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DISSERTATION

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I certify that this portfolio is my own work. Where references are used, I have acknowledged these in my Bibliography at the end of the Self-reflective Essay. *HRodkin* (electronic signature)

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Declension

I am

You are

He, she, it is

We are

You are

They are

Family

Not.

“Ma, can you please make quick? We’re going to miss the next train and you know how long it takes on the Cape Flats line to Heathfield station. Hurry.”

“Hey, watch your tongue Missy. Who are you telling to hurry? It’s my long weekend too; do you think that I’m sitting and painting my nails in the factory every day?”

“But Ma.”

“If we miss this train we’ll just have to catch the next one. Bring your haversack and let’s go.”

My mother, Marie, walked briskly down to Klipfontein Road, mumbling that she didn’t know what her sister was going to do with all of us children. My Auntie Ellie was very fussy about her house, and my mother reminded me that there was to be no messing on the piano. For once, I didn’t moan about the long trip, first by bus to Athlone station and then the train. It was exciting to be away from Silvertown with its rows of council houses consisting of two bedrooms, a tiny kitchen and an outside toilet. My mother often reminded me to be grateful, that there were many others who had nothing. At least she had a permanent job at Rex Truform as a pattern maker, a promotion from her job as a machinist.

I was looking forward to spending time with my cousins in Punts Estate, in their pretty little house with a front and back garden, full of flowers and fruit trees that Auntie Ellie had lovingly planted. The house wasn’t huge but it was like paradise in comparison to my mother’s house in Silvertown. I loved the wooden parquet floors, which Auntie polished by hand every

weekend. Even my three spoilt boy cousins had to help, but they usually just bossed their little sister, Heather, and myself around, telling us how to shine the red front stoep with old stockings, instead of working themselves. Our work was only done once the piano was shining, and we could see our faces in it. Afterwards we would play for hours in the garden or the spare bedroom at the back of the house, if the weather turned and the rain came down, turning the lawn into mush.

Heather was a quiet, kind little thing, and was happy to spend time with her books, dolls and cats. She was two years younger than me and had just started her first year at primary school, which was just across the road. The two older boys, Simon and Peter, were moody and kept to themselves. The third boy, Dickie, did not live with Auntie Ellie, but with foster parents, because she had been too ill to look after him when he was still tiny and needed a lot of attention. He was meant to go back to his parents after a few months, but stayed with the foster parents for some reason that was hard for me to understand. My mother told me to stop asking grown up questions.

“Always why, why, why ... like ‘*n papegaai*. Just behave; Ellie has enough on her hands without your hundred questions and all the noise you children make.”

Their house stood on Chudley Road, in the middle of two long roads crossing each other at right angles, a good position for spotting cars and watching people go by. We two used to climb up on the stone pillars and see who could spot the most makes of cars, not that there were that many different cars around in 1974, usually old Datsuns, Minis and VW Beetles and Kombis, which had been refurbished in backyard garages and resold several times. Only people who earned good salaries, or who saved forever, had better vehicles like Mercedes Benzes and Alfas. We would say, “I spy a Cortina,” or “I spy a Mini”. The winner would receive the privilege of choosing the next game, usually one that the other party was less adept in. I was better at the physical games such as races and eight blocks, while Heather was an ace at cards, word games and draughts.

Auntie Ellie was my mother’s eldest sister. They came from a family of fifteen children, most of whom we didn’t really visit; but these two sisters were close and shared a lot of secrets. When they fell out, my mother would say, “That Ellie can be *skeinheilig*, just because she is married and lives in Punts. I feel sorry for Uncle Leo for having to put up with all her English

speaking airs and shit. Both of us only finished standard seven so I don't know why she thinks she is so grand."

They would make up on the next visit, drinking Five Roses tea from cups kept for special occasions, at the green laminated kitchen table. We were not supposed to listen, but sometimes Heather and I would stand in the passage with our ears pressed against the wall. On my previous stayover visit during the Christmas holidays, when I was on my own because Heather had already fallen asleep, I heard my mother and Ellie's voice suddenly drop. They were almost whispering.

"You know Marie how I struggled to keep the babies. Every time at about three months, I would start having cramps and the bleeding began. For three years. Then Leo would come back from sea and the next month I would be pregnant again, sick to my ears. You must be happy you just had the one go, with Betty."

"Ag, shame Ellie. I used to panic every time you called to say you were preggies."

"Leo just wanted to keep on going. Dropping the bun and off to sea after three days. He didn't want to stop until we had a girl. If I was clever, I should have gone to the doctor for the snip while he was away."

They went on, making sussing sounds, especially my mother, when Auntie Ellie went on. I was surprised that she spoke so much because she usually listened patiently to my mother's stories about her colleagues or new boyfriends and whether or not she thought she would be proposed to.

