dance routine that involves him squatting and moving his knees inward and outward, while his arms cross over each knee and back again, so he dances sideways.

He stops immediately when I grab his elbow. He pulls me close to him and as we stand with our arms around each other, I watch Jennifer over Jim's shoulder.

I can't tell how much time passes. I'm finding it difficult to cover myself as I crane my neck to watch her. Sometimes she is a far-off dot, hidden by other dots that dance into my view.

My palms are sweaty. The notebook slips between my fingers as I feel for its shape in my bag. I wonder what Jennifer's Adam is doing tonight.

Jim and the Jedi Masters laugh at me as I stretch. Michel is wearing sunglasses, and he puts them on my face while we dance. I stop for a moment. Close my eyes, and think about what it would be like to meet Jennifer.

What it would be like to know her here. What it would be like to know her at home. Would I be convincing as I pretended to like her?

What do I do with her book?

I open my eyes and Jim is staring at me. I look across the dancefloor, where Jennifer is now sitting astride a man's shoulders. She is flushed from dancing and clumps of hair have come loose from her ponytail.

Jim wrenches my eyelids apart and checks my pupils. Convinced that I am sober, he pats me on the back and continues to dance.

And then I know what to do.

I turn away from Jim and stick my fingers into my trouser pocket. I pull out the yellow pill and drop it into the bottle of water.

Standing on tiptoe, I shout into Jim's ear, "Please do something for me."

"Anything *lapin*, what must I do?"

"Remember the South African girl who came to work yesterday? She's dancing over there." I turn Jim so he is facing Jennifer's direction and stand behind him while I point over his shoulder.

"No, I cannot remember- wait, on his shoulders?"

"Yes. I need you to help me."

"You were to give her something... a book? I did not understand so much what you were saying, but-"

I move into Jim's view and look him in the eye. "Please make sure she drinks this."

"Water, *oui*?" He's confused.

"Make sure she drinks this water Jim. Please. I have to go home. I'm very tired." I kiss him on both cheeks and push the bottle toward him, with raised eyebrows to emphasize the importance of his task.

"Why is this so -"

"She is not from here, I want her to be safe. Thank you, Jim."

As I leave, I receive a double high five from Jacques and Michel, who have managed to track the Korean girl down, and are taking turns dancing with her.

While I'm waiting in the queue to pick up my jacket, I look out to the dancefloor, where I see Jim making his way toward Jennifer. They begin a conversation. I'm tapped on the shoulder. The coat man holds out his hand and I retrieve my ticket from my backpack.

As I take my jacket, I turn back to see Jennifer sip from the bottle. She smiles at Jim and drains the rest of the water.

I begin my walk as the sun begins to rise.

When I am home, I play out the sounds of Jennifer's voice. I imitate her accent and remember how much I hate *Van Der Merwe* jokes.

I sleep briefly.

I don't bother to change my clothes even though I smell of cigarettes and the stale scent that comes from sweat and indoor heating. I walk down to the market which lines the smaller cobbled streets outside my apartment on a Sunday morning. Stalls have been set up by pensioners who load trestle tables with unwanted crockery, dog-eared novels and discarded textbooks, weathered Nintendo consoles which other pensioners will purchase, believing their finds exciting and fashionable for their bored grandchildren waiting at home.

I address a few people as I wade through their jumble, trying to communicate that I'm not looking to buy. A man about my age is inspecting a table loaded with boardgames, crocheted table napkins and old jewellery. He gasps and dives to the bottom of the heap, letting out a cheer as he reveals a chipped ceramic monkey. His long blonde dreadlocks hang down to his waist and tangle in his arms as he presses the figurine to his face and smiles. He rattles off a bargaining deal with the old man behind the table, a wild exchange of grunts and gesticulation.

Finally they agree on a price. He hands over one Euro and gazes at his purchase. The monkey is painted a horrendous mustard colour, and a hole has been moulded through its stomach. The young man strokes his beard, then pulls a pack of tobacco and rolling papers from his bookbag and slides them into the monkey's stomach.

"*Voi la!*"

Smitten with the new use for his buy, he ambles up the street, all the time gazing at the monkey. He joins his friends at a comic book stand and presents his buy to them. I slump down on to the sidewalk and my eye line meets the level of the men's legs. They stroll off, in their uniform of skintight punk denims tucked inside their high-top sneakers.

A man selling carpets and old paintings grows annoyed with me as I sit cross-legged on the pavement, trying to piece together a puzzle on which I can see Charlie Chaplin's face coming together. He wants me to buy or bugger off. I promise to return next week when my pockets are not so empty, and scuttle away as he waves his hand, shooing me with the pigeons that drop feathers and faeces across his stand.

When I have wandered enough I decide to return home to attempt sleep.

And as I turn in the direction of my apartment, I spot Jim and Jennifer, standing a little way off at the edge of the market, in front of a caravan selling food and hot drinks. Jim's hands are laden with two enormous waffles. You never really understand the concept of a waffle until you've eaten one in Belgium. Our instant mixes are just insulting, packaged in boxes baring cartoon characters in chef hats, hurriedly slapped into toasted sandwich makers. Belgian waffles are the size of sponge cakes, heavy and loaded with strawberries which ooze from the insides of *crème fraîche* mountains that fill your fists.

Snowflakes flutter over Jim's hands and mix with the dustings of vanilla sugar.

I move behind a telephone pole to watch them. Jennifer balances on the curb, flipping her feet backward and forward so she bounces up to the pavement and back down to the street.

Jim holds a waffle out to Jennifer, trying to persuade her to eat. Jennifer giggles and avoids Jim's eyes, continuing her bobbing on the roadside. She slaps her hands on her thighs and jive dances along the curb.

Jim is obviously at a loss and he looks around him – a hulking, desperate klutz with a woman he doesn't know, a language he cannot speak, and no one to help him. He scans the market and for a moment his eyes settle on me. I shift closer to the pole, twist my neck away from him and pull my hood over my face.

I allow a few minutes to pass before turning back to them.

Jim is now standing in front of Jennifer. The waffles are sagging over his hands and he swings his arms around him as he tries to punctuate language with gesture to be understood. He points to the sky, from which a heavier snow has begun to fall.

Jennifer is shivering, and dancing more dramatically now – robust, hippieish motions that carry her to the ground and back up again. She puts both hands on Jim's shoulders so he is forced to sway with her, politely battling to support two waffles and this pilled-up girl with whom he can't communicate.

I inch closer as Jim speaks. People throw me suspicious looks as I slide along the edge of the market, behind tables and to the rear of the waffle van, my head just skirting the corner so I can see them on the other side. They can only be three, maybe four, feet away from me.

"Where you live, Jennie?"

Jennie! Why is he calling her Jennie?

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"Pretoria. Jennifer Elisabet Britz. *Van Pretoria af!*" She shrieks, salutes and topples off the pavement. Jim pulls her upright and, having realized that waffles on a drug trip are a terrible idea, drops them in a trash bin, to the disgust of the woman inside the caravan who spits at him.

"It is cold. You must sleep. You need sleep. Come, come, where you live... please?"

Jennifer kisses Jim on both cheeks. "Jim. J-eeeeeeem. Jeem the fraaainchmaaaaon."

That is without doubt the worst French accent I have ever heard. Moron.

"*Ag ek wil jol, man.* Let's go somewhere. Let's go dance at the river! Let's go climb that flippin' statue!"

He plants his feet to the ground as Jennifer tugs on his arm, batting her eyelids which rein in a pair of manically dilating pupils.

"No." He sighs. "Good, you will come to my home. You sleep then we will remember to you where is your home."

She roars with laughter and kisses him again. "*Jussus* you're so flippin' cute bru. I love your little *vet magie*."

Jennifer pats Jim's stomach and I want to beat her for her rudeness. I grit my teeth to keep myself quiet.

"Come. Off we go. I live just close." Jim nods in the direction of his house, where he lives with his mother. I wonder how the very dominant woman will react to her son coming home with this girl.

Jim removes his coat and drapes it across Jennifer's shoulders. She disappears inside the bulk of camouflage print.

They begin to walk, but Jennifer immediately leaps into the path of a woman sashaying down the sidewalk with a small dog, its fur trimmed into stylish black poufs around a miniature jersey bearing a Louis Vitton emblem.

“Ah! Look! *Chien! Jislaiik* that’s flippin’ cute man! ” Jennifer speaks directly into the dog’s face, “*Bonjour!* I am English!”

Both dog and owner turn their noses away and hurry past with soured expressions.

Jim tugs Jennifer towards him and she kisses him yet again. They take a right turn into an alleyway shortcut toward Jim’s house.

I am craning my neck to watch them right up until they enter the front door, at which point Jim says something and they both laugh.

He puts his arm around her shoulders as they enter the house.

I’m jealous.

I follow their path up to Jim’s house. These houses are very narrow, with layer upon layer of rooms rather than the sideways spread we know in South Africa. I wait on the front step of a house two doors down from Jim’s, giving them enough time to settle inside.

Then I hear voices.

The front of Jim’s house is stone, with a red door and a large window to the left if you’re facing it. I’m able to stand on the doorstep and bend forward, masked by the post box protruding from the front wall, and I can look directly into the window.

Besides pressing my cheeks against piano keys, my favourite pastime is looking into people’s windows.

Jim is standing with his mother in the entrance hall. Domitille - we met once, when I arrived in Liege and Jim brought his strange new foreign work

companion home for a sympathetic welcome dinner. She is a greying woman, fiercely proud of her womanliness. She rages against her age.

When I first entered Jim's house, he hastily opened the front door while trying to whisper warnings about his mother, trying to prepare me for the spectacle of a woman I was about to meet.

Domitille likes to pretend that she is Frida Kahlo.

The windowsill is covered by a huge piece of silk, smudged in places with gold and red paint and it extends across the floor into the centre of the room, on which Domitille has placed large ceramic pots, art books and sketches of herself.

Her home makes a mockery of the politely refined world outside, with blue walls and orange ceilings and garlands of thorns and dried flowers strung across the doorways.

Jim is standing directly behind me on the other side of the door, so I can only see his hands as they move in and out of the frame of the window. Domitille is listening to him, playing with her hair and commenting back. I hear my name mentioned at one point and hold my breath. He is speaking too quickly for me to follow. Domitille pulls a section of hair from behind her ear and begins plaiting it as she nods and turns toward Jennifer.

Now I have a perfect view. Jennifer has been stroking the silk, lying across the floor with her feet up on an overstuffed couch over which a deep brown animal hide has been tossed. She gets up and looks at the wall facing the street. I pull back so she can't see me. Her eyes have grown heavier and she seems suddenly withdrawn. Drugs will do that to you.

Jim enters the room and Jennifer smiles at him. She points to something that I cannot see but remember from my visit - an enormous, vulgarly slathered oil composition of a tiger in mid-leap.

"My mother. She like to paint." Jim looks exhausted.

Jennifer giggles, then goes silent, chews on her fingernail and sits down. "Let's dance!" Then she stands again, removing her boots and rubbing her feet into the floor.

"No. Now you must try to sleep, please. Also me."

Domitille enters and drops a pillow and blanket on the couch. She smiles at Jennifer.

"*Bonjour*, I am English." Jennifer offers a handshake and whips her free hand up to her hair to neaten herself. Domitille looks to Jim, who explains that his mother refuses to learn English. Domitille speaks quickly, pointing to Jennifer, and then crosses her arms, looking to Jim.

"Her name Domitille. She is happy to meet you and - why you here, she want to know?"

"Oh *Here*, please tell her thank you, I don't know what's got into me, tell her – go. I got sick and then okay and I don't know."

Jim translates to his mother, who doesn't flinch. He tries again, "Why you here, in *Liege*? What you do here?"

"I'm modelling. Flip my jaw, it feels like a *moerse* – sorry. I am a model. I am here for a shoot with a photographer. I won this competition at home...through a magazine", she yawns and slaps her hand over her mouth, "*verskoon my*." Jennifer giggles again, then looks sad.

Once Jim has explained, Domitille seems satisfied, "*Ah, la la, tres bien*." And she disappears out of the window frame.

"You sleep now, we will get you home later, yes?" Jim nods and looks around the room, and then he also moves out of my view.

Jennifer lies back on the couch. She has flesh coloured tights pulled up to her thighs. Tucked into the elastic on her right leg is a photograph. She smiles at the picture as she pulls it out of her stocking and holds it to her chest. Then she closes her eyes and is still.

My cellphone rings.

It gives me a fright and I rush away from the door so I am not heard. I hate this thing, but my boss at the tourist centre insists I have it. I yank the phone from my backpack and look at the screen.

Jim.

I cancel the call and trudge back to my apartment.

In order to get to my door I have to pass Mylene's florist on the bottom floor. I don't want to make small talk today but she spots me. She approaches me, her hands full of tulips and cellophane, and I prepare to excuse myself from the invitation for a coffee or a cigarette or gossip.

But as she gets closer it becomes clear that she is not wearing her usual expression, which reminds me of silk scarves and eyelash curlers.

We are face to face and she holds my hands.

"Your sister, darling, your sister call Mylene."

I don't know why a woman born in Dublin so enjoys pretending to battle with the English language.

