

*The Marginal Grey: A Collection of Short Stories*

Bronwyn Douman

A mini-thesis submitted to the Department of English of the University of the Western Cape  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing).



Dr Meg vandermerwe, Supervisor

November 2015

DECLARATION:

I declare that *The Marginal Grey: A Collection of Short Stories* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Full name.....

Date.....

Signed.....



UNIVERSITY *of the*  
WESTERN CAPE

## Game shop

It was November 1997. The jukebox was booming out Boys-II-Men's "Mama...Mama, you know I love you."

I was singing along to the tune when I was interrupted by the loud bang of a 50 cent coin on the wooden counter that separated me from my customers.

"Girly, can I have a packet of chips, puh-leeze?" said a boy in oversized light-blue dungarees.

"What chips do you want?" I asked.

"50 cent chips," he said.

"Yes I can count, but what type of chips do you want?"

"Crack-a-snack chips, cheese," he whined.

I got off my high stool and went to the box crate where the chips were displayed and grabbed the yellow packet. I glanced at Ma Sophie who was counting stock in the back room. I climbed back up onto the chair and leaned over the counter to pass him the packet through a 30 cm. hole in the gate.

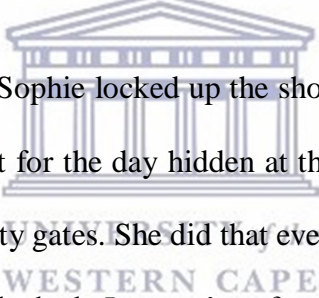
Four years earlier, my grandma Ma Sophie – who lived with me and my father Neil and my mother Cathy – asked my father to turn our garage into a game shop for the children of the community. He built on a car-port next to the garage to cover the pool board area. Ma Sophie always wore a black moon bag which was strapped around her waist and tucked under her belly. In her moon bag she carried her pink camouflage Velcro purse, two blue pens, crumbled tissues, Vicks ointment, and her *bookie* in which she used to write names of customers who bought items and paid on the 15<sup>th</sup> or at the end of the month. Her moon bag

was heavy because she also carried the house keys, game shop keys and a padded lock in it. Ma Sophie had long, black hair with grey streaks. She always tied her hair up in a bun. She wore tracksuit pants with Reebok *takkies* and a green overall like the uniforms domestic workers wear.

We had people rob us, many times, with Ma Sophie held at gun point and my father too when he closed up the game shop one night. The gangsters who robbed us were from the neighbourhood. They broke in and stole our stuff so we would not be able to keep our game shop open. They also had a game shop, in The Flats, and wanted all the customers to come to theirs and not ours. But everyone liked our game shop better. People came from far, from Old Belhar and even Delft and Elsie's River to come to our game shop because we had the best games of all. My Ma Sophie's game shop had three pool tables, five arcade video games (Street Fighter, Puzzle Bobble, Pac-Man, Super Mario Brothers and Double Dragon) which were all coin-operated. And we had a jukebox, a red and yellow one that played the latest songs. The game shop was always filled with young boys, their eyes glued to the video game screen, or bent over to focus on hitting the white ball on the pool table. Some girls would come in to dance to the music, and we even had karaoke on Friday nights. Everyone loved karaoke night. Fridays and Saturdays were our busiest days. The game shop was full of sticky, sweaty bodies; it was stuffy and filled with cigarette smoke. Youngsters stood in lines outside – girls leaning to one side and playing with their hair and boys cracking their fingers – waiting their turn to play pool or arcade video games. There was always a group of boys and girls standing around the jukebox with coins in their hands, singing and dancing, waiting to play their next best song.

The day the little boy came in to buy the cheese chips, was my first day working at the counter and helping customers. My father did not want me to work in the game shop but Ma Sophie said when I turn ten-years-old, I can help out before and after school if I wanted

to. On the day after my tenth birthday, I woke up at 6 o' clock and quickly brushed my teeth, got dressed and combed my hair, before joining Ma Sophie in the game shop. We open up at 7 a.m. and Ma Sophie said I could help her pack cool drinks into the fridge and switch on the machines before I left for school that day. We bought our bulk supplies for the shop at the wholesaler's 1-Up in Ravensmead. When she got back from the wholesaler's she would fill all the crates with chips and the jars with sweets and lollipops. Ma Sophie gave me sweets for helping out. At night, my mother would complain to Ma Sophie about my rotten teeth. That afternoon when the little boy came in, I had just been given the task of managing the counter. Ma Sophie was counting stock. By 4 p.m. I had seen to more than ten customers. I sold Nik-Naks chips, Pirate sweets, black and red Jaw-breakers, salt and vinegar Lays chips, a 500 ml bottle of Fanta, Chappies bubblegum and lots more.



That Tuesday evening, Ma Sophie locked up the shop at 6 o'clock, as she usually did on weekdays. She carried the profit for the day hidden at the bottom of her moon bag. After she locked up, she bolted the security gates. She did that every day, shaking the gates twice to make sure that they really were locked. It wasn't safe to leave any money in the shop overnight and Ma Sophie didn't like carrying it in her moon bag either, even the few steps to our front door. She hurried to our *stoep* with the front door keys already in her hand and without wasting any time let us in and shut the door quickly behind us. If she had known what was still to come that night, I think she might have taken more from the shop with her and hidden it under her mattress as she did with the day's profit.

The clinic security guard was the first one on the scene. There was a loud knock on the door and I heard Ma Sophie jump out of bed and saw the light go on in the passage.

“*Wat gaan aan? What's wrong?*” she said, tying her towelling gown.

“*Hulle het ingebreek.* The gangsters, the Sexy Boys, they broke into the game shop.

They carried out stuff,” he said.

“Where were you? Why didn’t you do anything about it?” she cried out, her voice hoarse.

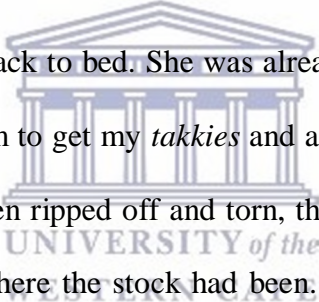
“I don’t carry a weapon on me. I only had my baton. They have guns and knives.

And they were six guys.”

“Okay, *dankie*. Thanks for coming to tell me. Did you call the police?”

“Yes, just after ten o’clock, just after it happened. They are on their way.”

“Thank you Sollie. God bless you.”



Ma Sophie told me to go back to bed. She was already pulling on her tracksuit pants and a jersey. I ran back to my room to get my *takkies* and a sweater. When we walked in we saw that the pool table felt had been ripped off and torn, the screens of the games machines shattered, empty crates and jars where the stock had been. Ma Sophie started shouting and swearing. She called my father to tell him what happened. He was out with my mother at her school’s function. He said they were on their way home. I came over to hug Ma Sophie around her waist. She leaned down and wrapped her arms around me. I started crying because she was crying. But she wiped her face and said this is no time for tears. She told me to go back in the house but I stayed. I wanted to help fix things. Sollie pushed the jukebox back to an upright position. Ma Sophie started sweeping the bits and pieces of broken glass and felt. She shouted at me to go inside but I wanted to help, so I picked up the dustpan. We threw the broken pieces into the big, black dirt bin. We tested the machines to see which ones still worked and which ones didn’t. My father walked in.

“Have the police been here yet?” he asked Ma Sophie.

“No. We are still waiting on them,” she replied.

“*Fokken skollies*, look at this place! Where was Sollie when it happened?”

“On his post, at the clinic. He saw everything. But they were wearing balaclavas. So he could not see their faces. He came over to wake me up when they left.”

“And our neighbour, Mrs Davids, did she see anything?”

“She said she could not see anything but just saw a white Datsun *bakkie* drive away.

She called the police. She didn’t get a chance to write down the number plate.”

“Aai” he sighed and closed his eyes for a moment.

“I want to open for the school children. We must get this place clean.”

“Ma, we must close for a few days. The detective and forensics people must come

in and investigate. They must take fingerprints and statements. Don’t touch anything else. The games machines must be replaced and the pool tables repaired.”

My father picked up a piece of broken glass and looked like he too might cry.

“I want this place open for the school children,” insisted Ma Sophie. “I want everyone to come here and feel safe to play games and buy from me. This is their only fun. We must open up shop again.”

My father looked at me. I was in the corner by the empty fridges, holding the broom.

“Why is she here, Ma? She is supposed to be in bed, sleeping. Nadia, go inside. You must get up later to go to school.”

“Daddy I don’t want to go to school tomorrow,” I said, gripping the broom tighter, “I want to help you and Ma Sophie.”

“Don’t back-chat with me Nadia. Go inside. Now!”

I left and went into the house. My mother scolded at me and told me to take off my dirty nightie and put on a clean one. I got into bed. She kissed me and switched off the light. My eyes were burning from the tears. I hated my father for telling me to go inside. Why didn’t he want me to help Ma Sophie? And what if the balaclava gangsters came back? I could not sleep.

Ma Sophie had already swept up all the broken glass, plastic and felt and my father had already fixed the security gate and found a spare padlock to replace the broken one when the police finally arrived.

“You will have to close this place down. The gangsters aren’t letting anyone take their business any more. It won’t be safe to operate your business in this area,” said the freckle-faced constable.

“No, we cannot give them that satisfaction. And this is our livelihood. We will reopen,” said my father.

The constable shrugged and filled in his report. He asked my father to sign it and gave Ma Sophie the top copy. He told them to wait for the detective who would come and take fingerprints.

“Don’t touch anything,” he told them, looking at the broom in my grandma’s hands.



When he was gone, my father crumpled up the copy of the report and threw it in the black rubbish bin. He knew nothing would come of it. The gangsters had most of the local policemen in their pockets.

The next morning, I got into my school uniform and went into the kitchen. Ma Sophie was making jungle oats for me on the stove. I sat down to eat. I hoped she would let me stay with her at the game shop. I didn't like the thought of leaving her alone there.

“Ma Sophie, I don't want to go to school today.”

“Nadia, you must go to school.”

“But, Ma Sophie-”

“No, listen to me. I know you like to help Ma in the game shop but your schooling is more important.”

“But I like working in the game shop more than school.”