"You know the thing that happened with my third baby, my beautiful Dickie boy, nearly pushed me over the edge, having to give him away at three months because my nerves were just finished."

"*Jissus*, I can imagine."

"I was too sick; nothing was helping. And you know that when Leo was home, he just drank himself finished with his friends and was off to sea again."

“*Siestog*, Ellie, you *darem* had a rough time. It must have been hard being alone, with four babies. Still, those bladdy foster parents stole that child from you, no matter what the social worker said. You would have found a way.”

“It broke my heart to leave Dickie there. That made it worse.”

It sounded awful and I felt bad that I had listened in on this grown up talk. Poor Auntie Ellie used to be alone most of the time because Uncle Leo worked for a month at sea and three days off. He was a big man, who loved to joke and read us stories when he was sober. The drinking with his friends was a constant cause of arguments when he was home, even though Auntie Ellie would try to hide her scowling face when I was around.

My Auntie was a very religious woman, and looked well after the family, cooking and cleaning and making sure that they made ends meet. There was never a lack of anything. I thought that they really lived a good life, even though Uncle Leo wasn't that much interested in keeping up with the Joneses. He was happy with a good plate of food and to be with the family when he was not out with his friends. Auntie would buy special steak from Harneker's *halaal* butchery on Station Road, pickle onions and make fresh fried chips, when it was time for him to come home. She really knew how to fry chips, from her days when she worked as a cook at the Cape Town Harbour Café. This is where she met Uncle Leo, at the age of eighteen. He was twelve years older, but left most decisions to her.

I didn't tell Heather about my eavesdropping because it was too grown up even for me, and made me feel strange; all the talk about babies and losing them. It frightened me that someone would send a baby away; but then Dickie was still visiting. I could see him for myself. On the other hand, I was trying to make sense of how everything was a battle and that a job was a privilege. But still Uncle Leo and Auntie Ellie had to send Dickie away until things settled. Why wasn't one of the older boys sent away instead? Those two were close, thick as thieves, and could be mean. Dickie was nicer. When I dared ask, my mother said, “*Jy raak ougat*, go play outside and don't stick your nose in other people's business, where it doesn't belong.”

I pushed the grown-up business out of my head. This Easter weekend holiday, Dickie was going to be home, and that meant that Auntie Ellie would make extra nice food, and would go all

out to make it a fun time. Nothing else mattered to me; even though I felt sorry that my Auntie had gone through so much pain and sometimes could not cope with everything.

Even though I was older, Heather and I were close and even looked a little alike. She had a curious face with two stiff plaits at funny angles to her long thin neck. I used to tease her especially when she was being mischievous, and call her “*Pippie langkous*”. She never backed off when the boys challenged us to games; mostly when they were short of someone to keep wicket for cricket or goalie for soccer.

“You two come play; each one can stand at one end of the garden and make sure you block; otherwise you won’t get a chance to score.”

Heather could surprise them, and be really competitive, demanding a chance at batting or shooting for goal. Or they would pretend to be generous and allow us to help look for good pieces of wood to make the peg and stick for their *kennetjie*. Heather would agree, so long as they carved separate *kennetjies* for us.

Auntie Ellie’s yard was big enough for us to play separate games, and when the howling and screaming became too much, she would yell at Heather and myself, “Come inside right now to help me; you can’t play all the time.” She said our high-pitched screeching gave her headaches. When we protested, saying the boys should also help, she would shoo us inside with the dish cloth, “Ssh, don’t backchat otherwise you two can do the washing-up for the whole weekend. My hands are full. Heather, fetch my tablets.”

When Uncle Leo was around, he would drive us in his beige Valiant, sometimes as far as Grabouw and Caledon, with Heather and me tightly squeezed in-between him and Auntie on the wide front seat.

Heather and I could occupy ourselves for ages, making-up dance and fashion shows, and pretending to be models from Auntie’s *Fairlady* magazine, which she bought once a month to spoil herself. We would prance down the make-believe runway, in Auntie’s old mini dresses and high heels, like I’d seen at my mother’s annual factory beauty shows. Or we would make a tent with the old cotton pink bedspread, one end tucked into the windows of Uncle’s Valiant, that parked in the back garden while he was at sea. Heather would take the keys and start up the car, as if we were on a road trip. Or we would play hide-and-seek for hours till just before dark, when

Auntie Ellie would call us in. Heather was too scared to run through the narrow alley on the far side of the house because one night while Auntie was taking off the washing from the line, some *skollie* tried to grab her. Ellie screamed so loud that her guts nearly popped out and the next door neighbours came rushing. Mr Johansen and his son chased the man, who escaped over the fence separating the houses. The next morning, Mr Johansen found a piece of blood soaked denim from the skollie's jeans stuck to the fence. Auntie Ellie called my mother to tell her, "Imagine Marie, what if they had taken my child."