"She says you are to return her call. Call her now. Go, use Mylene's phone, you know where it is. Speak with your sister little *bella*."

I'm confused. Besides my monthly calls home, the only routine link with my family is via text messages, my insisted-upon handwritten letters, and reluctant email from my side, usually when I am pleading poverty and promising to repay loans.

I go to the telephone behind the counter and notice that Mylene is waiting outside her shop.

I have to forage through a pile of cut leaves and cast-off buds to find the receiver.

I punch in the digits. No answer at my sister's home.

"How long ago did she call? There's no answer."

"Try her mobile then. You must speak with her. You know numbers, call." She is hovering in the doorway as she speaks.

"What is it, Mylene? What's so urgent?"

"No, you speak with her, *bella*, not Mylene. Now."

So I dial my sister's cellphone. She answers on the second ring.

"Isobel?"

"Cate, what's wrong?"

"How much money do you have?"

And suddenly the urgency falls away, replaced by my defensiveness, against these questions, about my situation, when I am as unsure of what I am doing here as my siblings are.

"I have enough, I'm getting by. No I don't. No I'm okay. I'm living – this isn't any of your business. When are you going to stop seeing me as the baby? Sorry, how are you? Actually no, you can't just start with an interrogation. I've upped my job at the booth from weekends to all week, I might get a job at the newspaper when my French is better but I - "

"How much money do you have in your account, Isobel?"

"Enough to get by, C-a-t-h-e-r-i-n-e."

There is silence on the other end of the line. Then her tone shifts. She becomes softer.

"Mom is putting a transfer through now. You will have the money soon. With that money you need to buy a ticket home. You need to come home."

"Oh please, not today, I haven't slept, let's talk about this tom- "

"You need to remember to book Economy, Brussels to Jo'burg, and Jo'burg to here. Text us your flight details, if you have problems with booking, we'll do it from our side..."

"Cate?"

"And mom says there'll be extra to get the train from Liege to Brussels. Just do it quickly."

"Catherine. What's going on?"

I hear muffled voices and the receiver being handed over.

"Isobel?" My brother's voice.

"What the hell is going on over there?"

"You need to come home." A pause and then his voice breaks. "Dad died, Isobel. Dad's dead."

three

I am trying to write my way through the flight back to South Africa. I'm always surprised by how full airplanes are. I want to know why other people are going the same way as me at the same time.

I wish the flight was empty.

Thank God the flight is full.

I want to talk, I need to be alone. My head is pounding. My heart beats in my throat. Blood bangs in my brain. Skin hurts.

Dad's dead.

I'm angry that I care what they're serving for dinner.

I accept my tray from a stewardess who looks like her skin has been jerked back behind her ears. When she smiles, her lips stretch across her face and she shows too many teeth. I ask her for two mini-bottles of whisky, and the elderly man seated next to me chuckles. He winks and shoves his elbow into my ribs.

I push my service light and the stewardess, annoyed at having to heave her trolley back to me, leans right in and fills my view with her white unblinking grin.

"Can I have a headset please?"

Dad's dead.

She says nothing and spins on her heel, toward another stewardess with whom she mutters. They both look over their shoulders to me and roll their eyes. She fetches a pair of headphones and returns to me.

"You say you didn't want these", she says, still all smile and teeth.

Dad's dead.

I apologize and plant the headset over my ears, not even bothering to plug the cord into my mini-screen. There's no room in me for films or sitcoms or in-flight trivia. I just need to ensure I appear unreachable to my seat partner.

Dad's dead.

How do you pen your father's eulogy? What am I supposed to say, when all I want to say is what I'm not supposed to say, and I can't find anything to say at all?

We fly through the night. Everything is black outside my window. I heard they allow alcohol consumption on flights because it thins your blood. Helps with pressure adjustment or something.

Dad's dead.

And somehow I have eaten a meal and downed two whiskies from a plastic tumbler.

The stewardesses remove our trays and offer coffee as the plane goes quiet and people settle into their films.

Dad's dead.

I have attended one funeral and seventeen church services in my life.

I was born into a family running out of grandparents.

I slip into dreaming as the cabin lights go down.

While our mothers were taking tea beneath the oak trees overlooking the cricket pitch, we, that being my gang and I, would wait, pout-faced and aggressive, below the iron grate of Henry's tuck shop window with our pocket

money savings thrust out to stuff our mouths with niggerballs and cold Sparletta.

Henry regarded us with disdain. Dressed up in our smocked-gingham-tulle-billowing party outfits, made and forced on us by mothers devoted to the fashions of *Your Family* magazines, we would glower at him as our mouths blackened around the edges in our sweet-sucking frenzy.

His hands moved between sweet rack and cash tin, to the Niknaks and back again, and Henry would deliver his lecture on "the problem with little girls." Knowing that to endure his preaching meant access to sweets, we tugged on our hemlines to mask our grazed knees and muddied sandals and grimaced through his contempt for our behaviour.

Eventually, with the first team matches over, our mothers dragged our older brothers toward home to clean the grass stains off their pants. We followed, scooting our neon BMX bicycles away from Henry as he roared behind us, noticing the Chelsea bun we had conspired to steal.

We spotted Henry on the beachfront once, teaching his son to fish for shad on the shoreline, golf peak pulled low over his eyes so he would not be distracted by the pigeons and joggers and setting day around him.

I cried as he spoke with my parents. The day had grown too long for a seven year old loaded with ice cream and a real life meeting with Harry, my oversized dog hero from *Harry's House*, the programme that introduced me to traffic rules and respect for my elders. Henry handed me a niggerball and wagged a finger in my face.

It was in the years long after trips to the tuck shop, when I understood what it meant for a little white girl to demand a niggerball from an Indian man, that we learnt of Henry's death.

uniforms that should not have made it out of the 1970s. Navy blue with a paisley neck scarf that is frayed along one edge. Her hair clouds out from underneath her headset in coarse little bunches and she wears no makeup except for a purplish swipe on her mouth which she chews on, rolling the lipstick into balls of colour along her bottom lip.

"Yebo sisi?"

"I want to change this", I say, smoothing the notes out in front of her.

She stretches up to gather my money.

I feel embarrassed that I have noticed the sweat stains underneath her arms and turn my attention to the rest of the room while she clicks away at her computer keys.

The walls are coated in rough paint that feels like it may graze your fingers if you ran them along it too quickly. Cream and beige. A line of masks hangs to the right of the door. In the centre of the main wall a beaded impression of the South African coat of arms has been mounted and just to its left hangs one of those prints reserved for offices and south coast beach cottages, this one depicting a line of Impala looking startled beside a watering hole, a kitschy sunset streaked above them.

"Hundreds and tens?"

The top of her head sits cocked, just below the counter surface. I lean over so she can see me and nod my head.

She slides the notes into a machine and then counts them in front of me. Forty Euros. Three hundred and ninety Rand and some cents until Durban. I decide to try and spend it all.

Dad's dead.

She shows me where to sign and requests that I consult her should I need

anything in the future, in lines so rehearsed that the words have merged into each other and I don't understand the ending.

I snatch up my passport and ticket stub. Dad's dead.

Get through.

Three hours and fifteen minutes to Durban.

I find a seat in a restaurant with fake plants and coloured lights. The smoking section runs alongside the glass casing of the children's playpen in which a little boy and girl are pelting each other with plastic balls, disappearing now and then into a pit and then surfacing, arms laden with neon toy armour and swords which bend and fold over when they poke each other.

My waiter's name is Eric. Eric has round cheeks that are marked by reed scars and the occasional ingrown hair, where I would guess he has shaved with one of those cheap disposable razors. The kind that I use. Eric laughs often and for no reason and he thanks me many times.

I try to remember all the things I'd missed eating while I was away and realize that the thought of food makes me want to throw up.

So I spend two hours drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, watching the groups change at the table next to mine.

Eric checks on me frequently and for a bit of variation I order a beer as he is about to offer me another refill.

"Are you coming or going, miss?" He places a bottle on a coaster in front of me.

"I'm, well, I guess I'm coming."

"Coming home?" He wipes down my table.

"Yes."

"For good?"

I laugh and fold my hand into the hollow between the base of my neck and my collarbone.

"I don't know."

Eric smiles and leaves me alone until I ask for my bill.

Before I file into the queue for my flight, I notice a special running on imported chocolate in the duty-free. 'Purchase two mega-slabs and receive a third free.' White for gran. Milk for Catherine and Dan. Orange for Mom. Dark for Jack and Clare. I calculate how much money I will save each time I toss a slab onto the counter. I get pissed off halfway because I have to convert Euros back into Rands to understand the value of anything, making me feel like a tourist in my own damn home.

I decide to double up on everything and add two bags of cartoon-covered sweets for my nieces and leave the shop with a bulging packet.

My final flight is so fast I don't even notice it. We're fed and amused and landed just as soon as we have taken off.

I climb out of the plane and drink the city in. For a second my thoughts stop and my blood runs red again and I am home.

Durban has, in my absence, quite obstinately refused to change.

There is still a dirty fog hanging over the airport.

December is still sticky.

Palm trees still fence everything in.

The same men in the same yellow jackets are still standing with orange bats on the runway, shouting in thick accents and calling each other *bru*.

My brother is standing at the front of a crowd of people waiting to make their collections from behind the arrivals barrier. He spots me and walks over.

"Hey", I mutter, as he lifts my suitcase and bags off the trolley and begins walking to the exit.

Just as the electronic doors sense him and slide open, he stops.

"Sorry. Welcome Home."

We laugh a feeble laugh and he shakes his head. He pinches the sides of his nose and closes his eyes. He moves to hug me and we stand awkwardly between the doors, arms cramping while we try to hold each other and the packets I had hurriedly stuffed before leaving.

With my face pressed into his shirt I mumble, "Dad's dead", and he pulls away from me.

I've left an impression of my face in tears and gunge on his breastpocket.

On the evening of December fourteenth, as my parents were sitting down to dinner on the verandah to celebrate their thirty-third wedding anniversary, four men surrounded them and, with guns shoved into each of their necks, informed my parents that they were going to steal from them.

Police would later inform us that the men had entered over the wall connecting my parents' house to their neighbour, out of view from the road. No fingerprints or significant shoe prints would be discovered. Investigation into the time and duration of the robbery would be made, as suspicion of the whereabouts of the employed armed response company would reveal that

despite an alarm signal made during the one and a half hours that the house was under attack, no security presence would appear until well after the intruders had escaped.

My grandmother was asleep inside and my mother begged the men to allow her time to calm the old woman. As she was steered toward my gran's room by one man, another beat the two dogs until their barking ceased, a third questioned my father about the presence of money and guns on the property, while the fourth, younger than the rest, made loop-da-loops with his .38, swinging it in circles with one finger in the guard as he made a start on ripping open the Christmas presents that my mother had arranged beneath the tree.

My mother and grandmother were kept in gran's room. One man was stationed in the doorway and taunted them with threats. He looked away once, and mom managed to press the panic button next to gran's bed. The man returned his attention to her and suspected that she had done something. He noticed the button and knocked it off the wall with the butt of his gun, not wanting the leader to find out that he had been distracted from his job. He glared at my mother and stuck his gun in her face as a silent warning.

"Don't worry, old lady", he said to my grandmother, "we're not going to hurt you. We're going to shoot your children."

"Lucky people! You live in heaven!" The leader pushed my father into each room of the house, demanding that every drawer and cupboard be opened while he played with a harmonica that my father kept by his bed.

After an hour, the youngster stepped into my gran's room and tied my mother and grandmother at the ankles and wrists with my father's work ties.

My mother noticed that she was bound with the yellow silk tie which my father wore to my sister's wedding. My grandmother began to breathe very heavily and mom asked if she could be allowed to sit next to her mother, convinced that she was at the beginnings of a heart attack.

The men allowed this, but hit my mother once across the face as she raised her eyes and looked at them.

While the women were jeered at and my mother whispered reassurance to gran through her tears, my father was led into the main bedroom.

One man stood by the glass doors that look over the driveway and down to the road. He received a call on his cellphone, hung up and told the leader that they were almost out of time.

The youngest was ordered to pack my parents' clothes into suitcases and duvet covers, taking only branded items and sports gear.

The leader sent another through to remove mom and gran's jewellery and once he had their wedding and engagement rings, he noticed a safe in the back of my dad's cupboard.

The leader grew instantly furious and asked my father why he had lied.

My father tried to speak in a calm voice and promised that he had forgotten that the safe was there. He apologized and told the leader that the safe key was hidden inside my mother's dressing table.

The leader noticed the alarm and without saying a word, he walked over to the keypad and ripped it off the wall.

A car arrived outside and the men used my father's gate remote to let it on to the property. With the car pulled up on the lawn, just outside the bedroom doors, the men loaded televisions, sound systems, a computer and other appliances into the car.

The leader emptied the safe and as he was passing its contents to another member of the group he noticed the watch on my father's arm. He loosened the clasp, making sure not to damage the gold links and struggled to slide a cygnet ring off my father's pinkie finger, lodged into his flesh since it was given to dad by his mother on his twenty-first birthday.

With everything packed into their car, the men prepared to leave. They locked mom and gran inside the room and dropped the key in the passage.

"What work do you do, old man?" My mother heard the leader ask.