“I know it's fun, but school can also be fun.”

“And I don't want to leave you alone. What if the *skollies* come back when I am at school? What if they hurt you?”

I had been thinking about it all night, about the gangsters coming back and tying up my grandma or even shooting her, but it made my stomach hurt so I pushed the thought away and pulled my spoon through my porridge. My grandma could read my worried face.

“Don't worry about me, baby,” she said, her voice softer as she turned back to the stove. “I will be okay. Your Ma knows how to survive.”

## Gravestone

My grief is like a stone weighing heavy in my pocket. It's what I have in place of a son. It never goes away.

The house is so quiet now. Sometimes I forget that he's dead and I walk into his room thinking he's going to jump out of the cupboard or behind the door and surprise me. I want him to make me laugh again. I miss him most when I am happy.

It's been fifteen years and I can still remember what he smelt like. I remember how he loved bananas on his bread, thick butter, coke mixed with his ice-cream. He ate funny stuff. Even ants and snails and beetles when he and his friends played 'survivor-survivor'. He liked me to put honey in his tea and I would call him a "little old man" and he would call me a "little old lady". Even when I look at his photos now he comes alive. I remember him telling me,



"Mummy I want this... mummy I'm hungry... mummy I don't want to wash my socks and shirt out, I want to go play outside... mummy I don't want to go to school."

My son is in the ground. I have nothing now. *Ek loop rond, ek swêrf*. That is my lot. Many a time I sit at the foot of his grave and we spend hours sharing the silence. We are in an everlasting silent conversation. My love for him is everlasting. *My-everlasting-love-fits-like-a-glove...* I should have been returned to the soil before him, I should be the one resting in the grave, not him, not my baby. *Maar die Here het hom weg gevat*. God said "It is his time to go," and changed Nature's course, so I had to put him in a coffin. *Ma-aai-dai's-maar hoe-die-lewe-is*.

I went to go visit him on his birthday last week. I threw out the stale water that smelled like rotten eggs. I filled the glass pots with fresh water, like I do every week, so I

could put in fresh flowers. This week I put the carnations in to bloom. I would tidy up around his head and feet so it looks nice. He was a neat and tidy boy, my son, he would want me to take care of things. I missed him a lot that day. I missed him and I missed my mother. I lost them both around the same time. I spent my time in the graveyard between the trees, lying on the carpet of leaves and pine needles. I walked around looking at the gravestones and dusting off crosses of wood with tissues I carry in my purse. I sit and read the names of those just like my son, who have gone too soon and I know many have been forgotten.

I stayed there deep into the night. Lying on my back on an old granite gravestone of Luke Engelbrecht, born 17 August 1989 and died 19 June 1997. He was eight years old. Still a baby. Two years younger than my baby when he died. Borrowing his resting place, I fell asleep crying for him and his mother, and for my child.

I woke up with a headache. The cemetery caretaker was standing over me with a torch pointed at my face. I could only see his shadow. The light blinded me. He asked me to leave.

*“Is jy al weer hier?”* Lukas said with a slur, smelling like Old Brown Sherry. “You can’t sleep here, you must go home. *Waar is jou mense?”* I got up, dragging my rheumatic legs. I put a R20 note in his hand and asked him to look after my son until I returned.

When I go visit Modderdam cemetery I feel at home. My son is there. He is my home.

I promised I would never leave him. A few weeks before he died there was shooting outside our house in Ravensmead. The local gangs were shooting all night and David was so scared. David, me and my other child, Peter, were lying with our heads rested on the ground. Our cheeks were cold and started to stick to the ceramic tiles. David asked,

“How long, mummy?”

“Not for long, my boy, don’t worry, it’s going to be okay, *it-will-pass-it-doesn’t-last-it-will pass...*” I made up rhymes to keep him calm, to make him laugh.

“Why do they always shoot here by us, mummy? My friend from school who lives in Old Belhar say they don’t shoot there by him so much, why do the gangsters shoot so much here by us?”

“Because this is not a good place to live David, we live between all these stupid gangsters who think they are big and strong because they have weapons to threaten and kill people, forget about them, you don’t get involved, you stay away.”

I told him to forget the sound. Forget about knowing what it is and pretend it’s something else, like a car backfiring or the sound of a loud, powerful firecracker going off. He loved firecrackers. On Guy Fawkes I was always scared to buy him *klappertjies* firecrackers but he went on about it so much that I gave in. The shots stopped for a while. And just when we thought it was over, we would hear another one and get a fright and nervously laugh it off.

“When mummy, when?”

“Now, now. I held him tight and started singing, *Smile-a-while-and-give-your-face-*”

Another shot just outside of our house. Valerie. Shouting hysterically. Nigel, I thought, he must have been shot. I told the children to stay down and indoors while I ran outside. “Stay on the ground. Peter, hold your brother. Stay in the house.”

I didn’t know what I would find but the danger was gone. I walked in on Nigel’s bloody body lying outside on the pavement – a wound from his neck and chest streaming with blood. He was on his back choking and crying. His mother screaming, “I love you, I

love you! Nigel! Oh God! Please God!” Valerie cried and begged, clutching his body. Her pink nightie was covered in his blood.

I didn’t realise it but David was standing behind me, seeing all of this. I felt him pulling on my skirt, “Mummy, is Nigel going to die?” I chased him back inside without saying anything. But he stayed. I went to comfort Valerie but Nigel had left us. His eyes were wide open, staring at the night sky. I look at Valerie and her bloody clothes; it was worse than a butcher’s apron. Even her blue slippers were drenched in blood. Her hands were dripping with it. The next day I would come over to mop the floors, put her clothes in a black bag and throw it away. But in that moment, I turned to David and closed his eyes with my hands. I held him tight, crying with Valerie. Everybody, it seemed, from the neighbours on either side, to the street behind us, was there just staring. Staring at Nigel, at Valerie, at the scene of the crime. Mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, made a circle around the young man with bloodshot eyes. I looked around at everyone’s facial expression – pity. David’s lower lip was shivering; I knew he wanted to cry, not because he felt for Nigel but because he could see how much it affected me. Valerie coughed out a cry. Elderly men took off their hats, shook their heads and said: “Not another one. Not another one.” I remember taking David inside and giving him sugar water for the shock.

“Is Nigel dead now, mummy?” he asked, with tears in his eyes.

“Yes David, he’s dead,” I grabbed him and started crying again, feeling so heart-sore for Valerie and thinking that that could have been my son. But thinking that today it wasn’t.

“Mummy, please don’t leave me, please don’t die like Nigel.”

“I promise you, David, I will never leave you,” I said as I held his face in my hands.

“What happened to Nigel was a mistake.”

I lied. Nigel was involved in gangs and knew that if you live by the gun, you die by the gun. But my David didn't need to know the truth; as his mother I needed to protect him from it.

A few weeks after I watched Nigel's body go into the ground, I would bury my son.

\*

I was in the kitchen peeling potatoes for the hot chips and fried fish I was preparing for supper, when David's older brother, Peter came into the kitchen crying, “Mummy, *die trok het oor Dawie*. Mummy, *Dawie is dood*.” I put the knife down, stared at Peter and slapped him across the face. “Peter *dis lelik om so iets te sê*. You don't joke about death, Peter, *die Here gaan jou straf*. Go call your brother. Go call your brother!” I said, with a lump in my throat. Peter shouted at me between sobs, “David is dead! Mummy, *hoor mummy*, he's dead!”

Then he told me what happened, the whole story. I sat and listened as I continued to peel the potatoes.

After school on that windy afternoon in August 1993, David and his friends hung onto the back of the truck that brought oranges, milk and bread as they always did in winter for the primary school children. The truck driver picked up speed. The children hanging on started to panic and jumped off one by one, but David held on, wanting to show off. Then as the truck came to the gravel road he jumped off, but couldn't get away. His school pants, torn and ruffled, got caught in the tyre and wrapped around it like a plastic bag. The wheels went over

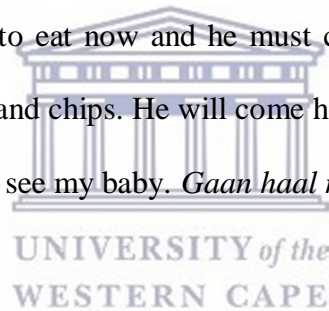
him. The middle wheel, the double wheel, went over his body. Then the rear wheel went over his chest and his head. He was no more.

I got up from the table, and put the very thin sliced potatoes into the hot pan and watched them float in the oil while I spoke to Peter.

“Go call him, Peter.”

“But mummy- ”

“Go call David and tell him to come here, I want to see him. Tell him I didn’t make the slap chips so thick, I made the slices nice and thin, just like he likes it. I think he is by his friend Nathan’s house. Run quickly. Go fetch him. Tell him he must come home. Tell him we going to eat now and he must come home. Tell him I made his favourite. Homemade fish and chips. He will come home if you tell him that. Go fetch him for me Peter. I want to see my baby. *Gaan haal my kind.*”



\*

A week later we sat in church. I was wearing a black dress and a veil. I greeted everyone as they walked in. I received compassionate smiles and embraces, and gentle hand- squeezes, soft and lingering. That’s how they said they felt sorry for me. That’s how I knew my son was dead.

I don’t remember getting dressed that morning, but I remember ironing my clothes and Peter’s clothes and speaking to my sister about cakes, pies and samoosas, and ordering orange juice from Mr Harris. My sister, Sunita, made all the arrangements. She called the

Funeral Home, and went to the Anglican Church in Ravensmead to ask Father John to bury him and she informed all the relatives. All I did was see the body.

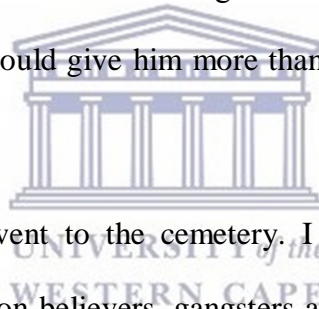
My son was blue from the cold. Lying in a freezer at Tygerberg Hospital. I couldn't believe he was there. His wounds were still fresh. His face was crushed, skull cracked.

“He broke his neck,” said the coroner. “That’s how he died.”

“Oh, I see,” I said and dried my tears.