In the quieter moments, Heather would practice her piano scales and exercises which her music teacher, Mrs Combrink, would give her on a Friday afternoon. The Franz Kuhler piano had been a gift from her parents, and stood proudly against the middle wall of the lounge, so that it was away from the wind or rain that might come in through the windows. We held make believe jazz concerts, running our hands wildly over the keys, like we'd seen in the films. We made so much noise that the boys would moan to Auntie that we were breaking the expensive instrument.

This weekend was just so busy. Heather and I cycled all the way to Constantia, peddling like crazy over the two bridges that ran along the railway line towards Diep River Station, and then we carefully crossed the Main Road into the really smart 'white' neighbourhood. We were not meant to go that far but with the cool breeze on our skin, we were entranced by the forest-like green treed, leafy surroundings. On the way back we stopped at Mrs Osman's for cold drinks and sweets. Fifty cents went a long way, and we harassed Mrs Osman, slowly choosing a long list of our favourite sweets, "Two of number one and ten of twenty, please," while pointing at the numbered sweet compartments, until we had a packet which we would chew under the covers at night. Our favourites were Wilson Blocks and Star Sweets, sticky colourful blobs of sugar.

Back at the house, Auntie Ellie showed us new crochet and knitting stitches, for the caps and socks we were making for the dolls. Heather had an impressive collection of dolls that included a walkie-talkie doll that Uncle Leo was coerced into buying for her. He often joked that he felt like a fool walking through Cape Town with a huge doll that looked like a real girl.

Afterwards, we helped Auntie bake biscuits and tarts. Heather was quite an impressive baker at six years, standing on a little stool to roll out the biscuit dough, while I cut out the shapes with cookie cutters. We were preparing our stash for the Muhamed Ali fight at two

o'clock in the morning, which we would listen to on the radio in the boys' room. It was cramped for space with one double bunk bed and an extra single mattress for when Dickie was around. Heather and I took our blanket and cushions in preparation for the match, and we had set up a small picnic table with the snacks. We wore matching blue pyjamas my mother had brought from the factory. The boys woke us up in time for the start of the match. The radio crackled with excitement all the way from the Congo, for the iconic "Rumble in the Jungle" battle between Ali and George Foreman.

Heather and I listened for about fifteen minutes, but we couldn't keep our eyes open, and soon returned to curl up behind Ellie's back. When Uncle Leo wasn't at home, we liked to crawl into bed with her. Everything was warm and cosy; we were looking forward to the next day's adventures.

The next morning, Easter Sunday, started off quietly, with everyone lying in late after the boxing match. The boys were shadow boxing, pretending to be Ali, who had knocked out Foreman by the end of the eighth round. Auntie Ellie had a slight headache and called Heather to bring her the Disprin she kept in the drawer beside her bed.

"Put two in a glass of water for me. After lunch I'm going to lie down for a bit; so make sure the dishes are done. Everyone must help - the boys can pack away and sweep."

Lunch was pickled fish that Auntie made from the *Kingklip* Uncle Leo had brought on his last break from sea. With full tummies, we followed the boys to their hideaway hut, in the bushes next to the neighbour's house. There were only seven houses in the road, with open bushy plots in between the houses. The Paul Jackson trees provided cover above our heads, while we made up all kinds of spy and cowboy thrillers. The boys had a stash of bread which they covered with condensed milk they had taken from Auntie's food cupboard. We stuffed ourselves, pretending it was dessert after lunch, and then shared a few sips of watery *Oros*. The boys said they needed to pee out in the bushes. We promptly followed them, and Heather had just pulled down her shorts when they shouted at her.

"We're going to tell Mommy you're pee-ing in the street. Girls don't do things like that."

Heather and I thought they were joking, or just trying to taunt us so we took no notice. They ran off but quickly came back to say that Auntie Ellie was waiting for us.

“Mommy says you must come now, or else.”

Heather refused to go and the two older boys started tugging her to the house. She screamed, but they kept dragging her towards the sandy piece of pavement in front of the house. The neighbours came out to see what the commotion was about. The sight of Auntie Ellie’s angry face at the front window set Heather off even more. Eventually the boys managed to drag her to their mother, standing at the front door with an old leather belt dangling from her hand, like a snake waiting to strike.

Dickie and I both stood, petrified. We knew something was going to happen, maybe a quick hiding, including anyone foolish enough to stand close by or brave enough to chip in. I could never have imagined what happened next.