"I teach", my father replied as a tie was secured over his eyes.

"That's your work. This is mine. Do you understand?"

"Yes".

My mother prayed.

"I need to be sure you can't find us, and you have seen too much", he paused, "I'm sorry."

And the leader pushed dad to his knees, in the centre of the bedroom.

Police say my father was shot once, in the back of his head, at nine forty-five.

My brother tells me the details of mom's account during our drive home. I'm reading a newspaper article about it while he talks.

"They haven't caught anyone?"

"Not yet." He checks his blind spot and indicates right. "The house is going to give you a fright. You need to be careful because there's a lot of fingerprint dust everywhere. Cate's trying to clean everything but I think the police still need it."

"How did mom and gran get out?"

"Mom told the police that when she couldn't pick the lock, she just broke through the door. She used gran's bedside cabinet and just bashed through it. She's got bruises on her hands so I guess she punched too, at some point."

"And the neighbours?"

"Didn't hear a thing", he shakes his head, "until mom got out and screamed through the bathroom window. They called the cops."

We drive in silence for a while, both staring at the darkness in front of us.

"We're all staying in the house together. Don't ask them any details. Mom doesn't want to talk about it anymore."

"Okay."

He looks into his rearview mirror. "Guys came yesterday and replaced gran's bedroom door. There's a guard outside the property, even though I've had the alarm fixed. Cate wants him there. Don't be scared. The cops say a gang will never hit the same house twice."

"What do I need to do?" I fold up the newspaper.

"Mom and gran are sedated. The doctor's been around and the cops sent a counsellor to the house. Cate spoke to her, I think you should too."

"Jack. What can I do?"

"Well, the funeral was arranged while you were travelling. Help Cate. She's cooking for everyone. You can help with that or play with the kids. The doctor said we must keep an eye on her, it's not good for a pregnant woman to be under this much strain."

He holds my hand while we drive.

"Cry if you need to. Everyone will probably be asleep now. You have to sleep in the spare room, sorry, we're using your room and Cate's in with mom. Dan's family arrived last night, so he's camped up with them and the kids in the lounge. If you hear noises in the night it's Dan checking on Cate. If you're nervous you can come in with us. I put some sleeping pills next to your bed."

"I'm so sorry, Jack."

"I'm sorry too, Issy."

We turn into the driveway of my parents' house and Jack waves to the security guard. He rolls down his window and offers the man a cup of tea, which I offer to make.

"No. Take some time."

Jack takes my luggage from the car and walks behind me, checking the garden as we go. He locks the front door behind us and carries my things to the spare room.

Someone has moved a clock radio into the kitchen and left it playing. The dogs come to greet me. They sniff at my legs and lick my hands. One walks with a limp and squeaks as the other pushes past to get closer to me.

"They hit her. I took her to the vet this morning. She's fine, just bruised." Jack walks through to the kitchen and switches the kettle on. "Want some tea?" He's opening and closing cupboards, trying to find things.

"Yes please. Try the cupboard next to the oven. That's where teabags used to be."

There is a lamp on in almost every room. The dogs stick close to me as I venture down the passage. I start with the study. Dad's desk is bare apart

from the telephone and a few cords from the computer and hi fi, which jut out of the plug socket. His papers have been gathered into a pile, and sit in a corner with his briefcase.

Each room holds traces of the robbery, an empty space where a television used to sit or coats of fine black fingerprint dust or just the quiet.

My parents' bedroom is at the end of the passage. I open the door and stick my head in. There is a new cover on the bed. I look for stains on the carpet but there aren't any. Cate must have got in here and cleaned any memory away.

My mom looks tiny. She's lying on her side so I can't see her face. Cate lies close to her on the side nearest me, facing my direction. Her pregnant belly is much bigger than I'd expected. She sleeps with a hand on it.

I pad around the bed and crouch down so that I am looking into mom's face.

She opens her eyes as I stroke her hair.

I kiss her forehead and we stare at each other for a long time. She manages a small smile.

Her eyes drop closed again.

I stand in the room for a while watching them sleep and then Jack steps in and holds a mug out to me.

He takes me to the spare room and shows me extra blankets and towels.

"I know where things are, Jack." And I rub his back and tell him to go to bed.

"I'll wake you in the morning... I love you."

"I love you, too."

Jack steps into the room across from mine and clicks the door shut. I hear him whispering to Clare and getting undressed.

I sip my tea and dig in my backpack for the key to unlock my suitcase, collapsing onto the makeshift bed that has been set up for me on the spare room floor. I pull out a pair of tracksuit pants and a t-shirt to sleep in, and the only sensible thing I own, a plain black cocktail dress bought for my graduation. I lay the dress out on the floor and rise off the mattress. With my last gulp of tea I swallow the pill which Jack has left for me.

Then I tiptoe down the passage and flip on the bathroom light. I strip down and get into the shower. Lathering soap over myself I stand, for ages, inside the jets of water.

I play the story over in my head. Over and over and over.

I remember the drive to my grandfather's funeral when I, a child old enough to feel the gravity of death but too young to understand the ceremony that surrounds it, sat with a box of sherbet in the back of the car growing impatient, needing the toilet, waiting for someone to speak.

The entourage drove through the Scottburgh streets with headlights on and just before we turned off the main road a group of municipal workers mending the electricity lines stopped their work and held their hats to their chests as we led the hearse toward the cemetery.

I'm still waiting for someone to speak.

"...John fourteen, verses one to four. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to where I am going".

The priest is the same man who married my parents. They used to tell me he made their wedding hip, this holy man with enormous bellbottoms and a dog collar.

We used to see him at Christmas, when my parents would choke back giggles and elbow each other as he opened each year's sermon with, 'This is the day that the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it', speaking through his nose so his words merged into each other in a high pitched slur-snort.

Even after so many years, my mom and dad behave like teenagers in love.

The priest is thinner now and his hair has turned white. He lowers his hands on to the lecturn to still the papers that tremble and scratch against each other in his grasp. His fingers have taken on the spasms of arthritis and curl into each other like twigs, or claws.

The thing about funerals is watching the family being watched. Each move we make sends a ripple of whispers through the room. Everyone is waiting for my mother to break down, to wail and throw herself on to the coffin.

But she just sits.

Very still in the front pew.

A vacant smile is spread across her face and with her left hand she is rolling the pearls in her necklace between her thumb and forefinger.

My sister and sister-in-law flank her, one with a hand on mom's leg, the other wrapped around her shoulders.

Jack is standing above us. It is either my ego or my petulant temperament as the youngest child which has been biting at me all day, wanting to match my brother's duties as head of the family. We have moved through the morning in a battle for phone calls and invoices from florists.

Earlier, I walked in on him and a man dressed in a black suit with a tiny emblem of the funeral parlour engraved on his tiepin. The man is kind of stooped and pathetic looking. He stands too close to me, offers condolences, and nods through Jack's instructions with his eyes half-closed and his head lolling.

"Is it going to be an open or closed casket?"

The man holds my hands between his to shush me.

I am tempted to slide my hands out and slap him.

As he turns back to my brother I notice that his inner ear is lined with blackheads.

How old are you?" I hear myself say.

He looks at my brother and straightens the knot of his tie.

"Well, gosh, well I'm thirty-eight."

"Isobel", Jack can always tell when I'm looking to argue, "go check on mom."

"Cate's with her. She's fine. All everyone's doing is talking about nothing. Some lady who worked for dad in nineteen voetsak is telling Cate about breastfeeding and formula and boob pumps and –"

"Isobel."

"What?"

He looks so tired. "Just not today. Try be sensitive, okay?"

"Sensitive?"

"Just don't be quite so much... you... today. Please."

"Well, give me something to do then."

He grips the top of my arm and clenches his teeth very hard.

"I'm not asking. I'm telling you."

When he lets go, the prints of his fingers have turned my skin white.

The pathetic man interjects. "So sorry, so that's an open casket?"

I speak across him. "Dad would never have wanted an open casket. He wouldn't even want to be in the room. He wouldn't –"

Jack locks his eyes with mine. He holds out his arm and leads the funeral man away from me.

Now, in the service, I notice he's had the casket closed. I look at Jack, tracing the outlines of the dark grey tiles on the floor. He notices a scuff on his shoe, licks his thumb and reaches down to clean it.

Then he looks up to check on our mother again and catches my eye.

We stare at each other and he tries to smile. Shakes his head. Looks away.

Then the priest is calling me up to the lecturn.

My sister's crying. A man at the back is cleaning his glasses. A couple about midway whisper to each other. A woman in a green *doek* is sweeping the stairs outside.

"Uh..." There's a small microphone prodding out of the lecturn and I lean in to it.

"Um." I wish I could cry or something.

"I found this book of my father's that he used to teach with. It's really old and the pages are the colour of teabag stains and it's got that smell, that smell which everything in my parents' house takes on once it's banished to the spare room. For those of you who have visited them, and I'm guessing it's a lot of you, that's the first door on the left down the passage. It's probably always been closed because they don't want guests having to deal with a tumble dryer or camping gear or our old BMX's falling on you."

People laugh, but quickly return to their silence.

"I think he must have taught with this, because it's full of his handwriting." I hold the book up.

My mother lets out a sob, one of those low animal howls from her stomach. Cate moves closer to her and a murmur moves through the crowd like golf commentary. A man in the second row puts his hand on mom's shoulder and drops his handkerchief at her side. Mom looks down and moves the hankie away from where it has landed on the programme, covering my dad's face.

Then I am speaking, about families, and love, and how we are made real by the people who care for us.

And still, I'm not crying.

We have never been a large family. It was only when my sister became a mother that holidays moved from adult attempts to celebrate rituals intended for children to the real thing, with actual small people. My mother and father are both only children. My mother has cousins whom we have met a few times in forced reunions.

"My goodness, Isobel, what an attractive young woman you've become!"

Audrey, someone's grandmother or aunt or cousin to whom I am vaguely related, is speaking. She and her husband Fred are beaming down at me and she pulls him onto the couch where I am sitting, hand firmly clasped around his upper arm.

I smile and slide to the edge of the couch. They perch on one side and I sink further back into the other. We sit there like awkward scatter cushions with nothing to do but smile at each other.

Audrey opens her mouth to speak and, realizing that she has nothing to say to me, closes it again. Fred clears his throat and leans past his wife. He nods at me and raises his eyebrows. He continues to nod his head, up and down, eyebrow raise, up and down, smile, eyebrow raise.

My sister hurries past us with a tray of food.

I take my chance.

"Cate, do you need help?"

"No it's under control."

Me, more urgently, "Really, you sit down, I can take care if it", I mimic Audrey's smile and pitch, "She hasn't stopped since we found out, poor thing."

Audrey and Fred shift in their seats. They are feeling pity and sadness for this family torn apart, and admiring the resilience with which we pull through and lend support to one another.

'Thank God it wasn't us', they are thinking.

Audrey had clucked to Fred about inevitability and security when they arrived at my parents' house.

"We knew to retire in a safer area", Audrey said to Fred, as Fred nodded his standard nod and raised his eyebrows and thought about calling a board meeting to add another security guard to patrol their complex.

"Catherine, let me help, seriously".

"Thank you, Issy but I'm fine".

Shit.

She clears a space on the coffee table and lays a pile of sausage rolls in the centre.

"Isn't South African party food funny?" I say, leaning forward to take a sausage roll.

"This is hardly a party, dear", Audrey's lips tighten as she straightens her collar and looks to Fred for support.

Fred clears his throat and continues his head wobble, probably thinking about the cricket or times with the boys in the good old days.

"Things wrapped in pastry, mini things, mini quiches, mini pies, mini samoosas, mini sandwiches. I have never found a sandwich filling that I like. Everything tastes old when it's squashed between bread and butter. I don't know why anyone bothers, really, everyone just eats it because it's there and then gets annoyed when they get home because they're too full to eat their own food that tastes better."

I'm not bothering to gauge their reaction to me.

"Cheese things aren't bad though. Melt enough cheese on anything and it's bearable. And cocktail sausages got me through, like, two years of university." I pause to tear the pastry away from the meat and pop it into my mouth. I throw the sausage in before I am finished chewing. "We're just weird, you know? Putting things on toothpicks. My mom always used to give us ham and gherkins and pickled onions in our lunchboxes at school. She'd arrange them in very specific ways so every time we unwrapped the tinfoil at break, there'd be this weird lunch meat composition waiting for us." I laugh. "Once she rolled a piece of ham around a big gherkin and positioned an onion on each side so it looked like a pair of balls and a penis, and gave it to my dad for lunch. She was so delighted telling us on the way home from school that he'd called her at home telling her about this terribly embarrassing moment as he revealed his pornographic lunchbox to the other lecturers." I laugh again. "She always used to do stuff like that to us."

I look across to my mother, sitting in a corner of the dining room, a full plate of food on her lap. My brother stands a little way off, watching her.

"Well goodness, aren't you an eccentric girl!" Audrey's fingers tighten around Fred's arm.

I smile as sweetly as I can, and wonder how I look.

"Bloody hell! You girls are healthy looking, aren't you?" A red-faced man in khaki shorts and a matching shirt is dragging my sister out of the kitchen and towards me.