I left with the burden of loss.

It was a closed casket. I listened to the squeaky voices singing, *Free-fully-free* and *Amazing-Grace-how-sweet-the-sound...* and humming between sobs. I couldn't cry. Everyone cried for David and I felt like I should give him more than just tears. I should be strong for him, and for Peter.



We left the church and went to the cemetery. I laid him to rest at Modderdam cemetery between believers and non-believers, gangsters and teachers, doctors and lawyers, liars and crooks. We are all sinners but in death we are all equal.

I looked at the grave, threw the sand on him and said “I will miss him very much. He was my baby.” That was the first time I spoke about David like he wasn't there any more.

I covered his casket with sand and roses as it went down. I looked around and listened to more singing. More shaking and crying. More down-turned smiles. Tissues and handkerchiefs taken out to dry the eyes and blow the nose. I offered tissues that I carried tucked away in my bra, and handed them to my cousins, sister and friends. I tried to smile but I felt my face pull tight. I felt older.



Later when everyone came over to my house for cake and tea, I watched them chatting about the priest's sermon, David's beautiful casket, and my brother Denver's eulogy,

“David was a good boy. The cleverest in his class at school. He liked to read and his brother was always teasing him about reading so much books. But I said to him, *lees Dawie*, because nobody can take *jou geleerhenteid*, your schooling, away from you. David kept him like a child. He was always playing outside with his friend's hide-and-seek or with the soccer ball until late in the night, when his mother must come outside to call him to eat. Sometimes he didn't even eat and just played on. He was a good boy, our *Dawie*. He was a good boy...”

Denver's eulogy was nice. But none of it mattered to me. Friends and relatives would come over to ask if I'm okay and I remember thinking, what a stupid question, but I had to be nice and say, “I'm okay,” with a frown that was meant to be a smile. I had to be okay even if it was a lie. But in that moment I didn't feel anything. It was like my ears had popped the way they do when you drive up a mountain. I fell silent for the rest of the day and listened to distant voices offering condolences and prayers. I nodded my head and made my rounds, working through every room like a machine, making everyone feel better. At the end of the day I was tired and hungry. I didn't feel like eating, but Sunita insisted I have a plate of food.

“I can't eat, Sunita.”

“Please, Dorothy, you must, you must look after yourself. Peter needs you.”

“I will make some chips.”

“No, it's fine, let me.” She took the oil out of the cupboard.

“I'm not sick or disabled, Sunita, let me do it for myself.” I took the oil from her. I lit a match and ignited the gas stove.

“I didn’t see you cry.”

“And?”

“And you don’t have to be strong, you lost your child, Dorothy, it’s okay to be sad about it.”

“Sunita *asseblief* please, just leave it.”

“But I’m just trying-”

“No. Stop it. I don’t need that from you right now.”

Sunita fell silent and left the room a few minutes later.

I was cutting the hot chips as thin as a pencil when the knife slipped and I cut myself. The blood came streaming from my finger. Peter walked in and saw my bleeding hand. “Don’t worry, Peter, it’s just a small cut,” I said and asked him to get me a plaster.

When he left I looked down at my hand and started to cry. I sat down thinking I was going to throw away that *bladdy* old knife and get a better one. A knife that can slice the potatoes stick thin. By the time he came back I was lying on the floor, short of breath. Peter came over to me and went down on his knees, “Mummy, only David liked the potatoes like that.” Then I cried so loud it scared him. Peter stood over me, crying. Sunita ran in. “David! David *kom huistoe*! Come home, my boy, come home.”

## Last words

His breathing was slowing down. The gap between each uneven breath was getting longer and longer, like a watch whose battery was running flat. I knew it was time. I wasn't ready. But I got up from the couch next to his bed and curled up next to him. I wrapped his arms around me and put my head on his collar bone.

A few months earlier, my brother had called me up one Saturday evening and said I needed to come home. I was living in Switzerland at the time pursuing Environmental Studies. I received a scholarship to study at Franklin University. I was surprised by my brother's abrupt phone call since we had not spoken in three months. I tried calling him but he always said he was too busy to talk and would call me back...but he never did. I sent him several WhatsApp messages asking to speak on Skype but he would either not respond or he would tell me that he had errands to run. He called me one night and then abruptly hung up. I called back and demanded to know why he was being so childish. He said he needed to talk, but that now was not the right time, then he hung up again. I was irritated and decided not to bother myself with his nonsense. A few days later I felt guilty and reached out to him on Facebook. I was worried about him. I wrote on his wall: *Thinking of you... I hope you're doing well? Wish you'd return my calls, love your big sister.*

I noticed that he had stopped posting his status and putting pictures of himself on Facebook. Two weeks after I wrote on his Facebook wall, he called me back. I forgot that I was mad with him and could not contain my excitement at hearing his voice. He sounded so distant. He kept mumbling about needing money for something important. Then he hung up. When he mentioned that he needed money I was so disappointed that I could have burst into tears. I had thought he was calling because he missed me...or at least in answer to my messages. All I wanted to tell him was how much I missed him. I called back but he didn't

answer. I sent him a WhatsApp message and asked what he needed money for? He didn't respond. I got irritated with him again and went about my day.

The following week he called me back. I listened closely to his voice, allowing his words to wash over me.

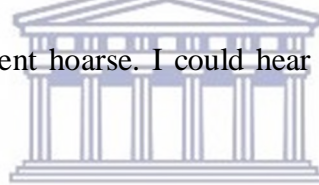
“Melissa, I'm not well. You need to come home.”

“Richard, what do you mean not well?”

“I'm dying, Melissa.”

“Ricky, that's not funny.”

But my brother didn't laugh. He didn't tell me that this was one of his jokes. A lump formed in my throat. My voice went hoarse. I could hear him swallowing too on the other side. Was he crying?



“What's wrong with you?” I asked as I sat down on the couch.

It was my turn to go quiet now. I think Ricky knew it was harder for me. I felt calmer now but so many thoughts passed through my head. How much time?

“Is it cancer?”

“No.”

“A brain tumour?”

“No. Don't try and force it out of me. Please, I want to tell you in person.”

“I'm your sister. I deserve to know,” I said, swallowing my tears.

“Melissa, please stop asking me. We can talk when you come home.”

“Ricky, please tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s not the kind of conversation we should have over the phone. Mel, I’m sorry but I need to tell you face to face.”

“Ricky you’re my only family.” My tears burnt my eyes and cheeks. “It’s hard being this far away from you and missing out on your life... and now this.”

“I know. Please come home and I will tell you everything.”

I put down the phone down on the couch and stared at the screen. I’m dying. I’m dying. I’m dying. The words seemed to be on “repeat” in my head. Heart disease. It’s in our family. It must be that. Our maternal grandmother died from it. But Ricky had converted to vegetarianism at the age of fifteen. It was so typical of him to just expect me to drop everything and come to his rescue. But this time it was different. He was dying. My only sibling, my brother, was dying. We are each other’s only family. Our parents died in a car accident when Ricky was five years old, I was twelve. We moved in with our grandma in Glenhaven, Bellville. I helped raise him. I was there on his first day of school. I took care of him when he was sent home with chicken pox. I drove him to the hospital when he broke his arm in a skateboarding accident. I packed his lunches. I made up his bed when he left it undone, almost every day. I could not believe it. My baby brother. He was young and healthy, or so I thought. I hoped that he was wrong. I hoped that it was a ploy to get me to come home. I didn’t want it to be true.

Suddenly I knew I had to go. I sat down in front of my laptop and booked my flight ticket back to South Africa. I arrived in O.R. Tambo International Airport after a twelve and a half hour flight. I boarded a flight to Cape Town and took a taxi to my brother’s town house in Table Bay.

I walked through the gate of his home, staring at the hairline cracks in the plasterwork of the outside walls. His prized vegetable garden had become weedy and the plants were dry. I walked up to the door and knocked three times. He opened it slowly and smiled gently when our eyes met. I gasped when I saw him. His head was small enough to fit into my hands. His eyes were sunk deep in his head. His skin, stretched over his bony face, exposed his high cheek bones. His cheeks were sunken in. He looked as if he had aged by twenty years. His once-broad shoulders were narrow and frail. He was wearing a white vest with light brown Chino trousers and a dark brown belt.

“Hello, Melissa” he said, giving me a hug. I wrapped my arms around him and felt his ribcage. “You look good,” he said.

“Ricky” I gasped, my voice cracking into tears. I didn’t want to let go but gently my brother loosened my grip.

“Come inside, let’s talk over a cup of green tea.”

He tried to move my luggage to put it inside but could not. So I did. I took it from him and he went to the kitchen and put on the kettle for tea. All his clothes looked baggy as if they were meant for a much heavier man, like a boy wearing his father’s clothes. But I knew they were his clothes, I had bought him those Chino trousers four years earlier at Mr Price in Blue Route Mall. It was just that he was so thin.

“Did you have a good flight?” he asked, taking two mugs from the cupboard.

“Yes,” I said, taking off my pink floral scarf and leather jacket. I sat on the couch in the lounge facing the kitchen. I could not take my eyes off him.

“How many sugars?”

“Two please.”

“You’ve cut down.”

“I was dating this health-nut back in Switzerland, he told me if I just cut down on sugars and fats that I could prolong my life...”

“Go on, it’s okay,” my brother said, and smiled.

“Oh God, is it cancer?”

“Calm down,” he said, clearly burning his tongue on the hot tea. “Milk?”

“No thanks. Why didn’t you tell me about your... your condition sooner? Oh God.

Look at you!”

“I’ve got to pee.”