Catherine wipes her hands with a dishtowel and looks to me for help. Uncle Mickey, old friend of my parents and my theoretical Godfather, who used to post me cheques for twenty-five Rand on birthdays until I turned eighteen.

"My God, you just both have this glow. You are really bloody, healthy-looking, I can't believe it." He strokes his beard and I remember how I used to believe he was Father Christmas until he got skin cancer and started to look old.

"I mean it's just bloody good to see. Not like those models all the girls your age worship. Damn right", he lets out a laugh, a single loud burst, "Good to see girls who enjoy a plate of food. Bloody good!" He wallops Cate on the back like a rugby buddy.

"I'm pregnant, Mick", Cate says, with a flat expression on her face.

"Oh. Right. Right, right, right. Of course! Congratulations!" Uncle Mickey looks across to me, "Well what's your excuse, my girlie?" Then he roars with laughter and wanders toward the trays of food.

Cate shakes her head and stalks back into the kitchen.

Then a hand is on my neck, half-squeezing, half-stroking, familiar. I know who it is immediately.

"Wanna go for a walk?" Michael whispers, so close to my ear that I can feel his lips and that same warm breath.

I excuse myself as Audrey is brushing crumbs off Fred's cardigan.

I pass my mom on the way out of the house and ask if she needs anything. She hands me her plate and points to a glass of water on the dining room table.

I hand it to her and say that I am going for a walk. I kiss her cheek.

There is a park across from the house, running parallel to the road until the fence of a new housing development cuts it off. I cross the road and jump the wooden railing.

It is turning to that point in the day when the heat disappears and the blue sky becomes a dirty beige one and the thunder rumbles, low, sporadic, sounding like someone dropping metal stacks in the distance.

The grass has been worn away and patches of dry soil cloud up around my feet as I walk, leaving a sandy residue on my ankles. A jungle gym stands on one side and an obstacle course on the other, made from tractor tyres and dowelling rods for the dog training classes on Saturday mornings.

I head towards the jungle gym, where the grass is a little overgrown and the yellow buds and white wisps of dandelions mix with reeds as the edge of the park inches down into the river.

I stand in front of the swings waiting for Michael to catch up to me. When he does, he grabs me and holds so tight I feel he may squash all the breath out of me.

"I'm so sorry", he whispers into my hair.

"I know."

He rearranges his arms around me so that my chest is drawn closer into his and I have to bend my neck right back to fit.

He cries. I can tell by the way his chest moves in and out. We stand, hanging on to each other, while the small shakes of his weeping move us.

Then he pulls back and looks at my face. He wipes under my eyes at tears which aren't there.

While he sniffs and rubs his face with the cuff of his shirt, he asks me how I am.

"You know. Shit."

I sit on one of the swings and he takes a seat on the grass next to me.

"When did you get home?"

"I landed last night."

"What time?"

"Late."

"You must be buggered."

"I dunno."

"You could've asked me to fetch you, Isobel." I remember how he only ever called me by my proper name. He said 'Issy' made me sound like a Jewish lawyer.

"Jack was there. They made the plans for me." I sway backward and forward, staring down at my shoes. "Thanks", I add.

"I want to help. But I'm too scared to talk to any of them. I sent flowers..." He stops and looks away from me, back to the house, "...I can't, I'm just, I'm so sorry."

We sit together for a very long time, not speaking. I keep swinging, back and forth, sometimes reaching a little higher and then braking, shoving the tips of my shoes into the ground, then starting all over again. He raises his knees up to his chin and wraps his arms around them. Chewing on a piece of grass and playing with his shoelaces, he looks like a little boy dressed up in his father's clothes.

When it starts to get dark, he says, "I wrote you letters."

"I know", I say, and look up to the sky as it changes colour.

"Everyone said you only wanted letters, no email."

"Computers don't really fit in there."

"Why?" He looks at me.

"Well, I suppose, I'm only interested in the things which add to the beauty. Technology kind of ruins it."

He laughs. Really quietly.

"You should get a typewriter. A cool old one."

"Maybe I should."

"I'll buy you one, and then you can dedicate everything you write on it to me."

"Why did you come, Michael?"

"Because I loved your father. I loved your family and I loved you and... how could I not come? I wanted to see you."

"Why did you write?"

"What?"

I stop swinging and turn to face him.

"Why did you write to me?"

Michael looks at his hands and considers his words very carefully. Then he speaks, almost into his lap.

"You didn't even tell me you were leaving. I didn't know where you were. One week I see you, and then I hear you've packed up and gone to Belgium. Belgium, for God's sake, why the hell would anybody move to Belgium?" He almost looks disgusted.

"It's beautiful."

"So are a lot of places."

"Why do you care?"

We both know I'm being childish. He sighs and rips up a clump of grass.

We return to the silence. Eventually he laughs a kind of frustrated, giving-up laugh.

I speak slowly.

"My dad always wanted to go. Have you heard of a writer called Georges Simenon?" He shakes his head. "Well, he wrote these novels that my dad really liked and he always used to tell us stories about him. I read this article that said he had slept with ten thousand women."

Michael whistles. "Lucky guy."

"And those women wanted to be with him because he was a writer."

"You don't know that."

"So I thought, go to a place where writers are that important –"

" – So you can sleep with ten thousand women?"

I throw him an angry look and he shuts up.

I swing a little more. "Plus, they're all about chocolate. Writing and chocolate. Good combination."

"So how's that going?"

"What?"

"Writing?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I don't care", he replies, and I get angry again.

"I don't have a story yet", I pause, "it'll come."

He has grown tired of talking about my work, as most people who get close to me do.

"So how'd you get there?"

"My folks gave me the money."

"You spoilt bitch."

We both laugh and I say, "Ja, I know."

Then he gets up and stands in front of me.

"You should have warned me you were going to leave."

He holds the chains of my swing.

I look at him for a really long time and think about the days I cried for him and how he closed me up and how eventually all I had was the want to run away.

"You should have, too".

Then it all gets far too teenage and obvious and I feel like I can't breathe.

I push past him and run toward the house.

The next few days are spent giving statements and filling in case numbers on reports. My mother goes through each room, trying to remember what was there before and what has gone as she makes list upon list for the insurance company. Each time one of us offers to help, she screams at us and begins to cry.

We call the counsellor, who suggests that this is a coping mechanism and that we should allow her to continue.

Gran's age works in her favour as her memory fades quickly. She keeps asking us how many pills she is allowed to take, barely remembering why she is taking them at all, and we monitor her access to the box of sedatives, now placed in the centre of the kitchen counter for anyone who battles to sleep. She spends her days as she always has, in her little sitting room next to the study, watching cricket or British news reports on a TV loaned to us by a friend so that we have something to break the silence in the house.

Sometimes I sit in with her, pretending that I am watching too, but I find it hard to focus on anything and I grow unfairly irritated with her and have to leave.

I go for walks.

Each day's silence is punctuated by somebody crying. Mom, or Cate, sometimes Clare. I hear Jack alone in his room at night and retreat behind my bedroom door when he emerges with a bloated face and renewed determination to organize us all.

On the sixth day after the funeral, the telephone rings and Jack calls me from my station at the front door, where I stand and speak with neighbours, receiving their donations of cottage pies and grocery packs.

"When did you last shower?" he asks, with the telephone receiver pressed into his shoulder.

"I dunno, shut up."

"You don't look good. I think it's your landlady."

I grab the 'phone and push him out of the room.

"Hello?"

"*Bella*. It's Mylene." Her accent is not nearly as strong as usual.

"Hi Mylene."

"How are things going? We all think of you so much."

Given my unsocial tendencies, I wonder whom she means by 'we all'.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm alright. Thank you." I cough and kick the door to the study closed as my nieces hurtle down the passage, fighting over one of the teddy bears from my mother's collection.

"Oh you're crying. It's okay, *Bella bella*, you let it out."

I don't bother to correct her. "How are you?"

"Everything is good here, but we talk about you now. Your friend came to see you."

"Jim?"

"Nice boy", she says, "I tell him all about it. He's so sorry. His eyes, they just welled up for you."

A sick feeling clogs my throat.

"And a nice girl was there, now, what was her name? Let me see –"

"Jennifer?" I know instantly that I'm right.

"*Oui Oui*, Jennifer. A South African girl, like you. Nice girl too."

"I don't know her", I mutter.

"Now my darling, I can't speak for long, but I have something to tell you. For whenever you are ready, for whenever you need, I have put some money into your bank account."

"Mylene, no."

"It is not a gift. I just put back all that money you gave Mylene for rent and then she spent so much time sitting inside your flat that she owes you rent now!"

The accent's returned.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing, *Bella*."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. It went in today, I don't know when you will have it cleared, but it is there. For when you need to come back."

"Thank you, Mylene."

"No, no, *Bella*. Now you kiss your mother from me, yes? And we speak again soon."

There is a click as she hangs up her telephone and the line goes dead.

For when I go back.

I hadn't thought of that.

Jack is leaning against the kitchen counter while Cate and Dan prepare dinner. Each time Dan slices a vegetable to add to the salad, Jack swipes it off the chopping board and pops it into his mouth.

Clare is playing with the children in the lounge. Mom is sitting on the couch watching them, wearing her same vague expression and pulling at a tissue that she has tucked into the sleeve of her blouse.

"So what did they say?" Cate narrows her eyes and holds a piece of paper up to the light as she battles to read mom's handwritten *lasagne* recipe. The freezer is now crammed with dishes from friends and virtually every household on the street because Cate insists on cooking all our meals herself.

"Well", Jack straightens up and puts his hands into his trouser pockets, "they haven't caught anyone."

"And they don't think they will", I say, looking to Jack as I slide down the cupboards beside him and sit on the kitchen floor. I notice the smell of the rubbish bin.

"There isn't enough evidence to accuse anyone of anything."

"Typical", Dan says and slams the knife into a carrot.

"The most we can do now is request that the police investigate the security company."

"And until then? What do we do? How do we make sure we're safe?" Cate shoves me over to one side and reaches into the cupboard for a casserole dish.

"We're with a new company. I'm keeping the guard on. The whole road has agreed to hire him so he'll be patrolling and we'll all split the costs." Jack turns to the counter and reaches for a glass. "We don't go out at night. And we make sure everything is locked. Everything."

Dan passes him a beer from the fridge and hands the salad bowl to me to put on the table, which I do, and promptly fetch myself a beer too.

Then Jack says, in a quieter voice, "But we need to discuss mom and gran."

Cate turns from the stove and snatches my beer bottle. She takes a swig and Dan reprimands her, returning it to me.

"Clare and I think they should live with us. You two already have the kids and we have more room anyway. We could sell this house and build a cottage if gran wanted, or if mom wanted, or, shit, I don't know."

"Mom won't want to live with you guys. It'll make her feel old", I say.

"Well what do you suggest, Isobel?" Cate shoots a pointed look at me as she places the *lasagne* in the oven.

"She's right, Cate." Mom surprises us at the kitchen door. "Thank you all so much but we won't be going anywhere. This is our house."

"No mom, you're not staying here alone. Not a chance."

"Catherine, the last time I checked I was still your mother. Now, you have never treated me like a child before, so you needn't start now."

"You need to think about this, mom", I say, moving to her. "This is a big house for two of you. And all the memories are here – "

"You're right. The memories are here. All the memories of a life your father and I built together for a very long time. Some of the times in that life were hard work, so I'm not just going to give it all up. It doesn't change anything. I love him." Tears shine in her eyes. "And I'm not going to forget him."

"Mom – " Jack holds out his hands to her.

"No Jack." She lifts her chin, such a proud woman. "Thank you my boy, but we're staying here. It'll take some time to adjust, and you're all very welcome whenever you want, you know that, but this is my home. Now, no more discussion about that. Who's going to pour me a drink?"

When dinner is ready, we move to the table and take our seats. I have taken gran's usual chair so I'm moved to another side, and as the seven of us sit around the square table we notice the empty seat beside me. Mom stares at it, and each face in turn looks toward the vacant spot where dad would have been. Without saying anything, and while Cate begins to dollop steaming

servings of food on to each plate, I get up and move the chair to a corner of the dining room. Cate apologizes for the *lasagne* that she has overcooked, Dan reassures her, and the children distract us by annoying the dogs, which are trying to sleep beneath the table.

Then we eat in silence. The house and the dinner smell so sad.

"How was Michael, Isobel?" Cate asks me while picking one of her daughters up and positioning her on her lap to be fed from Cate's plate.

"Fine, I think".

"It was nice of him to come." My mother is trying to make me speak.

I nod, and push my food around. I squash a noodle into my plate, so that it oozes up between the prongs of my fork.

"What's he been up to?"

I look up and meet six faces waiting for a response. "I didn't ask. It wasn't really a good time to catch up. Clare, can I have the salad please?"

Clare hands me the bowl and asks about Michael.

"Michael and Isobel were together through university", Cate interrupts, "until Michael broke her heart." She folds a lettuce leaf into her mouth, "That's why she left."

I fix my eyes on Cate and ask her daughter to inform her mother that it is impolite to speak with her mouth full.

"He turned out to be a bastard. Issy cried for months."

"Catherine", my brother warns.

"She thought they were going to get married and then, out of the blue, he just dropped her. We all tried to help, but she just said she was tired all the time and she never wanted to do anything. She just stayed in her room and pretended to write – "

"I wasn't pretending."

"Let's be honest", she continues, "You can talk about this now, it's been ages. We bought you journals and they just sat empty." Then she turns to Clare, "You and Jack got married just after mom and dad told her she could go overseas, so you never really knew her like that, when she was depressed."

I go on loading vegetables on to my plate until it is piled high.

"Dad took her to see a doctor. It didn't make any difference. They put her on antidepressants, but she said they made her feel worse. We told all her friends she was just tired, from university."

Clare nods and looks uncomfortable and we can all tell that she's searching for the right thing to say, the way that people do when they're let in on a family's secrets and begin to understand what they've married into.

"So mom and dad let her go overseas, to write. She could choose anywhere she wanted as long as she came home with a finished book. Jack and I had to start work straight after we finished studying, Issy got a holiday." Cate laughs and Dan rests his hand on her lap, straddling the line between being an outsider and being married in and therefore having a right to get involved.

Jack is resting his chin on his hands, which he has folded into fists. "She needed a break."

"Oh I know, I know. It's fine, it's always been that way with Isobel though, hasn't it?" She's trying to get Jack on her side.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, Issy", he says.

I slam the salad bowl down and reach for the dressing. "I'm not. I just think it's interesting that she enjoys this so much."

Cate's voice becomes a little softer. "Of course I'm not enjoying it. I just want to make sure you aren't getting any ideas again. Do you think I didn't notice how long you stayed out with him the other day? I just want you to remember how much he hurt you." She starts rocking the little girl on her lap as she falls asleep. "You can't get attached again."

I laugh and shake my head.

"Now girls, let's not fight please." Mom folds her napkin and leans across to everyone's places, rearranging the dessertspoons which I have set incorrectly.

"I'm not going to get attached, Catherine, even if I wanted to." I pause. "I'm going back."

Everyone stops.

Mom stacks gran's plate on top of hers and tells me that she thought I would stay.

"...After everything that's happened", she says.

And then I feel the worst guilt I have ever felt.

A long silence.

"No mom", I grin, "I'm just going back to fetch the rest of my things."

As I watch her relax, I know I'm lying.

Cate heaves a sigh and claps her hands together. "Well that's settled then! Issy, let's get the pudding out."

"I'm not finished", I say, pointing to the mounds of lettuce leaves.

"Rubbish", she declares, "you're not eating that, you're trying to be difficult. And don't point with your fork, it's rude."

"Are there peaches?" Gran says, tuning back into the room, "I do love a little ice cream and peaches."

Jack laughs and pats her hand. "I'm sure we can manage that, gran."

My mother rolls her eyes and goes to retrieve her box of cigarettes from the kitchen, pulled out from their hiding place behind her baking things. We let her smoke without complaining lately.

"I think I'll have one too, mom", I say, and raise my eyebrows at Cate to warn her against any objection to my smoking.

"I do love a nice pudding", says gran as Cate places a bowl in front of her.

The next morning I visit the bank to find out about Mylene's money. Within three days it has been cleared.

On the eleventh day after dad's funeral, I am sitting in the travel agent's office and booking my return flight. My father had lectured the woman's son, so she gives me a special deal and gets me a cheap flight without having to pay airport taxes.

I get one of the last seats on a plane set to depart on the weekend.

My siblings have begun to wean themselves off the protective camp we've set up, and return to their normal lives. On the first night back in their respective houses, Cate calls as I am about to fall asleep to tell me she is on her way to the house.

"I just keep dreaming about it", she murmurs.

Mom agrees to take visitors, and people flood into the house. There isn't a moment in the day when I don't find her sitting in a sunny spot on the verandah or hovering on one of the lounge chairs with a guest. She drinks tea with them and accepts homemade biscuits and muffins from carefully packed ice cream containers bought in wicker baskets by the ladies who come to see her.

My father's colleagues put a collection together for the family and arrive, one evening, with a bouquet of flowers and a cheque made out to mom. Slowly, the insurance claims begin to process and Jack makes treks between brokers and factory outlets as he replaces everything that has been stolen. New televisions replace the old ones, and we secretly thank God that we have something to dull our minds into sleep each night, now that the doctor has taken the sedatives away.

The counsellor checks on us. She gives mom a journal and a book on dealing with trauma. We talk to her about what we are feeling and are told to give in to the emotion. We try to do as we are told, to share our thoughts and to keep talking and never to resent each other.

Mom is, for the most part, astonishingly composed. She is occupied by visitors and the rituals of grief, and when she is left alone she sits in her bedroom with her hands folded neatly in her lap, watching TV or flipping through magazines.

Once I catch her standing in her bedroom doorway, staring down at the carpet and another time she jumps as I offer help while she is boiling potatoes in the kitchen.

I hear her talking to dad when she is in bed.

Cate has begun to give some of his clothing away, but when she is discovered, mom screams and will not talk for the rest of the day.

We do not dare to go outside at night.

Neighbourhood Watch holds daily meetings as the community agrees that working together is the only solution to a difficult time. We do not attend.

By the time the weekend arrives, my escape becomes desperate and I can't reach the airport fast enough.

four

Flying has lost its novelty.

When I first left South Africa, I marvelled at the routines of overnight journeys. Film guides and plastic tumblers filled with anything I wanted, whenever I wanted. Free pens. Watching the different ways in which people deal with the process of being in transit.

I remember listening to the other passengers as they introduced themselves to their seat partners. It is an incredible thing to watch two people grow so quickly familiar.

Might as well open up, they think, if we're gonna be drooling on each other's shoulders.

I listened as a middle-aged woman told a younger man that she had just found her husband in bed with another woman, and the man respond with the story of his mother's cancer, and giving up his job so that he could be with the family.

The economy passengers crane their necks to sneak peeks through the curtains as stewards move into the business class section to deliver newspapers or meals with real cutlery. They mutter about full body massages and call themselves poor sods while writhing in their seats and jabbing their knees into the unlucky people in front of them.

Some people come prepared so that they do not notice the discomfort of the trip. With their carrybags clutched to their chests, they wait in line at the toilet door and stuff themselves into the minute cubicle to change their underwear or shirts and manipulate their legs into fresh pairs of elasticized trousers. They splash their faces and underarms and sprinkle their private parts with talcum powder before returning to their seats.

I surrender to my odour and creases.

A double tot and two antihistamines.

We land in Frankfurt at six in the morning. The sky is pallid, shades of nothing and just on the mottled side of invisible. I wake as the plane begins its descent. The clouds part to reveal a landscape that hints at a regimented people. Lines run through the countryside, separating farms and fields and houses from each other and reminding me of those maps we were given to colour in during history lessons in my early years of high school, red for the Eastern Bloc, navy for the Atlantic Ocean and so on.

German officials meet us at the gates and inspect our passports. Their gazes convince each of us of guilt and responsibility for crimes that we try desperately to remember as we think about what we may have smuggled in our hand luggage.

A tall man in an olive-coloured uniform with a shaved head and rings under his eyes sits in his booth and watches me as I approach him. He comments on the frequency of my travels as he stamps my passport, adding a purple ring to the colours spreading over my visa.

I am not allowed to pass until I have sufficiently explained the reason behind my to-and-fro tendencies. I laugh to myself as I compare him to the official I passed on my way out of South Africa, who yawned as he checked my papers, thinking of the cheese sandwich beneath his desk rather than the rules of migration.

The airport is almost empty. We glide through two terminals and sixty-five boarding gates on conveyor belts, watching disgruntled teenagers as they set tables and wipe down counters and resent their part-time jobs that force them out of bed on weekends.

A phantom voice echoes announcements over us.

I check my itinerary and realize that I don't have long before my flight out of Frankfurt. I hoist my bag more comfortably over my shoulder and hurry toward check-in.

When I receive my boarding pass, I seek out a smoking room for a quick cigarette.

I find a rectangular space in the terminal showing a smoking sign, and feel ridiculous as I perch on a bar stool in the middle of the airport and suck on a cigarette, enclosed by nothing. There's a small extractor fan above my head. It doesn't work. This seems to function as a way to point out smokers so that the stronger, healthier members of society can observe and berate us for our bad habit, rather than be protected against us.

I'm tempted to perform a mime routine and inch my way along an imaginary wall with a fag pursed between my lips as the other passengers pass me to board our flight.

Instead, I stub my cigarette out and join the queue.

We are greeted by tall blonde stewardesses and handed German newspapers as the plane engine warms up for the last in my series of flights back to Belgium.

I'm seated next to a businessman wearing a dark brown suit and large glasses. He ignores me and clears his throat while shaking out the newspaper in front of him.

I am handed a large round pastry thing covered with icing, and as I bite into it I am trying to figure out if it is filled with fruit or meat. The brown mixture squeezes out the sides and into my hands and drops onto the tray. The man sitting next to me stares down his nose at me while I eat. Then he barks something in German and a stewardess is at his side, opening a can of beer and placing it in front of him. Foam coats his moustache as he sips. He dabs at himself with a napkin tucked into his shirt collar.

I try to joke about drinking so early, and how any country that accepts getting liquored up as the sun rises is okay by me.

Tough crowd.

He and the stewardess scowl at me.

I point to an apple juice, which I spill across my tray as soon as I open it, bringing the stewardess back to me, full of grunts and sighs and tapping of her pale pink fingernails as she cleans me up.

I give up and after sending the food and drink away, slump into the nook between my chair and the window, and close my eyes while I push my chin into my hands and feel my teeth grinding against each other.

We land in Brussels.

I am standing at the baggage claim and the crowd filters away as the other passengers collect their bags and hurry off to meet their families or friends or taxi cabs. When the carousel stops rotating, I concede that my luggage is not there.

After twenty minutes in an office, a lady in a grey suit informs me that my bags are arriving on the next flight and I will have to wait another hour. She calls another woman to her desk. They shake their heads and discuss how this never happens on their side. They look at my passport, and at me, and both tut-tut, because my nationality makes me accountable.

There is a trophy standing on the woman's desk, one of those plastic things sprayed gold and glued into a fake marble base, and I fantasize about threatening her with it, a clobber over the head maybe, because after everything that has happened and my exhausted, unwashed state, I really don't feel like debating service divides between the First and Third Worlds.

She realizes that I'm not planning on moving, so she stands and performs one of those gracious routines where people cover up kicking a person out on their ass with courtesy. She plants a hand in the small of my back and sweeps me out of the room.

"Carousel four in one hour." She smiles and clicks her door shut.

I waste time by scanning restaurant menus and resetting my mobile phone. I send Mylene a message. She is expecting me today, so I let her know that I will be delayed.

Then I text my brother and sister, and ask them to pass the message on to my mother, who has never really 'got' cellphones, that I have arrived safely.

I mention nothing about the agreement that I am to gather my things and return home.

As I am stuffing my phone back into my bag, I wonder how they will react to the absence of communication from me. I imagine mom waiting, week after week, for me to call home, or come home, or inform anyone at home of my plans. They'll sit at family dinners, still aware of dad's chair at the table, and discuss me. My siblings will catch on, and try to hide it from mom as she talks about what she will cook when I get back. Then dinner will finish and they will leave, and Jack and Cate will go back to their homes, and sit with their spouses and cry and curse me and wonder when it was that their sister became this screwed-up and cruel.

I consider deleting my South African numbers. And then I imagine how it would seem if I died, and some stranger found my phone, and it offered no clues to my history. Perhaps I will write them into a notebook when I get back to my apartment, and then erase them from my phone so they are still somewhere, but packed into a drawer where I can't see them.

I wonder how long it will take for them to give up on me.

I wonder if they'll move on.

I hope they will.

Then I send a message to Jim. I tell him that I am back in Belgium, and ask how work has been without me.

He replies almost instantly.

"Hw R U? Can U C visitors????xxxxx"

I hate when people do that.

I think I have always been a snob when it comes to language. I remember being disgusted by my schoolmates when we were younger and negotiating the rules of 'speaking like an adult'. Children who said pacific instead of specific. Or who put apostrophes in the wrong places. I had no time for them. It seems I have always been concerned with how something is said, rather than what is actually said.

Explains why I've never been very popular.

I don't reply.

I had packed and checked and repacked and rechecked my bags over the days before I left my family, so my usual necessities, World Call card, newly exchanged Euros courtesy of Mylene, a train schedule and an English-French-Flemish dictionary which I no longer need but still clutch, are all with me.

I check it all again. Still there.

I drop a couple of coins into a vending machine and page through a brochure while sipping a cold drink.

Then a plane lands, and the motor on carousel four starts up and my bags are the first to emerge through the rubber curtain.

Finally, after lugging my bags from the airport to the train, and on to a bus to Liege, I climb the stairs to my apartment.

Mylene has been in to open the windows and change the sheets on my bed. She's left an enormous bunch of yellow tulips standing in one of my mugs on the kitchen counter. Next to them is a note anchored down by a box of cigarettes and a bar of chocolate.

"Fresh in this morning. Yellow for hope, for the thinking girl. *Ti Amo.*"

She's been cleaning, too. I don't think I have ever seen what my appliances look like when they're not caked in the dust and grease of my carelessness. I open my fridge, which no longer makes that low groan when the door moves. The light inside actually flicks on now.