UNIVERSITY of the  
WESTERN CAPE

I watched him leave the room. As I sipped my tea, I looked around at the pale blue couches. Photos of our parents on holiday in Istanbul. The ornaments and artwork my brother had collected from his gap year travels after Matric to Thailand and India. When he came back he studied Journalism at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Ricky was an aspiring freelance photographer. But it didn’t work out. His dream was to photograph for the *National Geographic* magazine but he made no effort to pursue that dream. He got bored as he always did, wanting the autonomy to take photographs of whatever he wanted. “That’s not how this business works,” the *Cape Argus* editor said, before letting him go. After that he was out of work for two years. My dad was in real estate and had invested in property in Table Bay. It was meant to be a beach house for our family. But my brother made it his home. I didn’t want the privilege. I wanted to make my own way. I preferred to have a plan and a set of rules to govern my life but Ricky was a free-spirit, like tumble-weed. My

grandma supported Ricky during his period of unemployment, when he told her it would “just be until I can get another job, something permanent”. But he never did. After two years she had given up and so had Ricky. He was wavering, reluctant to get tied down in a permanent job or pursue a different career path. But I knew it was all bullshit. He just didn’t want to work. Ricky was spoilt and my grandmother always made excuses for him. She died shortly after his twentieth birthday. Ricky was heartbroken. Our grandmother was the only parent he had ever known. Without her pushing him to do things, he stopped trying. He gave up on life and he gave up on himself. He spent his twenties partying and changing girlfriends as frequently as he changed his bed sheets. I didn’t like any of them. I knew they were just party girls looking for a bit of fun. They never really cared about Ricky. They just spent a few nights with him and left.

During this time, I was studying in Switzerland. I had not been in contact with my brother. We spoke every two weeks or so in the beginning, over the phone or on Skype, but after a while I guess we both just got busy. Or maybe I just got busy. I soon began to realise that he would not contact me unless I made contact first.

He returned to the room with a wide grin.

“I’m happy that you’re home.”

“Ricky, I’ve come all this way, what is it, cancer?” I said putting down the cup that had begun to tremble in my hands.

“No. Why do you keep asking me if I have cancer?”

“Because you look fatigued and aged like a cancer victim.”

“No. It’s not cancer.”



“Thank God.”

“I have AIDS.”

Silence filled the room.

“HIV?”

“No. Well... yes. My condition has worsened. I have Full - blown AIDS.”

“What? But how?”

“I didn’t always use protection.”

I did not know what to say next. I had not expected it to be AIDS.

“How did you find out?”

“One of the girls I slept with called to tell me she tested positive for HIV. I went to

Dr Rabi the next day and I tested positive. That was two years ago. My body

rejected the ARV treatment. I later developed full blown AIDS.”

“Later, when? Two years, Ricky! You’ve been living with this for two whole years

and you have not told a soul, not your family or friends.”

“Well, Jason knows. I told Jason.”

“Oh, of course, your best friend Jason knows before your own sister. I’m so mad at

you. How could you be so stupid as to have unprotected sex?”

He did not respond to my question. He just diverted the conversation. Same way he always does.

“My immune system is too weak to fight it. I’m getting weaker every day.”

“How could you be so careless, Ricky? So reckless with your life!” I fumed. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

A lump rose again in my throat and this time I just let the tears flow.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Just you. And Jason.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. My brother, a victim of AIDS. It was a strange thought, even stranger to say out loud. I had read an online news article only a few days ago about South Africa’s high prevalence rate for HIV/AIDS. Over 5 million people in this country are living with HIV, and 270, 000 of those people died of HIV-related deaths. My brother was going to be a statistic. I watched as Ricky sipped his luke-warm tea. I just stared at him, my tears wetting my cheeks. He could not face me.

“Ricky. How much time?”

“I don’t know. A few more months maybe.”

“We’ll find the best doctors and treatment abroad. They have made some advances.

I’m sure if I looked, I could find someone. We could get help.”

“It’s too late Melissa,” he pleaded.

“No, that’s unacceptable. It’s never too late. Families don’t give up on each other. I will find a way.”

“No, Mel. This is it. I’ve been on ARV treatment. It didn’t work. There is no cure.

I've made my peace with it. You should, too."

"Nobody wants to die, Ricky. No one. And not from AIDS."

I stood up, looking down at him.

"Were you even taking your medication? Was it about the money, the consultations with Dr Rabi?" But HIV treatment should be free? I thought.

I paced back and forth.

"Did you get a second opinion?"

"Yes."

"Did you go and see a specialist?"

"No, for what?"

"What do you mean for what? To prolong your life. To put you on special treatment.

Was it about the money? I could have given you the money, why didn't you ask me?"

"I did!" he snapped.

"When?" I lowered my voice.

I stood still with my arms folded across my chest.

"I called you a few weeks ago to ask for some money. The money was to pay for my pain medication. I ran out of medical aid funds ages ago."

"Why couldn't you just tell me so I could help you Ricky? Why must you always wait till the last minute and put me under pressure?"

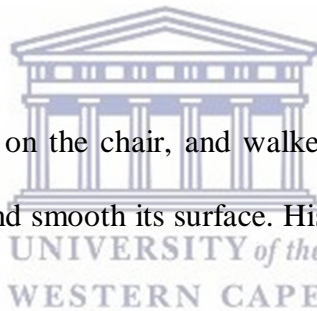
“You were busy. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Ricky, you’re my family, you are all I have in this world. We always stayed in contact. We always told each other everything. I’m hurt because you kept this from me. For two years. It’s not right.”

I sat down next to him on the couch. Ricky put his tea-cup down and faced me. I glared at him with watery eyes.

“I’ve made peace with this,” he said, taking my hand in his and squeezing gently. “I will give you a few days to absorb this. I know you’re in shock. Let me help you get settled in.”

He got up slowly, leaning on the chair, and walked to his room. I followed him. I watched him climb onto the bed and smooth its surface. His movements looked strained. My tears fell before I could stop them.



“I am so sorry, Richard. I’m sorry that I didn’t try to contact you all those months.

Now we can never get that time back.” I turned away, wiping my tears with my

hands. “You don’t deserve this. You’re such a good person.”

“Even good people die of AIDS, Melissa.”

“Yes, of course I know that, but you’re *my* brother. Now that it’s you it matters to me.

I don’t want to see it take you away.”

“I know-”

“I can’t live without you. You’re my best friend. I love you so much.”

“I know. I love you, too” he said, getting up to wrap his arms around me.

“It’s just not fair,” I cried into his neck, his Adam’s apple poking me. “I can’t lose you.”

He put a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. I held him. Tight. Feeling like I’d never let go. We stood in silence.

I woke up later that evening while Ricky was asleep on the couch. He was snoring. His breath was warm and faint. I covered him with a brown, fleecy blanket I had brought as a gift from Switzerland. I was wide awake, adjusting to the news of Ricky. I sat down on the couch opposite the coffee table and picked up his GQ magazine. My brother must have cancelled his subscription because it was the December 2012 edition, and now it was August 2013. I put the magazine down. Switched on the TV to search the channels for a movie. Switched off the TV. I got up from the couch to get a glass of water. I stood in the open-plan kitchen and watched my brother sleep. It was the start of it all for us, I thought, but it was also the end.

The next day while Ricky was taking a shower, I called the offices of our family GP, Dr Rabi, to get his side of the story.

“Melissa, this is confidential patient information.”

“Dr Rabi, you were a friend of my father, you knew my grandmother, my brother is dying, please help me.”

“He was angry and resisted treatment,” said Dr Rabi. “I put him on a fixed dose combination because he was complaining about having to take so many pills. He took the ARV’s sporadically. He was defaulting on his pills; that’s why he is deteriorating

so fast.”

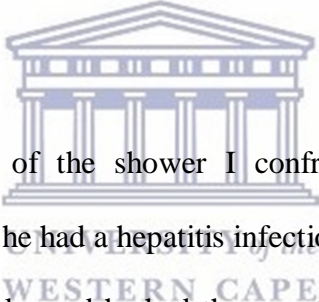
“Dr Rabi, is there anything more that you can do to help him?” I asked. “I cannot just sit back and watch him fade away. He is still so young. His body should be able to fight it.”

“He is at an advanced stage. Along with infections, he also has liver problems. There is nothing more that I can do for him.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay. All the best.”

“Goodbye.”



When Ricky climbed out of the shower I confronted him and he admitted to defaulting on his pills and said that he had a hepatitis infection. He said that the Antiretroviral drugs made him nauseous and cranky and he had the worst diarrhea of his life. I was angry that he lied to me, but at the same time, I was overcome with sadness because I knew that this time I could not come to his rescue.

As the months went by, I watched Ricky grow weaker. At first he couldn't dress himself properly. Then he struggled to bathe himself until he was bed-ridden and unable to do anything except chew his own food and swallow. I fed him one boiled egg at a time and maybe some tea. He drank mostly water and struggled to keep food down. He never wanted to eat anything.

“That's normal,” said Dr Rabi when I called to ask about Ricky's loss of appetite.

“Just try and keep him comfortable at all times. I will give you a prescription for some

morphine that you must pick up from the hospital pharmacy in Panorama.”

I drove Ricky’s car to Panorama Medi-Clinic hospital pharmacy to get the morphine. I gave it to him when he complained about abdominal and body pains. He developed bed sores on his hips and tailbone. I went back to the pharmacy to get some hydrocolloid dressings and antiseptic cream which Dr Rabi had prescribed for him, to keep the skin dry where the ulcers had formed. I also bought a foam mattress for him to sleep on to relieve the pressure on his body from lying in bed all day.

On good days, days when he felt well enough to talk, we often spoke about our childhood.

“Do you remember our trips with Ma to the West Coast as children?” I started the conversation.

“Yes,” he said, smiling.

“Do you remember how scared I was to go into the water because of the seaweed? I thought they were slimy sea snakes. But you were so brave. You just walked right through it.”

“Nice day.”

“Yes, it was,” I said, and gently kissed him on his forehead as he dozed off.

In the days that followed, we watched cartoons, just like when we were children and we played ‘I spy with my little eye’. Some days, I helped him outside to feel the fresh air and to have the wind fan his t-shirt, and the warm sun tan his face and feet. I looked over at my brother and his legs were exposed: they looked like big dog bones. Pale and skinny. I

yearned to give him a hug but any movement he made or pressure he felt was painful. I tried to be strong for him but it was killing me to see him like that. A carcass. The Ricky that I knew was gone and had been replaced with this skeleton of a man. But I needed to be strong for him, so I cried in the shower so he wouldn't hear or notice.