Why didn't I get this service months ago?

Loaves of bread and cheese, sauces, salami, tins of mussels and olives and anchovies, pickles, fruit... Food is piled up inside, jammed into every possible bit of space.
No whisky.

If only the grieving could force themselves to enjoy the offerings of the people around them, people who wait for a sign that the food and cleaning and assistance is filling them up and replacing the feeling that nothing means anything anymore.

I gulp water from the kitchen tap and step over my bags, in a heap in front of the doorway. After slamming my front door shut I peel off my clothes, offend myself when I sniff my armpit, and step into the bathroom.

I'm waiting for the water to warm up, standing in front of the mirror and staring at my face and naked body. I've lost weight. I hadn't noticed. My stomach doesn't do that wobble-ripple thing when I slap it.

My laundry, left in clumps and knots all over the apartment, has been washed, folded and packed into the hamper. Once I've yanked out a jersey and a pair of pants, I take a shower and fall into bed.

I wake up not knowing what I've dreamt but with that feeling that it was something very heavy.

Mylene is in my kitchen, standing over the stove and slopping spaghetti around in a pot. Her cheeks are red from the steam and she's humming quietly to herself. Her phone rings and she pulls it out of her bra. She whispers into it before nodding her head and pressing a button to end the call. Then she turns around to face where I am lying and sees that my eyes are open.

"*Bella!*" She rushes over to me and kisses both my cheeks twice. She holds me for a long time.

I wonder when I can let go without seeming rude.

"How was your flight? You want something to drink? You want to talk?"

Her questions carry on and on and on, and all the time I'm thinking that I can't ask her to leave because she has been so good to me. Dammit.

I thank her again and she waves her hand in my face to shush me. She fetches a bottle of wine from the kitchen and I follow her, watching the wine as it is splashed into two glasses and the spaghetti sauce.

"I am so very sorry." We clink our glasses together and Mylene offers a toast to my father.

"Was it very difficult?"

"Yes."

"How is your mother?"

"Alright."

"Have you cried a lot?"

"Not really." I yawn and stretch my arms above my head.

Mylene stares at me for a while. She cocks her head to the side and sips her wine.

"You must cry", she says, "it is good for you, *bella*."

"I can't." I drain my glass and pour a little more.

"You do not want to talk yet?"

"No Mylene, I really don't."

She sighs, and then kisses the top of my head. "This is alright, but you must, you know. One day at a time, but you must talk when you can. It is not good to be always thinking, thinking, thinking, with things like this. This is not like writing. This is real."

Then there is a knock on the door.

We look at each other. "Who is it?" I ask, forgetting I live here.

Mylene smiles, "Darling, Mylene invited your friend to come and eat with us. To say welcome home. He asks for you all the time."

She glides toward the door and opens it, revealing a very nervous-looking Jim, who stands frozen on the doorstep and stares at me.

Once Mylene has ushered Jim inside and taken his coat and scarf, she pushes him toward me. We hug, clumsily, not really knowing where to put our hands on each other's bodies, and just as he is about to release me, he squeezes me really tightly.

"Sorry", he whispers in my ear.

I offer him a glass of wine and we sit together in the space just outside my kitchen, a makeshift lounge I guess, where I had set up a table and a couple of odd chairs from around town, originally intended to be my writing area.

When Mylene dashes downstairs to fetch plates from her apartment for dinner, I ask Jim how work has been going.

"Very good", he says, "Business is very good. Paul is very happy." Paul is our supervisor. When he talks to women he stares at their breasts.

"So how have you managed all alone?"

Jim smiles, then starts playing with the lip of his wine glass. "I am not alone", he replies.

"Really?"

"Paul say, I cannot do it all while you go, my English not so good enough for all the English travelling people, so he say, if I know someone who need a work who speak English then I can ask."

"So?"

"So... Jenny, she come to help me." Jim picks up on my expression. "Jenny very good. She friendly and she remember from books quick and people like to talk with her. Plus, Paul say she knows to sound Flemish because of her language, Afrik- I cannot say it better yet – "

"Afrikaans", I say.

"Afrikaans", he repeats.

Shit.

"So you gave her my job?"

"No, *lapin*, no. When you leave Paul say we don't know when you come back, so we take her for just now when you are gone. And then I hear you are to come back, so I tell him, and he say she too good to lose, so you come back too and we all can work together." Jim seems very pleased by this arrangement.

She's taking over.

I slam my glass on the table as Mylene returns and begins to serve our food. "I haven't even been gone a month. That girl is an idiot, Jim. She's a rocks-for-brains, dot-your-I's-with-hearts, empty vessel moron. Shit." I laugh. "She's got my job. That's some irony."

Jim looks annoyed. "Jenny-"

"Jennifer", I correct him.

"Jenny", he speaks over me, "is a nice, nice girl."

Then Jim's mobile phone beeps and he plunges into his pocket for it. He looks at the screen and smiles, then checks to see if I am looking, and discreetly covers the phone with his free hand as he reads a text message.

"*Bella* give Mylene a hand."

I am still eyeing Jim as I walk into the kitchen.

Mylene is wildly gesticulating, calling me to her.

"Don't say such things about that Jennifer", she hisses, "she is Jim's girlfriend."

What? I am standing very still. What?

I'm thinking about the notebook. Jennifer's handwriting. Her family and her boyfriend and her stupid stories.

How she explained my country.

I wonder what her writing looks like when she fills in my daily reports at the tourist booth. I want to see how my writing became hers.

She's replacing me.

I return to the lounge eventually, and gather our wine glasses.

"She thinks I'm French", I mutter.

"Lapin?"

"Jennifer", I bark, "She thinks I'm French, remember?"

Jim chuckles. "No, this is fine, we tell her you just like to play fun and games. I tell her already, all the time. Especially after the party. Jenny, she say I must tell her about you all the time. She say you cupid. She say you send me to her."

"Look, Jim, I'm sorry. I need to be alone. Mylene", I call to the kitchen, "please take the food down to your apartment. I'm sorry but you and Jim can eat there. I just, I just need to be alone. I'm sorry."

And I am handing over glasses and plates and coats and stuffing them both out of my doorway. Just as he is about to disappear from view, Jim asks if I am thinking about my father.

I lock the door and search my bags.

Where did I put it?

I didn't take it with me.

Where is it?

I check everything. Bags I know I haven't used in ages. Pockets of pants and jackets. Under my bed.

Then I spot my small backpack slung over a chair in my bedroom. I pounce on it and throw the contents on to my bed. An empty water bottle, loose sticks of gum, a broken cigarette, a crumpled coat ticket, and there it is.

Jennifer's notebook.

I reread what I already know. She has a boyfriend. She already has a boyfriend. Then what's she up to? What is she doing with Jim? Girls like Jennifer don't like Jim. Who is Adam? What's he like? Does he know? Does Jim know about him? Model girls don't go for Jim-boys. I wonder what Adam looks like. What's he doing now?

Then I am dialing numbers. Rubbing my eyes and coughing.

When Adam answers, he just keeps saying "Ja?" into the receiver. I can hear him breathing.

I dial again.

By the fifth call, he is angry.

"Look", he says, with a heavy Afrikaans accent, "I dunno who you are but stop it okay? *Jussus* fuck man."

Then he hangs up.

I try once more, just to hear his voice properly, certain I can find some kind of clue.

Then I realize I should tell Jennifer's parents. If she is falling off the rails in a foreign country, her family should know. She can't have all these secrets.

The call connects after three rings.

"Jaco Britz, hello?" He has a friendly voice. Strong, and rich. Deep.

He sounds just older than middle-aged.

Our dads have similar voices.

I cancel the call and toss my phone on the floor.

When I wake up it is morning and I decide that it's time to get back to work.
Mostly because I know that she will be there.

I still haven't unpacked my bags, so I return to the laundry Mylene had done for me. I dress in jeans and an old Communist Party t-shirt, throwing a black blazer and grey scarf over me. Then I dig my sunglasses out of my suitcase and pack them into my bag, along with my wallet, cigarettes and Jennifer's notebook.

When I get off the bus, I watch them.

Jim and Jennifer are speaking with two tourists at the booth. She shakes their hands and laughs. When they turn to go, I watch Jennifer kiss Jim's cheek. It disgusts me.

I want to run up to them, and take my uniform back. I want to tell her that Jim belongs to me. This was mine. I want to tell her to leave, to make her see the crudeness she's laying on the city.

I want to tell her about the notebook, and how I've watched her.
And the party.

And how she's ruining my story.

"Hey! Hey!" She is calling me over.

I let them see me. Not thinking. There isn't anywhere for me to hide.
There is a certain amount of defeat in the steps I take toward the booth.

"Ah flip man, this is so flippin' *lekker* you know? Do you even know how long I have waited to speak properly with someone. And another chick too! *Jus* man, it's just been Jim and his mates all the time, every night, and they're cool, but they speak so flippin' weirdly and they're all into that science fantasy *kak*-"

"Fiction", I say.

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

She giggles.

"Okay. So doll, what are you into? She checks her reflection in the booth window as she speaks, stopping at one point to fix her lipstick by doing that weird lips-around-the-forefinger thing, which I find obscene. "Like what do you like doing hey?"

I consider telling her that I'm a fan of voodoo, taxidermy and black beer, but she's going again before I can answer.

"You seem like a fun chick, like after the whole 'pretending to be French' thing. *Jus* man you had me so good hey! And I never saw you at that party? Jim said you were there but I don't think I saw you. But I got so flippin' sick at that thing hey. *Here* I dunno what happened to me but it wasn't *kiff*. Lucky Jim was there, to be my little hero!"

Jennifer strokes Jim's cheek, and then her expression changes. "Baby, go for a walk. Let us have some chick time, okay?" He is confused, and then understands her gestures out to the street – strangely not picking up on my silent pleas for him to stay.

When he leaves, she grins and begins to play with my hair.

"You know, I didn't want to say in front of a guy, but you lost weight hey. You're looking so skinny now. You look good. Hey you should come over and try some of my clothes. I bet we're like, totally the same size now and I've just got loads and loads and loads of stuff here, my dad had to pay for flippin', like, twenty extra kilograms on the plane."

I open my mouth to reply, but I'm cut off again.

"I know what you gonna say, like you're too embarrassed or some shit." She smacks herself on the upside of her hand for swearing. "But don't doll, seriously, what's mine is yours. Hey you know what? My dad has a sports shop at home, I should ask him to send us some Springbok jerseys over. We could go out in them, like team SA hey!" Then she screams 'Bokke' out to the street and I cringe.

"I was thinking we should gap it to Brouge hey, just you and me. Like, a total flippin' 'chicks' day out." She laughs and offers her hand to slap me a high five, which I reluctantly return. "No Jim or anyone. Have you got a boyfriend? Well he can't come, but I mean, not in a bitch way hey, like it'd be *kiff* if we could all do a double date thing, but just another time. This is like, crazy girls on the loose in Europe!"

An elderly couple approaches the booth, and Jennifer excuses herself to help them. I take a seat on a swivel stool behind her. In thick Irish accents, they request advice on where to spend the day. Jennifer recommends Brussels, for the European Union Buildings and the World Museum of Cocoa and Chocolate, or the architecture and canals in Brouge. She puts pen marks next to the best restaurants in the travel guides, and when they decide on Brussels, she plans their train routes for them.

As the couple departs, Jennifer suggests that they take an umbrella and jackets with them, because it looks like rain. They nod and wave and beam smiles at her.

She watches them disappear, walking hand in hand, and hugs herself.

"How cute are old *tannies*? They're flippin' cool man."

I have my hands in my lap and I slouch forward while I sway from side to side on the stool. I don't know want her to hear too much of my voice. "You're good at the job", I say, "You've picked up quickly. It's only a couple of weeks"

Jennifer laughs. "Well in my work you learn to be social, you know, like, a real people's person hey."

"Ja", I reply, "how's the modelling going?"

She fixes her eye on me. "How'd you know about that?"

Shit. I'm panicking. Shit.

"I never tell people about that", she says, her voice a little harder now.

Shit.

"Jim told me." I look away, out of the booth and into the groups of people heading towards the shopping centres and train station.

"Oh. Ja." She's anxious. "I thought I never told him. I just don't like people knowing about it. People think models are just dumb *poppies*, you know? I'm not just some flippin' *loskop* hey."

"No, no, of course not." I try my best to appear earnest.

"Because, like, I won this competition, and I come here, and everything's just so different and so beautiful hey, and so, like, like I just feel like I'm growing hey. Like I'm learning all this new stuff. Like Jennifer Britz actually has a brain, you know? Not just this", she pulls at her long hair, "and this", she gestures to her body.

"So I broke up with my boyfriend. His name was Adam. Sorry, his name is Adam. He's a really nice guy, shame man, but he just doesn't know this new me, you know?" She waits for me to respond. When I don't, she carries on. "I

mean, you must have had this like, flippin' a hundred times over man. You've been here spans longer than me. You must have learnt, like shit loads. Ooh!" She claps her hand over her mouth and giggles. "Excuse my French!"

We are silent for a while, and she's looking at me for some kind of conversation.

The she must think she's got me figured out and her voice becomes quiet.

"Plus you had that whole thing with your family. Jim told me about your dad. I'm really sorry hey. I don't know what I'd do if that happened to my dad. I really don't. It's just like a horror story, man. I don't know how you're back here. I don't think I'd even be able to carry on like you. My family got robbed once but we weren't even at home. That was scary enough. Nothing like what happened with you guys. I'd just cry and cry and hold on to my ma. You're a brave chick. No lies hey. Brave."

"Ja", I say. "Thanks."

I'm embarrassed.

"And it's like, only you and me get it hey. You can try explain South Africa over and over and over to these people, but they don't get it. If you're born here you just won't get it. That's why we so lucky we found each other here. We can help each other."

I light a cigarette and say nothing.

All the time, I am waiting for her to remember the notebook.

Jim is back.

"Hi baby!" Jennifer leaps on him. The sound she makes as she kisses him is wet and loud and, well, irritating.

"Check his *maag*", she says to me, "*ek wens jy hom in die bed kan sien. Hy dra daardie snaakse 'boxers', met dom sinne and klein komik karakters al daaroor. En dan probeer hy om sexy en macho te wees!*" She looks at him and raises her eyebrows. "*Ek's so lief vir hom, man.*"

I ask her not to speak to me in Afrikaans.

My tone goes unread.

Jim looks at Jennifer, and then at me, and back to Jennifer. He laughs.

"See, *lapin*? I tell you, cupid!"

Then Jennifer throws her arms around me.

"I don't know why you guys never hooked up, hey. You would be so cute together. I mean, I'm stoked you didn't hey but I just always thought-

"Yes, well, it doesn't matter", I say, and I feel my voice disappearing inside my throat.

"Actually, it's quite weird but, oh what the hell, I'll tell you anyway", she says giggling again. "I used to kind of watch you guys. Like long ago hey. And at the party, I was trying so hard to talk to get your attention but you kept running away. I just wanted to know you man. You guys seemed cool. And you, you looked like an interesting chick."

Jennifer smiles and arranges the brochures in piles across the counter.

I am the least powerful thing in the world.

I take this sickening little moment as a cue to excuse myself, explaining that I need to go and sort out my pay with Paul.

As I am leaving the booth, Jennifer yells out a reminder about our trip to Brouge, and then explains it to Jim.

I set off for home, thinking about the notebook, and Adam, and Jim, and Jaco Britz and being a thinking girl or a model girl, and watching and being watched and wondering what I have been doing here and what I'm going to do now.

It doesn't seem like I can go back there. Or anywhere, in fact.

When I reach my apartment, the post is tucked under the doormat. I remove what is addressed to me and leave Mylene's on the floor just inside the entrance, hurrying up the stairs so she doesn't hear me and come out for a chat.

I glance at the letter as I unlock my front door and notice that it is from South Africa, with a stamp taking the postal date back three and a half weeks. Before I went back.

I step over my suitcase and drop the letter on the kitchen counter.

I realize how hungry I am, and set about layering Mylene's treats between two thick chunks of bread. As I am finishing off a mug of cold milk, my phone signals a message.

"*Lapin*, nice 2 hv U bk. Jenny ask 1 thing. She not want 2 B rude bt she need her notebook. Do U hv it still? Pls 2 let me kno. Tx.xxxx"

The notebook doesn't seem to mean much now.

And I don't feel as smart as I'd thought I was.

I sit down on the kitchen floor and open the letter.

It is from my father, written just before he died.

It frightens me and for a while I sit with the letter face down against the tiles.

But I can still see the imprint of his writing through the pages.

Slowly, I take a deep breath and turn the letter over.

Dear Issy

Hello my girl. How are you? I know mom has been keeping you up to date about what is going on at home so I don't need to fill you in too much. We are all well. We miss you very much and we talk about you all the time.

Cate is losing her marbles with the kids. They've become obsessed with running everywhere, and they don't give her a break. They climb a lot, too. They get into everything! When Cate gets really angry, mom reminds her that she was a climber, too, and that she broke all our best china climbing up the dresser. That shuts her up a bit. She's becoming such a good mom, Issy!
Jack is also doing well. He's doing fantastically at work. He's up for promotion pretty soon, so why don't you send him a message or something, just to wish him luck. I know he'd love to hear from you.

How's the writing going? And work? Dealt with any more stupid Americans? Mum and I were thinking that we should come over and visit you. I'd like to take some leave from work. We want to see this romantic life that you're living! What do you think? I think some company from home would be good for you even though you like being alone. It's kind of like when we used to find you sitting at the bottom of the garden when you were a kid, because you wanted to hide. But you'd inevitably start crying when nobody found you, and you got lonely.

We're similar that way. Once, I had our neighbours searching for me long into the night, while I sat in the middle of the sugar cane and pretended I was on the run from the law. I was smacked until my bum glowed. You were luckier.

That's pretty much it, my darling. I hope you're well. Give us a ring sometime. If you'd like us to come and visit, I'll need to start planning it.

We hope to hear from you soon.

Love

Dad.

PS Mom wants to know if you've tried that Butternut soup recipe yet.

I read the letter seven times, and I run my fingers over his handwriting.

And then I feel my insides move. My eyes begin to water and I feel a vast weeping building in me.

The tears come.

I sob. Loudly, messily, with my whole body. I'm beating the ground and bruising the fleshy parts of my hands and saliva is shooting out of my mouth in threads and mixing with my tears as they hit the floor.

I sob like I have only seen people sob in films.

I sob for my father.

And for my mother.

My whole family.

For my country.

For me. For not staying.

For being afraid to stay, for being afraid to go.

For not crying, I sob because I am finally crying.

It doesn't stop.

My eyes swell, and I'm washing myself in gunge and sliming across the kitchen floor.

Crying about my memories.

I sob for my stories. For not knowing my stories, and forgetting them, and thinking they shouldn't be told.

It just keeps on coming, on and on and on, and all the time, dad's letter is pressed against my throat and stuffed into my mouth and I feel like I am finally

lying with all my ghosts. Rocking, backwards and forwards, as they all bubble up and fall out of me.

I stay like that for a long time, until my voice is raw and I have no energy left and only hiccups and bubbles of spit keep me awake.

Then, a stillness, which seems to last for days.

When I can stand, I fetch my notebook and my phone.

I send my siblings text messages. I tell them that I will book my flight home tomorrow. And I mean it.

Then I tell Jim that I will leave Jennifer's book with Mylene, because none of it matters anymore.

I open my own notebook.

They say that to be a writer, you have to write every day.

They also say that you have to write what you know.

I cross my legs and press my notebook into my lap. I'm chewing on the lid of my pen and squashing my eyebrows together like I used to.

The months of watching and waiting and crawling so far into my head that I lost myself entirely just fall away in tiny bits.

And it all seems so obvious.

My hand shakes a little as I begin my first sentence.

One

Being foreign is an interesting pastime. When you can't speak a person's language, something in you shifts. Silence changed me. So did death.

I was changed by the chase of a story. I just didn't think the story would be this.

Romanticising the Foreign, Familiar and Grotesque: the Process of Writing *Wish You Were Here*.

In January 2005, I remember sitting in my dormitory cubicle, overlooking the street in downtown Liege, Belgium, and realising the paradoxically alienating and empowering experience of foreignness. I remember watching the snow fall over a city with which I was quickly falling in love, but to whom I could lay no claim, nor really understand. I remember later, in Sweden, September 2006, trying to buy groceries in a supermarket in Uppsala, and realising the paralysis of the foreigner's illiteracy – in language, culture and geography.

So began my writing process and fascination with the concepts of travel and isolation, fetishism and curiosity, the foreign and the familiar. It would only be well into the first of my two-year process that I realised I could not write around the foreign without considering the notion of home. The two exist in partnership. There is a tension between our attachment to where we have been and our attraction to where we are going. I knew I had to write this.

My work as a theatre director has been key in the process of writing this novel, as my opportunities to travel grew. Each time I ventured to a new theatre festival or performance, I armed myself with a journal, a camera and a Dictaphone. These journeys became interspersed with trips 'home', to my family, who would fuel a new element in my writing. It was only in December 2006, during an armed robbery in my parents' house, that I realised how my home was insistently pulling at my pen and demanding to be written. This proved to be a turning point in my writing, a shifting experience, which I will explore in subsections from hereon.

The Travel Writing Genre

I have always been a fan of travel writing. The works of Bruce Chatwin¹, Bill Bryson², Pico Iyer³ and Alain De Botton⁴ became my gospel, and I spent days examining the ways in which these writers would simultaneously document and fictionalise their travels. It seemed a beautiful thing to me, this concept of the lone writer, lost in the sensory bombardment of new terrain, exotic cultures and alien languages.

My initial aim with this novel was to write a narrative which unfolded during the course of a young woman's walk down a street. I wanted to tell a story of a woman whom I knew would be similar in age and tendency to myself, and who had found herself in a foreign place. Alain De Botton writes:

One question revolves around the relationship between the anticipation of travel and its reality - what we imagine of a place and what can occur when we reach it...Artistic accounts involve severe abbreviations of what reality will force upon us. A writer who provided us with a profusion of details would rapidly grow maddening. Unfortunately, life itself often subscribes to this mode of storytelling, wearing us with repetitions, misleading emphases and inconsequential plotlines.⁵

I was intrigued by the daily routine of the foreigner, rather than the obvious tourist activities. Fascinated by the ideas of how the foreigner goes about locating a toilet, or choosing the right milk in the supermarket, I believed that I could write an entire world within the confines of a single moment on a roadside, inside the thoughts of a young female tourist.

¹ Chatwin, B. 1977. *The Patagonia*. London: Pan

² Bryson, B. 1998. *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe*. London: Black Swan.

³ Iyer, P. 1989. *Video Night In Kathmandu And Other Stories From The Not-So-Far East*. London: Black Swan.

⁴ De Botton, A. 2003. *The Art Of Travel*. South Africa: Penguin Books.

⁵ De Botton, A. 2003. *The Art Of Travel*. South Africa: Penguin Books. P14-15.

This was progressively fed by my experiences as I travelled. In Belgium, I attempted to purchase a necklace at a fleamarket in broken French, and a rudimentary form of Afrikaans, willing it to pass for Flemish. I would later be told that not only had my words been nonsensical, but on the rare occasions that I seemed coherent, I was closer to insulting people than anything else. In Sweden, I made myself a cup of coffee with *fil*, sour yoghurt eaten with porridge and a lot of sugar, much to the amusement of my host family.

The ironies accumulated, as a Belgian fleamarket became another version of the beachfront markets in Durban, and *fil* became *maas* and I could no longer understand the difference between the foreign and familiar, and everything new became another version of my home. For two years, I moved between Europe and Scandinavia, to Botswana and around South Africa, and my days became mists of Viking monuments and chocolate museums and Marula trees and waffles and mountains and *walkie-talkies* and the sea, and people, and language, and tradition, and road rules, and, and, and, and I realised I'd taken on a fascination too great to be written within a single moment as I'd originally thought.

So, as my resolve to explore this notion of the foreigner in ways other than 'touristy' grew, I became interested in the idea of isolation. I noticed a shift, in my travel companions, and myself as we arrived in new places. We discovered a freedom without the framework of home and permanent context to govern our definitions. The experience of being a foreigner impacts on identity. There is a ruthless freedom in being away from the limitations of 'home', and my questions exploded. Is home real? Is yourself in your home your real self? Is your real self more authentic without the constraints of context? There is also a great deal of watching involved in being a foreigner. Fascinated by everything, but involved in little, the foreigner tends toward voyeurism.

I decided that I wanted to build the idea of voyeurism into my protagonist, a young woman searching for a story in her travels, because she feels that her experience in her home has not been valid or exciting enough to warrant writing. As she becomes immersed in the travel experience, she draws away from her past, and settles into being a faceless person in an unknown land. Yet, when she discovers the presence of another South African in her new 'home', a woman similar in age to herself, but entirely different in character and background, she feels threatened. Growing obsessed with this new presence in her foreign experience, the protagonist becomes the voyeur as she follows the woman, steals a notebook containing her private details, and manipulates the woman's experience in Belgium. In this, I wanted to examine how the traveller, while making a novelty of new land, creates a novelty of him- or herself, and revels in the idea of his or her presence in the foreign place, as much as the place itself.

I read online travel journals of the experience of people similar in age to myself, finding great value in the writing of a woman who had documented her journey through South America:

You're awash in overstimulating sights and sounds. All of it is new, so all of it is interesting and you have no ability to separate the critical from the banal, because none of it means anything yet... You can hook onto little buoys of meaning via things you have heard about the culture or words you happen to know and you can come up with all these wistful, poetic misinterpretations that are usually completely off the mark, while occasionally dead on.⁶

This writer, ironically an anonymous young woman, documents her trip from start to finish. A shift occurs, where her excitement turns to desperation, and a yearning for belonging and a place where she actually lives, rather than watching.