I spent my alone time resurrecting his garden, knowing how much he cherished it. I removed the weeds, planted new seeds and watered the soil. The roses, blooming lipstick red and blush pink, glowed. He would sit on his padded, reclining chair and stare at the garden for hours at a time. I would join him with a picnic blanket and some snacks and we would sit and chew in silence. At that point, I could only get him to eat half of the boiled egg. I felt like a failure.

The last few weeks he could not keep food down. His stools were watery and frequent. He had bed sores on his ankles and heels too. Jason came to see him and cried at his bedside.

The last few days he could barely talk. He struggled to breathe enough to form words. I watched him and cried quietly in my room. I went on my knees and prayed for a miracle, "I just want more time, God. Just some more time," I prayed.

It was a Thursday. The room was filled with light poking through the venetian blinds. My eyes opened with the glare of the sun. It was warm inside the room. I fell asleep on the couch I had put next to his bed. I got up to lie down next to my brother. I wrapped his arms around me and put my head on his collar bone. I felt his index finger graze my arm and he said, "Mel" and exhaled. I kissed him on his forehead and closed his eyes.



## Lights out

He takes his last breath. He stops moving. I take my hands away from his nose and mouth. There's some spit on my palm. I wipe it onto my pants. I sit next to him on the bed. I get up. Pick him up and leave the room. I put him in the car seat and strap him in. It's dark outside. The street lights above my mother's house are dimmed. I need to leave. Nobody cares about me. I want to die. I'm taking my son with me. I can't leave him alone. I am his mother. He should not grow up without his mother. My son loves me. He adores me. I love my son. I need to have him with me.

I stop at an Engen garage on the way to Paarl on the N1. Why am I here? I switch off the engine and turn to look at my baby. Sleeping. I face the windscreen and want to hit my head against it. But I don't. The car radio is on. Michael Buble's 'Home' is playing softly in the background. I look at the time. It's 23:26 p.m. Just below it reads May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Three days have passed since I took a bath. But I don't care about me, I care about my baby. As long as he's okay, I'm okay.

The pills should start to work any time now. I've taken Panado and Ibuprofen. I didn't need a prescription. The first dose of pain pills had little effect so I took fifteen more. Why aren't they working yet? I'd finished them all. I should be feeling dizzy by now. I should have passed out by now. I decide to go inside the Engen one-stop to buy myself a cool drink and an apple juice for Kyle. My baby must be thirsty. As I walk back to the car I start to feel nauseous. The pills are working now, finally. I unlock the door of the car and put the juice in Kyle's lap.

“Drink your juice, Kyle. Be a good boy for mommy.”

I'm afraid that the crackling of opening the fizzy drink will give Kyle a fright so I drink it outside the car. He jumps and cries at every little noise. He looks so peaceful now. I don't want to upset him. I take a sip. My throat is dry. The corners of my mouth and tongue are white. I gulp up the rest of my drink. I am so thirsty. My hands are shaking. My skin feels cold. I throw the can into the bin and get back into the car. It's so cold outside. I rub my hands together and turn to look at Kyle. He has not touched his juice. He looks a little blue. It must be because of the cold. It's freezing. Kyle's head is bowed, his chin touching his chest. I push his head back.

“You can't drink like that, Kyle. You need to keep your head up or you'll choke on it. Let mommy put the heater on for you. Now have a sip of your juice, Kyle. Listen to mommy.”

I start up the car and get back onto the N1. I feel dizzy. It must be the pills. A wave of drowsiness washes over me. I know I'm driving but I don't feel in control of myself or the car. I watch everything happen as if from a distance. The car comes to a standstill. I get out, feeling unsteady on my feet. I open the back door where Kyle is sitting and unbuckle him. When I take him out of the car seat, his juice falls onto the car mat. I sit down on the edge of the tar road with him, just behind the yellow line. I hold him to my chest for a long time. He doesn't wake up. He's not breathing.

“Kyle, Kyle, wake up. We're here!” I shake him, lightly at first, then violently.

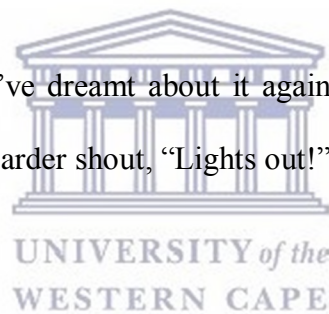
“Kyle. Wake. Up. Why won't you wake up?”

I get up and throw him over the fence of a farmer's cattle field. I can't see where he lands. I just hear a thump.

I walk back and get into the car, feeling as though I'm floating over my body, not able to gain control. I have the knife in the car and take it out of the cubby hole. I cut my wrist with it. I can't feel anything. I enjoy seeing the blood, the way it gushes from my wrist. How it drips onto the car mat and soaks my lime-green pants. I'm losing blood. I feel weak. But the cut is not deep enough to kill me.

My eyes feel heavy and close for a bit. My head turns to the passenger side. I open my eyes. I see my baby Kyle sitting next to me. I jump out of the car. It feels like my heart is in my throat. It's beating hard and fast. I run away into the darkness. I put my thumb out to hitchhike. My hand is bloody. It drips onto the tar.

I'm awake. And I know I've dreamt about it again. I pick up my blanket from the cement floor and hear the prison warden shout, "Lights out!"



## Baby love

I remember the first time I saw Lenny. I was idling at the robot on Okavango Bridge, Old Paarl road. The summer of December 2008 was a fiercely hot one. Sweat trickled down my back and neck. I was wearing my new, honey-tinted Ray Ban sunglasses. My window was down. He walked up to my car with cupped hands and asked me for money to buy food.

I was torn. There was a part of me that felt a sense of compassion for this child, even guilt - because I was in a privileged position and this innocent child was a beggar on the streets. Then the other part of me was annoyed by the constant harassment of these robot scavengers, and often, I just wanted to find his parents and tell them to stop using their child to exploit people out of their hard-earned money.

But instead I just said, “Sorry, I don’t have,” shook my head and turned to look away. Sometimes if I really feel sorry for a begging child, like Lenny, I give in and hand out R2 or R5. But I know that it is wrong to give the child money because once they receive anything they have not worked for they develop a sense of entitlement, and they expect people to give them hand-outs all the time. But Lenny was special.

“Aunty, don’t aunty have a R2 for me, please, Aunty,” said the hazel-eyed boy in tattered clothes.

I remember reaching for my purse when my eyes glanced over the packet of sweets I’d just bought. I reached over and grabbed the strawberry Fizzers and handed one to the child. His eyes lit up and he said, “Thank you, aunty” with a toothy smile. I smiled back. He rushed off to the other children standing on the pavement. I watched him chew with an open mouth as he showed them the wrapper. I heard a car hooting behind me and I looked up. The robot was green and there was a ten-metre gap between me and the car in front. I moved

forward and the robot started to change to amber, then red. The man behind me in a white Volkswagen Citi Golf hooted several times. He was talking on his cell phone and I stayed out of sight of my rear view mirror to avoid his glare. Lenny and his group of friends walked over to my car. Lenny was leading the pack. Seeing them move towards me, I tried to turn up my window, and just as I grabbed the handle the window jammed. I managed to move it up by a few centimetres when Lenny's face appeared at my door and his short, stout fingers arched over my window. I frowned as I stared at his unwashed hands. I looked at his black finger nails and thought of all the dirt underneath. I fantasized about washing his hands - seeing them clean, nails cut and smelling of soap.

“Aunty, my friends also want from the sweets, aunty,” he said, sounding cheery.

“I don't have any more,” I said, trying to cover the open packet of pink sweets with my black cardigan.

“Don't lie. I just saw now. You hiding it away. There's it on the back seat,” said one of the older boys.

“I don't have any more to give,” I said.

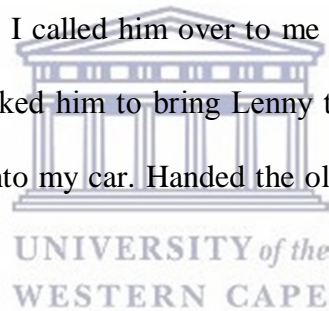
“Please, aunty,” said another boy in a desperate voice.

The car behind me hooted again. The robot was about to turn red for the second time. I was going to be late for work. I drove off.

The next day I tried to avoid their stares. I was in luck this time because the robot was green and I drove past Lenny as he waved wildly from the sidewalk. I kept looking at him in my rear view mirror and all through that day his face haunted me.

I got home and took a warm bath. I sat in the soap-scum water until it cooled down. I thought about Lenny. About bathing him and getting him some new clothes and feeding him and putting him to bed. Then I thought about the other children. How he was playing with them and sharing food.

The next day, when I got to the robot, Lenny came over and tapped on my window. I struggled to get my window down and his first words to me were, “Hello, aunty, does aunty have more sweets for me?” He had a layer of black dirt on his cheek. Mustard-coloured mucus escaped from his nose and slid down onto his upper lip. He licked it with his tongue. I made a frightening sound - loud and coarse. It scared him. He ran back to his friends. I pulled over, onto the side of the road in the yellow line, and got out of my car. I took a pack of Kleenex tissues out of my pocket. I called him over to me but he would not budge. I called over one of the older boys and asked him to bring Lenny to me. “*Lossie kind af*” leave the child alone, he said. I got back into my car. Handed the older boy the packet of Fizzers I’d been hiding and sped off.



A week passed before I saw Lenny again. Before I even stopped at the robot, I saw him running over to my car.

“Hello, aunty,”

“Hello,” I said with a grin. “I’m sorry I scared you the other day.”

A moment of silence passed between us.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Lenny,” he responded.

“Lenny, my name is Aunty Karin. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Aunty Karin, do you have any more sweets for me?”

“I gave you a whole packet the other day,” I say in a high-pitched voice.

“Thank you, Aunty Karin, but don’t Aunty Karin have more sweets, please?”

“No, I don’t. It’s not good to eat so many sweets. Your teeth are going to get rotten.

What do you have to eat?”

“Bread and jam. Muneeb got bread by the lady by the shop. Aunty Karin, what car is this?”

“A Toyota RunX. Where is your mommy and daddy?” I asked.

“My mommy did go to the shop with Uncle Lester and she didn’t come back from the shop and my daddy is dead,” he says, facing the ground.

“How old are you, Lenny?”

“I am five years old,” he said showing me the amount with his fingers.

I looked up and saw the robot was green. I drove forward and asked Lenny to follow me. I stopped on the shoulder of the road at the opposite side of the intersection. Lenny ran over to my car and I got out.

“Who are those boys you stand with at the robot?” I asked.

“They my friends. I play with them. We play on-on and hide-and-see and we sleep there under the road,” he said with glee.

“Oh, I see. Don’t you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No.”

I opened the back door of my car and took out my lunch box. I gave him the cheese and ham sandwich I had made for lunch.

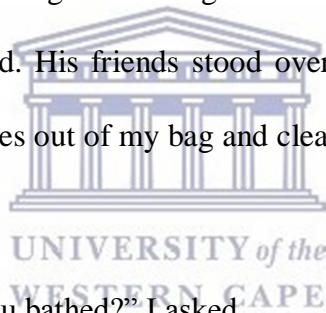
“Yor! Thank you, Aunty Karin.”

“It’s a pleasure, sweet-pie.”

I stood still for a while. He pushed both slices into his tiny mouth and chewed. His cheeks were bloated with chunks of bread. Saliva and small pieces of ham escaped from the corners of his mouth. I listened to him chew like a dripping tap.

I got back into my car and gave him a R5 coin before I drove away.

The following day we spoke again. I brought him his own sandwich and we sat and ate together at the side of the road. His friends stood over us like vultures. I shoed them away like flies. I took the wet wipes out of my bag and cleaned his hands before and after he ate.



“When was the last time you bathed?” I asked.

“My mommy did bath me.”

“Okay, when did your mommy bath you?”

“The night my mommy did go with Uncle Lester.”

“When was that?”

“That time when it rain every day.”

“In the winter?”

“Yes, Aunty Karin.”



I tossed and turned that night, thinking about Lenny and how he had not taken a bath since June. I thought about how he slept under the bridge in the cold and wet while I was warm and comfy in my bed.

The next morning when I gave him his bread I asked him to come home with me.

“Aunty Karin is going to buy you some nice new clothes; make you something nice to eat, wash you so you smell nice and clean, and you can sleep in a bed with blankets and pillows. How does that sound?” I said, enthusiastically.

He was quiet for a moment, thinking about it and then looked at me and said, “Nice!” I told him to wait for me at the robot and that I would pick him up on my way home. He smiled and jumped and skipped back to his friends. I picked him up just after 8 p.m. When he walked into my house his eyes were like an owl’s. He stared at my photos in frames. He ran his fingers over everything. His eyes were glued to the TV. He sat quietly on the couch, eating the chicken stew I had prepared for dinner. I gave him some apple juice and asked him if there was anything else he wanted. He shook his head. After he licked his plate clean I ran the water for his bath. I walked over to my room cupboard and took out the plastic bag with clothes that I bought for Lenny a few days earlier. I put him into the bath and lathered him in white soap.

“Why you do that?” he asked.

“Do what?” I said.

“Put me in the water?”

“Because I’m going to wash you.”

“But why?”

“So you can be clean and fresh.”

“But why?”

“Don’t worry about it my boy. Play with your ducky. *Quack. Quack.* Look at all the tiny bubbles, so many bubbles!”

I bought the bath toys and bubble bath to distract him. I scrubbed and washed his body until I saw the water turn brown and murky. I poured clean water into the bath and washed him again. After the third wash he smelled clean. I washed his hair several times; it was sticky and hard, and smelled of wood fire and sweat. I took out the olive oil and lice comb and got to work. Later, I dried him and dressed him in pyjamas. I brushed his teeth before placing him into my bed. I switched off the light and a few minutes later he was asleep. He woke up in the middle of the night. He looked around and started crying. I held him in my arms and rocked him to sleep.

The next morning, when my alarm went off, I got up for work and dressed Lenny.

“Did you sleep okay, Lenny?”

“It’s a nice bed, Aunty Karin, I did have a nice dream.”

“That’s nice, my boy.”

I brushed his yellow, milk teeth and gave him a bowl of Corn Flakes porridge to eat. At 7:05 a.m. we got into the car and drove off.

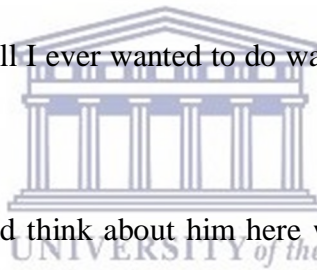
When we drove up to the intersection I locked his door. Lenny pulled on the handle but it didn’t work. He tried to pull up the knob to open the door but his fingers were too chubby and he couldn’t get the door open. I heard him murmuring in the back seat, breathlessly, “Open, Aunty Karin.” But I couldn’t. Salty tears rolled down my cheeks. I

looked at him in my rear view mirror and saw his quivering lower lip. He started to cry. “Open! Open!” he shouted. “I want to go to my friends!” The robot turned green. It was my chance to go. I drove forward. His pleas grew more desperate, “Please open!” he cried hysterically. I stopped the car and leaned over to open the door. He jumped out and ran over to his friends.

That was the last time I ever saw Lenny.

One of his friends told me his mother and Uncle Lester found him and took him back home. Another friend told me that Lenny was knocked over by a car and died at the scene of the accident. I don’t know who or what to believe. All I know is that I’ll never know. I did not get a chance to say goodbye. All I want to do is hold him one last time and tell him that I am missing him and loving him. All I ever wanted to do was help him. But maybe it is better that he went back to his old life.

I sit in the bath at night and think about him here with me, in my house – his clean face, his nose blown, his clothes smelling of lavender Stay Soft and baby powder. Lenny was my special boy. He was my baby love.



## Lisa's letter

I touched her. She was completely cold. I called the emergency services. I only remember fragments.

“My daughter. Not breathing. How long? I don't know. I just got home... No, I don't know...my address .....um....CPR. 22 Honeycomb Street, Bellville. Hurry. Thank you.”

The operator said an ambulance was on its way. I didn't know what to do with myself. I glanced at Lisa. My beautiful Lisa, what have you done, I thought. I wanted to stay close in case she needed me.

The bedside lamp was still on. I switched it off. The room went dark. I switched it on again. I opened the curtains and windows and the midday sunlight poured in. She had the floral comforter wrapped around her legs. She was wearing her white spaghetti-strap top with rose pink cotton shorts. Her curly dark brown hair was tied up into a bun. Her clenched fist gripped tightly to the bottle of pills as her body lay in rigor mortis. I could see a T-1 between her fingers. It was her Tramadol. She needed a prescription for it. I was the one who took her to the doctor. She said she was having chronic migraines and severe period cramps. The doctor had examined her but found nothing wrong. But he gave her the prescription anyway. On the floor lay a bottle of Smirnoff Vodka. It was open and spilled onto the carpet. How did you get that? It must have been her friend Kelly. Kelly was eighteen and always drinking. I had told her not to spend time with Kelly. I picked up the bottle and put it on the bedside table. There was a smell of urine. Had Lisa peed when she died? I heard people do that. Perhaps I should take off these smelly sheets before the paramedics get here, I thought. I did not want the paramedics finding her like that. Lisa was always so hygienically clean about herself. She had this obsession with cleanliness. She took three showers and washed her

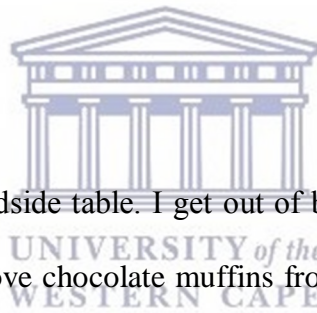
hands 20 times a day and used wet wipes and hand sanitizer in between. I tried pulling the sheets from under her but it was impossible, she was too heavy. I curled up next to her. I was facing her dressing table and saw a piece of paper. It's a note, I thought. I got up. I stared at it. I was too scared to read it. I picked it up and looked at it. It wasn't just a note, it was a three page letter scribbled in haste. Her P's and D's were written with sharp curves and her small i's without dots. I heard the *prrr* of a car's engine outside. That might be the paramedics, I thought. We live near the hospital. It would not take long. I put the note in my handbag to read later.

*I was ten years old when it happened for the first time. My breasts just started to grow. I spent the December holidays of 1998 with my best friend Jamey and her parents Uncle Godfrey and Aunty Sandra, at their ouma's beach house in Paternoster. It was a hot and humid Saturday afternoon. Jamey and I were sticky from the sweat but it was too hot to go for a swim between noon and 3 o' clock, so we decided to play a game using the pack of bicycle cards we bought at Shoprite in Bellville. We left the stuffy room and went outside to sit under the shade of a leafy tree. The bark was falling off like peeling skin. Not long into our game, Uncle Godfrey called me to come inside and help him with something. Jamey and I got up together and he said, no, she should stay as he just needed my help. So I went inside and he told me to sit down on the bed in the guest room. He sat next to me and put his hand on my lap, "You are now a big girl, big enough to be a woman." I didn't understand what he meant until later that night, while I was sleeping alone in the guest room. I felt a warm, sweaty hand over my mouth and the other hand in my pants. He told me to keep it a secret and that if I told anyone he would kill me and my family. I was so scared I just nodded. This continued for several years until last year, after my*

sixteenth birthday, he pulled me into the guest room and locked the door as he usually did. He grabbed my breasts and as his hands crept down to my vagina, I stopped him. With trembling hands I pushed him away hard and fast. He looked at me, surprised, but tried again. I pushed him away. He grabbed my arm. I kicked him in the groin. He fell to the floor. My heart was racing. I asked him about what he was doing to me and he said, "I'm doing it because I love you." At the time I was so confused by his answer I unlocked the door and walked out of the room. He came out a few minutes later, acting as though nothing had ever happened, as he always did. Later at suppertime, we ate together and he smiled at me. I went to the bathroom to vomit. Jamey ran after me to check if I was okay and I said yes. But she knew something was up. "Jamey, I...your daddy...Never mind." I could not even tell my best friend the truth. So I told her I had a stomach bug. "But you said something about my daddy?" she persisted, but I told her it was nothing and we went back inside. I joined the table again and Uncle Godfrey asked if everything was okay and I said yes, glaring at him and he smiled back. Aunty Sandra noticed the looks we've shared over the years, and she didn't like it. I think she knew what was happening to me but didn't say anything. But one night after Uncle Godfrey visited me in bed, while Jamey and Aunty Sandra were asleep, or so he thought, he went back to his bedroom and I heard Aunty Sandra shouting at him, asking him, "Where have you been? And why are you sneaking around? Am I no longer good enough for you any more?" He told her to keep her voice down. He whispered some things I could not make out and later I heard the knocking headboard, squeaking mattress and heavy breathing sounds coming from their bedroom. I took my earphones out of my bag and listened to music on my phone until I fell asleep. The next morning Aunty Sandra and Uncle Godfrey were holding hands and kissing, but she looked at me like I was filth and I knew that she knew.