⁶ <http://www.beleza-music.org/brasil/>

As the woman wrote of her return home, and her difficulty in adjusting to belonging, I considered my protagonist's return home, and how she would deal with it. Tayler suggests the concept of '*l'esprit frondeur*' ('the rebellious spirit') in his lecture on travel writing:

I set out to escape my world, to vanquish my demons, to remake myself by speaking other languages, traveling in other countries...⁷

In order to drive my plot, I wanted my character to be forced to return to South Africa, so that her 'fictitious self', the self which she had become in a foreign place, would have to collide with her 'real self', the self defined by her history and home and family. Yet all I had read on the experience of returning home proved it to be a painful process.

I believe this was a turning point for me, as my initial interest in travel writing began to shift and I considered the experience of returning home. The cliché says that 'we can never go home again'. What would the return be like for the protagonist? Was it possible to write one's home as the travel writers write foreignness?

The Notion of Home

I became fascinated by the ways in which South African artists expressed relationships with their home. We inhabit a bizarre climate, with white people feeling guilt for a history - of oppression and expressing a cultural detachment in the midst of a country so rich and diverse in cultural tradition. We are so riddled by political correctness and guilt and accountability that we talk around our identities, and try to find ways in which to say 'white' or 'black', or 'maid', or 'gardener' politely. It seems our language cannot carry our history. I wanted to write this, I wanted to claim a space in South African writing, to admit my white, middle-class context rather than hiding it or feeling guilt. However I wanted to write in ways that people felt close to, that felt honest. I wanted it to be intrinsic to the tone of

⁷ Tayler, J. *Inspiration and L'esprit Frondeur* (lecture). <http://www.vaggablogging.net>

my writing, rather than blatant. I read two key texts here, poems by my performance partner, Iain Ewok Robinson, and Ivan Vladislavic's *Portrait With Keys: Joburg & What-What*⁸, which I returned to again and again as my plot developed.

In Robinson's slam poem, *South Africa Is*, he writes of the paradoxical nature of South Africa, past and consequently present:

South Africa is potent
 South Africa is potent, is strong
 South Africa is a potent strong mix of third world reality
 and first world fantasy
 South Africa is white people feeling safest staying racist
 South Africa is white people feeling afraid to stay
 Coz racism won't make feelings of fear go away...⁹

I wanted to write my own examination of my country yet I grew frustrated with blatant descriptions of it. As I was writing a lot of poetry over this period, each time I felt this frustration I would write a lyrical short story, or a poem, completely isolated from the novel and examining my memories of my home.

Here I moved from romanticising the foreign to romanticising the familiar, as I looked at my memories, at the South African landscape – terrain, culture and history through the eyes of the travel writer. This lyrical style made it easier to write such familiar images in a heightened way, almost as if they were new to me.

Vladislavic's novel intensified this lyrical tone in my writing, as I began to realise how it was possible to write even a country so riddled with suffering, poverty and unrest in beautiful ways. Vladislavic also writes with acute attention to the ordinary, narrating minute details of our everyday existence so that the mundane takes on a magical quality.

⁸ Vladislavic, I. 2006. *Portrait With Keys: Joburg & What-What*. Houghton: Umuzi.

⁹ Robinson, I.G. 2007. *Word: Customized Hype*. Empangeni: Echoing Green Press. P37.

When a house has been alarmed, it becomes explosive. It must be armed and disarmed several times a day. When it is armed, by the touching of keys upon a pad, it emits a whine that sends the occupants rushing out, banging the door behind them. There are no leisurely departures: there is no time for second thoughts, for taking a scarf from the hook behind the door, for checking that the answering machine is on, for a final look in the mirror on the way through the hallway. There are no savoured homecomings either: you do not unwind into such a house, kicking off your shoes, breathing the familiar air. Every departure is a precipitate; every arrival is a scraping-in. In an alarmed house, you awake in the small hours to find the room unnaturally light. The keys on the touch pad are aglow with a luminous, clinical green, like a night light for a child who's afraid of the dark.¹⁰

As I became more excited by the possibilities of narrating my country, I felt less inclined to continue my plot in Belgium, and wanted even more to bring my protagonist back to South Africa. It was at this point that the battle with my plot began. I felt almost as if my value system had shifted, that while I still loved the idea and memory of the countries I had visited, I could create something vital by writing South Africa in the same, beautiful tone.

“Autobiography”

There have been many instances during my process in which this novel has felt somewhat fatalistic, governing my life or governed by my life in peculiar and abstract ways.

As I returned from my travels and settled back into Durban, I found my life suddenly riddled by a number of criminal attacks. During 2006, I was mugged in shopping centres and on roadsides, attacked in a car and put on a course of antiretroviral drugs, and finally held for two hours in an armed robbery in my parents' house in December. These experiences became pivotal to my

¹⁰ Vladislavic, I. 2006. *Portrait With Keys: Joburg & What-What*. Houghton: Umuzi. P11.

process. While everyone escaped the robbery unharmed, every possession was stolen, including my computer and the final two parts of my novel, of which I had neglected to create a back up.

These events, along with the murder of a family acquaintance, Brett Goldin, in Cape Town, 2006, prompted my interest in writing about South Africa. As on many occasions, writing became cathartic for me. I had no way to make sense of what had happened or how close to death we had been other than to write about it. I also had to rewrite what had been stolen, but the parts I could remember seemed insignificant, trivial almost, compared to what I had seen and felt. I wanted to document the experience of so many South Africans and give a voice to those who had not been as fortunate as we had. The idea of activism fiction became my obsession, where suddenly I did not feel shame in claiming my space in this country because I had somehow, in a dysfunctional way, 'paid my dues' and lost the guilt around my privileged class position.

I have had many discussions with people about the experience and few understand why my family and I have not emigrated. My parents remain in the same house with no great change to their lifestyle. Many people ask what it will take for us to leave, what greater attack will shock us into going. My answer, each time, cannot go past 'it's our home'. Once again, 'home' became a powerful concept that I wanted to explore.

My protagonist is a numb character. Like myself, she was in search of her story. She had been waiting for a sense of belonging, as had I. I therefore decided that, if I was so compelled to include the robbery in my novel, it would have to end in great tragedy, and she could not be involved. There had to be some sort of device to bring her back from overseas, and draw her out of the numb wandering which had dominated the first part of the plot. I rewrote the robbery, but had it occur while she was overseas, and had to return home because her father had been murdered. Here, my process evolved once more: from a thematic romanticising of the foreign, to the familiar, I moved to romanticising the grotesque, as I continued to attempt the inclusion of

beautiful imagery in tragedy. I looked at the ways families draw together in tragic events, and wrote simple imagery – a lamp left on through the night, or the residue of fingerprint dust in an empty room, or the ways in which a community steps out of its isolated existence and bands together.

Voice

There were two pieces of advice that impacted significantly on the way I would ultimately locate my voice as a writer. My supervisor cautioned me against 'trying too hard' with my voice, near the beginning of my process when I found myself slipping into a sarcastic tone, trying too hard to be witty, or sarcastic or emotive. I remember leading a performance workshop with high school pupils in 2006, and guiding them through ways to find their own stories and their authentic voice, and realising that I hadn't done it myself. The minute I gave in to the narration of my own experience and my instinctive observations in daily routine – the way in which material falls on a body, or how a person prepares their coffee, I located my authentic voice. Suddenly I felt more comfortable and secure in the value of the stories I had to tell. I gathered the short pieces and poems I had written but thought I had no use for, and worked on their inclusion in the novel, as I ended the raging period of insecurity in the value of my stories.

Secondly, I remember my father reading an early extract from my novel and commenting on the unstable nature of my protagonist. I was immediately defensive, but upon reading what I had created in her character, I realised the importance of this observation. She is a character who longs to be alone, who feels useless, and who obsessed with a complete stranger in the middle of a foreign country. She cannot deal with the trauma of her father's death so she leaves as soon as is politely possible, with the intention of never returning. She yearns for home yet rejects its stability. I understood that, while I was revealing her character through my major and minor plotlines, I was protecting her in my tone. I wanted readers to like her, despite her bizarre, voyeuristic and cruel actions because I felt as if they were reading me. This was a major

turning point in the evolution of my voice as, once again, I gave into what felt most honest, and grasped the ruthlessness that a writer must learn – in revealing difficult parts of themselves and their surroundings.

In this revelation, I studied the writing of two great novelists, Zoë Heller¹¹ and Julian Barnes¹². In *Notes On A Scandal*, Heller examines the female introvert. Her protagonist is isolated, obsessive, and desperate to forge relationships but incapable of dealing with people.

For most people, honesty is such an unusual departure from their standard *modus operandi* – such an aberration in their workaday mendacity – that they feel obliged to alert you when a moment of sincerity is coming on. ‘To be completely honest,’ they say, or ‘To tell you the truth,’ or ‘Can I be straight?’ Often they want to extract vows of discretion from you before going any further. ‘This is strictly between us, right?’ ... You must *promise* not to tell anyone...’ Sheba does none of that. She tosses out intimate and unflattering truths about herself, all the time, without a second thought.¹³

I loved the ways in which these writers portrayed characters whose dialogue is internal, who speak more to themselves than to other people. This became crucial to the development of my protagonist, who is an observer, and noticeably unable to carry ordinary conversation, but whose inner monologue is unceasing. This also carried some resolution to my problem of choosing to write in the first person present-tense mode, particularly with a protagonist who spends so much time in solitude. When I allowed her flaws and neuroses to emerge, and released her comments around herself and the people she encounters, I feel she became more real, honest, and believable.

¹¹ Heller, Z. 2007. *Notes On A Scandal*. London: Penguin.

¹² Barnes, J. 2000. *Love, Etc.* London: Quality Paperbacks Direct.

¹³ Heller, Z. 2007. *Notes On A Scandal*. London: Penguin. P3.

The Structure

So, I had in front of me a major plot, involving a young woman who leaves South Africa for the anonymity of travel. She is a writer unable to write, searching for a story. As she encounters another South African woman in her new 'home', she becomes territorial, jealous and obsessive, without realising it. She begins to manipulate the woman's experience, getting to the point of drugging the woman and then fleeing. The protagonist is brought back to South Africa after her father is killed in an armed robbery. She cannot cope with the 'ghosts' of her past and present experience and flees again, to the foreign place that has become her sanctuary. Upon her return, she realises that she has been replaced, that the other woman has taken her job and befriended the few people she had met. The protagonist returns to her voyeuristic habits and understands that she was as much a transitory element to the foreigners' lives as they were to hers. When she receives a letter in the post, written by her father before his death, the protagonist finally breaks and begins to deal with what has happened to her. As she embarks on this process, she starts to write.

I then had a number of minor plots, of her relationship with her foreign co-worker, a past relationship at university, her family, and the notebook that she had stolen from the South African girl. My battle throughout this process has been affording the appropriate weight to the major plot. The inclusion of the robbery and the return to South Africa came at such a late stage that my supervisor and I were worried that the plot may not provide a strong enough framework for an event carrying such gravity. Editing became a crucial stage here, as I had to return to early parts of the book and include subtle foreshadowing to the event.

This foreshadowing came in the form of the lyrical stories and poems I had been writing. As I converted these into short pieces of fiction which were heightened in terms of imagery, I realised that they can make for perfect flashback segments, interspersed in the plot at points where they were

thematically relevant. With these pieces inserted, I wanted to build an accumulative recognition in the protagonist that she has a story to tell, but could only see it after being plunged into crisis.

These flashback segments also tended toward description of my father. I hold a very strong relationship with my own father and most of the flashbacks are descriptions from my childhood. I asked my father to write me a letter, describing his memories from when he was young. This fuelled my interest in grounding the flashbacks in local contexts. As I adapted the pieces, setting them in Scottburgh (the site of my father's childhood) and Durban, I felt an intimate tone emerging, which I liked. This was also a strange instance of the old cliché around 'characters writing themselves' as the father-daughter dynamic emerged as foreshadowing for the death of the protagonist's father, without me consciously driving it.

The novel became a four-part story: the first is the protagonist's departure from South Africa; the second, her experience of travel and foreignness; the third, her return to South Africa and tragedy and the fourth her decision to stop running from her life. I am entirely satisfied with the ways in which the novel has manifested. It feels intensely personal but not indulgent. Stephen King's adage "kill your darlings" became my mantra during the editing period, as my supervisor showed me the ways in which I was wandering from my plot for my own enjoyment. It was only after I cut pieces which I so dearly loved, but secretly knew to be extraneous, that I realised how to drive my plot. Additionally, in my writing of the final part, I used a device of ending the novel with its opening paragraph. I believed this to be a conclusive way in which to end a story based on a character who could not write, that through her experience, the novel itself becomes what the character has written. I thought that rather than simply 'gimmicky', this was effective, as once again, the central tragedy is foreshadowed by the opening paragraph, yet suppressed until the second half of the novel.

I believe this novel to be relevant to contemporary South African readers. At its core, it asks the question of whether it is better to stay or go, a question I have so often encountered. It looks at the attraction to travel, adventure and soul-searching, actively sought by so many in my age group. Finally, it explores the notion of home and belonging. Lionel Abrahams¹⁴ writes, "Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half's in the concrete streets we have lived along." This is what I would hope *Wish You Were Here* would speak to readers: that we are so intensely forged from the places we inhabit and the people we encounter. And with great respect to those who choose to leave, and those who choose to stay.

¹⁴ In Vladislavic, I. 2006. *Portrait With Keys: Joburg & What-What*. Houghton: Umuzi. P6.

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