*Uncle Godfrey was always insisting that I join in their family vacations, and he said he preferred that I sleep over because his eyesight was bad and he did not want to drive at night. But we both knew that was not true. He needed to have me in the dark. Neither you, Mommy, nor Daddy, noticed what was going on. Daddy is always away for work and you work night shift and sleep all day. I had no one to talk to. The only other person I would have told was Jamey. But I couldn't. I started bunking school and cutting myself in secret. You didn't even notice. Why didn't you talk to me about my behaviour? It's like you didn't even care. You should have known something was very wrong. I guess you know now. I didn't tell you because I was afraid. He had already threatened me once, and I thought of what it would do to Jamey and her family if I said anything. So I had to smile with him and act as though nothing had ever happened. During the day, he acted so normal around me and then at night, he would turn into a monster. Touching, rubbing, kissing and feeling his way over my body until he had enough. Then he would go back to his wife, back to his warm bed. A few weeks ago, I decided that enough was enough. I went to visit Jamey and I wanted to tell her everything. But when I got to her house she was not there; Uncle Godfrey was alone at home, and he pulled me into the guest room and he pinned me against the cupboard. He gently kissed my neck with his warm, cigarette-breath and said, "I want us to take things to the next level." He continued to kiss me. I asked him what he meant as he unbuttoned his pants and placed my hand on his, his thing. "You are grown up now. You can do more for me. I want sex." I pushed him away and ran outside. I sat on their stoep and cried. I cried and cried. I could not handle the fact that I allowed him to do it once and then it became a regular thing, like a bad habit. I could not stop crying. Jamey and her mother pulled up into the driveway. She got out of the car and ran to me. "Lisa, What's wrong? Why are you sitting here alone*

*crying?” she asked. I didn’t have the courage to tell Jamey what was wrong. She held me in her arms and kissed my forehead. I wanted to use that moment to tell her everything that had happened before and everything that would happen if I continued to visit her house, but I was too upset to even speak. Daddy noticed I had been crying when he picked me up from their house and asked me why but still I could not speak. The next day, Mommy, when you asked me what had happened at their house, I told you I had a fight with Jamey but it wasn’t true. I could not go back to that house again and face him. That’s when I decided I would end things. I wanted to save everyone from the pain I felt, the humiliation, the guilt, the shame. It all felt like too much to handle. I couldn’t live like that any more. Tell Jamey I love her like a sister. Love always, Lisa.*



I place the letter on my bedside table. I get out of bed and go to Lisa’s room. I pass the kitchen and see my sister remove chocolate muffins from the oven; everyone is standing around chatting and drinking tea. Are you okay? I hear someone ask. I get to Lisa’s room and stand in the door frame. My daughter is not there any more. The paramedics have taken her to the morgue. I sit down at the foot of her bed and imagine her lying there sleeping. I smooth the surface of the bed. I smell the room again, her scent is still present – her musky sweat smell, the floral notes from her body spray, and her cherry-bubblegum flavoured lip-gloss. The smell of urine is gone. My sister must have cleaned up while I was resting. My husband comes to stand beside me not knowing what to do. He squeezes my hand. “Are you okay?” he asks. I shake my head, no. We stand in silence for a few minutes. I walk into the kitchen to say my hellos and I see Godfrey. He is standing in my kitchen drinking tea. Something came over me. “Get out of my fucking house!” I say and knock the hot tea out of his hand. Everyone turns to look at us. Godfrey is wide-eyed. Jamey is standing next to him. He bends



to pick up the broken pieces and I knee him and beat his head with my fists. “I’ll fucking kill you!” Mark pulls me off him. Jamey is startled and leans down to pick up the broken dishes. “Leave it!” I shriek. Jamey gets up to look at me, she is pale. “Sorry, Jamey,” I touch her shoulder. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” I walk out and my husband follows. We get to our bedroom and he closes the door.

“Lauren, why did you do that?” he asks.

“He must leave,” I snap.

“Godfrey? Why?”

“Mark, tell him to leave.”

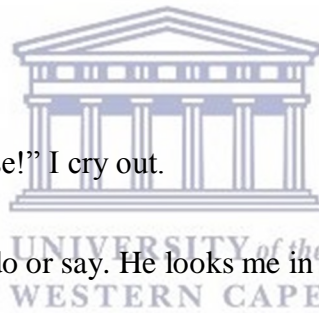
“What’s going on?”

“I want him out of my house!” I cry out.

Mark is unsure of what to do or say. He looks me in the eye.

“Is he involved somehow, in her death?”

I nod and burst into tears. He pulls me close.



## Mrs Cain

Mrs Cain picks up some dry cleaning for her husband when the shop opens at 9 a.m. She makes a pit-stop at the nursery to buy a lavender and an aloe plant which she wants to put in the kitchen window (to look at when she is washing the dishes). Then it's off to Woolies to buy butter, fruit and bread. The quality at Woolworths is always so much better than at Pick n Pay, she tells herself and it justifies the extra expense. She gets home and feeds the dog, Duke. She walks into the kitchen and puts down the plastic bags. Switches on the radio and 'Shout to the Lord' by Hillsong is blaring out.

“Shout to the Lord all the earth, let us sing. Power and majesty, praise to the King...”

She turns the volume down a bit and starts to sing along. Puts a pot on the stove, it wobbles. Pours in some olive oil she bought at Food Lovers Market. She takes an onion, green pepper, knife and cutting board out. Chop and dice. It goes into the spitting oil. She pours some water into the pot so that it does not burn. Steam rises, the sizzle of the oil reaches its climax. It sounds like falling rain. It fades out. She takes the lamb shanks out of the fridge, removes the packaging and gives them a rinse under the tap with warm water. The blood from the polystyrene packet washes into the sink and she watches it and is happy when it is gone. She thumbs and rubs off the loose bits of fat before spicing the red meat with salt and pepper and placing it into the pot. A drop of hot oil spits up from the pan onto her arm. Ouch. She winces and carries on. Turns the radio up and writes down a scripture from CCFM. Psalm 55: 22. The pastor she likes is on. Pastor Evans.

“My message to you is very simple. The Bible says the Lord is your saviour. Believe that! Every time you feel the burdens of life are overpowering you, every time you feel that God has deserted you in your hour of need, have faith! Romans chapter 1

verse 16 to 17 proclaims the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes!

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ Amen?”

She nods and says amen. She hums a hymn while she stirs the pot with the browning lamb. The meat is bubbling and she spices it with Robertsons Steak and Chops spice. She adds the McCain Country Vegetable mix and stirs the pot. Throws in some boiling water. A few minutes later, the Bisto gravy mix and brown onion soup go in, for flavour, and to thicken it. Then some Mrs Balls Chutney. A final touch. Spoon down. Tea. She gets up to make herself a cup. Rooibos. Two sugars. She uses the white porcelain teacup and saucer. Warm milk. Puts it in the microwave for one minute. Still not warm enough, another minute will do. Boils water. Twice. Once for rinsing the cup, the second time for pouring. She pushes the tea bag left and right against the sides of the cup, squashing and pressing it, releasing its flavour and antioxidants. *Pppppppp*: a distant lawn mower. Must pay the gardening service, leave money with Sylvie. In ten years Sylvie has never taken any money or valuables from the house. She only takes dishwashing liquid and washing powder and tablespoons. Maybe she thinks I don’t notice, Mrs Cain tells herself. Still, she cannot bring herself to fire Sylvie. No, that would not be right. Sylvie is the breadwinner for her family. She removes the tea-bag with a spoon and into the silver pot where she keeps the other old, used tea-bags as firelighters. A tip she got from the November 2014 issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. Then the warm milk. The cup is warm around the edges. Steam escapes. She takes a sip, careful not to burn her tongue. Ahh. “That’s lovely.” She pages through the *Good Housekeeping* and *Women and Home* magazines. She cuts out recipes and puts them in her makeshift recipe book, a flip file she keeps in the kitchen. She opens the travel section of the *Sunday Times* and reads an article about a travel writer’s quest to find the

best Italian dishes in Italy. And a nomadic traveller's ascension on the land of the Trojan Horse – The Fall of Troy: A Greek Legend, a book by Justine Font-es she struggles to pronounce. Troy. Isn't that the movie with Brad Pitt? Don't know what the fuss is all about, he is not nearly as handsome as my Garth. Garth. Our anniversary is coming up soon. Planning something special this year. I can't wait. So used to him being away from home. Always away for such a long time. Maybe there is another woman. She dismisses the thought and finishes her tea. Gets to dusting above the top cupboards and between the venetian blinds. She finds an old 2cent coin. I wonder how that got there. I remember how much I could buy with a 2 cent coin when I was a little girl. I felt rich! So many chips and sweets and chocolates. Dusting. Cleanliness is close to godliness or something like that. I mustn't forget to make that appointment to see Dr Carol Thomas, my gyne, for a pap smear and mammogram. It's been six month since my last one. She makes a note of it and puts it on the fridge. Her cousin died from cervical cancer. Her mother had cancer. She looks at the kitchen clock. It's 12 noon! I still have so much to do today, she panics. "Sylvie! Sylvie!" she shrieks. Sylvia walks in to ask if she should mop as well.

"Not today, Sylvie, I'll do it. How about you start on the windows and I'll mop. Have you vacuumed the upstairs and downstairs?"

"Yes, mem." Sylvia replies drily.

"Okay, then start with the outside windows, please."

Sylvia gets the Windolene, shammy cloth and newspaper out of the kitchen cupboard. She leaves the room. "There is no time to waste, Sylvie". She raises her voice. "I must still go and pick up Nicole from campus in town and drop off some flowers at Mildred's house. My friend Mildred recently lost her mother to cancer. I want to go and pay my respects. You know, Sylvie, I am so blessed that I still have my mother around." She folds the sides of a

serviette until it resembles a samoosa. “Most of my friends have lost their parents and my mother is still alive and well. Cancer free now. Up and about. Going on these trips with her church group and she even belongs to Kensington book club now. Can you believe it Sylvie?” Ahh. “Yes, she doesn’t like sitting around doing nothing. Silence and solitude is like death to her. I’m also like that. I like to keep busy.” She looks up from the folded serviette to see Sylvia cleaning the side windows.

“Okay Sylvie, I must go now, will you manage?”

“Yes, mem.”

“Okay, I’ll be inside if you need me but if not, I’ve left to pick up Nicole.”

“Okay, mem.”

She gathers the newspapers and magazines on the kitchen table and puts them into a neat pile. Duster goes back in the cupboard. She gets a water bucket from the backyard and the mop and fills it with hot water, Handy Andy and Domestos. She watches through the cracks of the blinds as the postman drops off the local newspaper, the *TygerBurger*. She goes outside to get it from the postbox and greets her neighbour Mr. van Vuuren. Such a nice man, a real gentleman, always opening the passenger door for his wife. Men don’t do that any more. My husband doesn’t do that for me. It would be nice.

The telephone rings and she speed walks inside to pick it up. It’s her friend June.

“Hi, June! How are you?”

“I can’t complain. How are you, Cheryl?”

“I’m fine, thank you. How are Fred and the kids?”

“Fine. Fred is just working so much these days, he is hardly at home, now I know what you must feel like with Garth away for work for several months at a time.”

“Yes, it’s tough but I manage.”

“So, listen, would you like to come with me to the Stellenbosch market on Saturday morning? 9 o’clock sharp.”

“Of course! I’d love to. I just love markets, June, you know, they sell such beautiful crafts. And the food stalls. The best honey and preserves. My granny and I would always go to the market when I was a little girl. I would use my pocket money to buy fudge. Those were the good old days. Anyway, yes. I’ll be there.”

“Okay, lovely, man. Listen, Fred will be at the sports pub nearby watching the rugby, maybe Garth would like to join him? Is he at home this weekend?”

“Yes, he is at home. But you know, my husband, he doesn’t like to go anywhere or leave the house when he is not working away. He prefers to stay at home. Maybe Fred can come and watch the rugby here at our house?”

“Yes of course, I understand. I will ask him, yes. So I will pick you up at 9 a.m. okay?”

“Okay, thank you.”

“Bye.”

“Goodbye.”

She puts the day’s newspaper down on the dining room table and skims through it. Page six has a photo of June’s daughter Kelly and her drummies troop from school. “Ah!” I better SMS June to tell her. She walks upstairs to her room to get her cell phone out of her

bag before returning to read the newspaper article. She takes a photo and sends it in a message to June. She wonders if June knows about the article in the newspaper. She closes the newspaper and stares at her cellphone for a few seconds, waiting for a response from June. But none. She looks down to the floor and remembers the mop and water waiting for her. She checks the kitchen clock. It's 2 p.m. "Oh, gosh!" Have to pick up Nicole from campus at 3 p.m. "The house is still such a mess," she panics. She mops the tiled areas of the house until it is spotless. Her mother always taught her, you must be able to eat from the floor, that's how clean it should be. She goes upstairs to get dressed. She combs her short, brown hair with her fingers. Spots a few grey hairs. Time to dye hair again. She puts on her lipstick, rose pink. Will match my pink cardigan. A spritz of Elizabeth Arden Green Tea. She sits on the bed to put on her denim skirt and pantyhose with her black ankle boots. She looks at the clock. It's 2:30 p.m. Have to leave now to pick up Nicole. She rushes into the kitchen. Juice. She opens the fridge and takes out the juice. She sees the note about needing to make the gyne appointment. Almost forgot. She has Dr Carol's office number saved to her phone. She dials. Number busy. Dammit. She calls out to Sylvia.

"Sylvie!"

"Mem," Sylvia lazily replies.

"I'm going to pick up Nicole from campus now. Do try and finish up by the time I get home."

"Okay, mem."

"If Devin gets home before I do, tell him there is food on the stove but he must wait. If Mr Cain gets home tell him the same, but if he doesn't want to wait, then he can dish up for himself. I also made some ham and cheese sandwiches for lunch this

morning that I left in the fridge just in case they get home early and they're hungry. Okay?"

"Okay, mem, I'll tell them, mem."

Sylvia goes back outside to finish the window cleaning. "Okay, thank you, Sylvie," she shouts. "What would I do without you?" She takes a tall glass out of the kitchen cupboard and drinks her juice. Phone Dr Carol. She redials. It rings three times. The secretary answers.

"Dr. Carol Thomas's office, hello."

"Hello. It's Mrs Cain. I would like to make an appointment to see Dr Carol. How soon can I get an appointment with her?"

"Okay, just a moment...she has an opening in November, on the 21<sup>st</sup> at 2 p.m."

"November! That's in two months. Don't you have a cancellation somewhere sometime this month? It's rather urgent."

"Okay, are you pregnant?"

"Oh no, dear, my time has come and gone for that. I need to come for my check-up, to do the pap smear and mammogram."

"Okay, let me just get out your file...what's your name and surname again?"

"Cheryl Cain."

"Okay, just a moment," she says putting Mrs Cain on hold.

Her eye glances over the room. Bedding. Creased. She straightens and flattens it. Looks at her watch, 2:45 p.m. "I am going to be late." Nicole gets very upset if she has to



wait on me. She looks at her wedding band on her finger and plays with it. It's her anniversary next month. Thirty-five years. Garth said they might go to Mauritius for a week. She has gone to *Sure Travel* for a quote on their flights and accommodation. He works so hard he needs a holiday, he is always so tired when he gets home...poor dear. It's right for us to have separate bedrooms; men of his age don't have 'needs'. But I miss his touch.

"Hello?"

"Yes. I'm here, hello."

"Mrs Cain, the doctor says that you have already come for your annual check-up six months ago."

"Yes, I know, but I would like to come again. One can never be too sure. One day you're okay and the next you're told you've got cancer. I don't want to be a victim."

"Okay, certainly ma'am. The doctor has an opening in three weeks, September 24<sup>th</sup> at 9 a.m."

"Okay, perfect. Thank you."

"Pleasure. Bye now."

"Goodbye."

Mrs Cain takes her car keys out of her handbag and heads to the garage. As she starts the car she remembers the flowers for Mildred. "Oh gosh! I almost forgot." She switches off the ignition and runs into the house to get the pink lilies and the vase she bought for Mildred. Mildred loves lilies. Anything to help soothe the pain of loss. She pours out the fresh water

and wraps the vase with the flowers in pink and white tissue paper. She walks back to the garage and gets into the car; puts the flowers on the back seat and drives off.



## Nurse

My aunt was a nurse. She came home with ink-stained pockets and smelled of hand sanitizer and Melrose cheese. When she started out as a trainee nurse at Nico-Malan training college she paid R325.00 for her studies. She earned R75.00 at Groote Schuur Hospital in the 80s. She woke up every morning, at 4 a.m. to leave for work to catch the 6a.m. train so that she would be at work by 7 a.m.

When she was a little girl she always admired the nurses that came to their primary school. In the year 1970, she was in grade two, and she had her first check-up with the nurse. The nurse checked her eyes, ears, teeth and her hair for lice.

The day before the nurse arrived, the teacher told the children:

“The nurse is going to come to school tomorrow so you must wear your best panties and wash your hair because she is going to ask you to undress and check your hair.”

My aunt always bought special panties and pyjamas to wear in hospital because nurses usually check the patients' underwear to see if they are *ordentlike mense*, decent people. My aunt said she always used to check the patients' underwear when they were sedated.

She came home with many stories when she worked at Karl Bremer Hospital in Bellville in the late 90s. She diced onions and complained about the drug-cupboard that someone forgot to lock.

“How could Annette be so careless? She could get into big trouble if I reported her to the matron. Luckily, I went to check if it was locked when I did my rounds.”

She ironed her clothes for work and told the story of the nurse that got pricked by an HIV-infected needle.

“We are all on high alert about the needle prick and how careful we have to be when handling sharps but it happened so stupidly. She picked up the patient's file on the trolley and underneath it was the needle and it pricked her and she was crying and we were crying for her and she was put on ARV treatment immediately and sent home.”

She sipped a cup of tea and explained how a fifteen-year-old Asian boy was attacked by armed robbers. He was shot in the head and pronounced brain-dead by the ER surgeon.

“Such an innocent life taken. The family don't want to switch off the ventilator. Shame. The boy is in a coma so they said they would wait until he wakes up but he has already been in hospital for three months. It's very sad.”

My aunt lowered her voice and said that his family paid his medical bills in cash.

She often spoke about a patient, Mrs Maughn, a ninety-two-year-old who was admitted to the surgical ward when she was working at *Panorama Medi-Clinic*. Mrs Maughn received a hip-replacement.

“Such a cute old lady. We kept her comfortable with morphine. Her family never came to visit,” my aunt would say. Mrs Maughn would talk and talk and my aunt would need to do her rounds but she enjoyed listening to Mrs Maughn's stories.

“Just another twelve hour shift,” she used to say and sigh.

The next moment she would take off her spectacles and rub her feet.

“What should I make for supper?” she asked but did not wait for an answer. “Is there tomato paste? I'll make pasta.”

My aunt left the nursing profession before retirement. She was taken from us too soon. A heart attack in her sleep. But we take comfort in the fact that her journey into heaven was a peaceful one. We love you Nurse Daniels and we will miss you dearly. Rest in peace.

“Is that fine mommy?” I ask, not sure of how my eulogy will be received.

“It’s beautiful, my girl. Your aunty will be proud. She is looking down on us from heaven smiling. You have captured her so well.”

“Thanks, mommy. Okay, now I’m ready to go.”



(Words 16 989)