Auntie Ellie’s face was crumpled into a furious scowl; she hadn’t put back her top set of dentures. The more Heather screamed and kicked at her brothers, the angrier her mother became. She stood unmoving at the front window, twitching the belt. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to help Heather; but I was scared to be in the way. Worse, the neighbours on the right hand side had come out to see what the noise was about. We knew that Auntie didn’t like them, because their children poked fun at the stocking, made out of her old pantyhose, she wore over her thick bushy hair.

Auntie went at Heather without stopping. We saw her hands lift and the belt crashing into my little cousin. I stood with my arms hanging at my sides. When I looked around, the neighbours were staring, horrified. I wished they could say something, but they just stood there. Auntie Ellie grabbed Heather around the neck and shook her.

Heather squirmed under the long green couch in the lounge, but Auntie reached under and dragged her out by her plaits, lashing out wildly. Poor Heather was screeching even louder and begging, as the blows rained down on her.

“Look at you, you ugly child. I should have thrown you away, you disgrace. Everything I’ve done for you, but look how you repay me. *Sies*, embarrassing me in front of the neighbours.”

Heather screamed and then whimpered pitifully, “Please Mommy, stop. It’s sore, you’re hurting me. I won’t do it again. Please stop hurting me.” She held her little hands up in the air to cover her face.

It ended as abruptly as it started; as if all the air in Auntie Ellie had escaped. Heather crawled into the spare room we used for playing in, and curled into a ball on the bed, softly sobbing until she fell into a feverish sleep.

Even those wicked two boys were silent for the rest of the day. I wanted to go home, but I was torn between leaving Heather and wanting the comfort of my shared room with my mother. I crawled in next to Heather, who had long blue strips down her arms and legs. Her hands were swollen. She didn’t move even when Auntie Ellie came to wake us for supper, and to put socks filled with ice on her hands. She gave Heather a Disprin dissolved in milk.

I felt like putting my arms around Heather, but knew she didn’t like to be held or squeezed. She was a strange child, appearing more mature than she actually was. I would tease her and say she looked like an old owl, especially when she wore her thick round glasses. That night, though, she looked like an injured pigeon that you see along the road.

Much later in the night I heard Uncle Leo’s voice. He had come home a day earlier from sea, because they had made a good catch and the bosses had decided to give them an extra day for Easter.

“And now Ellie, where’s my little mini mouse?” Heather would usually be the first to rush to him.

I could hear his heavy footsteps on the parquet blocks as he came down the passage, with the muffled sound of Ellie saying not to wake her. I pulled the blanket over my head as he switched on the lamp, and leaned over the bed. His face clouded over when he saw his daughter.

“What happened here?”

“I’m sorry Leo. I gave her a hiding. I didn’t know I hit her so hard.”

“Don’t ever do that to my child again,” he said quietly but firmly, all his jolliness gone. He told me to go back to sleep, as I peeped out.

I heard Auntie Ellie say she was sorry. “I don’t know what came over me. I feel really bad. I had a terrible headache, that was making me crazy.”

“Ellie, I haven’t always been an angel, and I know it is difficult for you, alone and your health. But you can’t hit the child like that. I can look for a job on land, but you know it pays less. You should go see Dr Parker again.”

Heather slept for most of the next day, only waking up to drink warmed milk. The weekend was in ruins. The boys stayed in their room and kept out of their father’s way. Dickie looked relieved to go to his other home, when his father said it was time to leave. As for me, I was happier than usual to see my mother when she fetched me.

Heather was kept out of her school for the next few days, until she was better. Surprisingly, when she did get out of bed, Heather was even tempered as though nothing had happened. She was elated to see her father and spent a lot of time lounging on his huge lap, listening to his tales about far-away sea pirates.

When my mother came to fetch me the next day, Auntie Ellie told her that watching Heather scream made her ill, “It made my head pain, here above my right eye, like someone was hammering a nail into my skull”. She said that the high pitched screams pushed her over the edge. “It’s like I was in a trance and couldn’t control my hands. The more I hit her, the less my head throbbed. Like if I stopped, the pain would come back.” My mother sat quietly without interrupting her; and thanked her for looking after me.

“We must go quickly now, before it gets dark. The train is slow on public holidays.”

I was happy that Heather seemed okay, but I was not. My mind was reeling with what had happened. I tried explaining the scene to my mother. She looked at me, saying nothing for a long time, before she took my hands gently into hers.

“*Elke huis het sy kruis*, don’t judge until you walk in someone else’s shoes. Be kind to Heather and Ellie. They both need us, especially my sister. What she did was not right, but she’s got her problems.”

I couldn’t understand what Auntie Ellie’s hard times had to do with Heather. It frustrated me when my mother spoke in English and Afrikaans in her cryptic way, imparting her insights that I

couldn't make sense of, but I was grateful to be back her on our dusty *stoep* looking out on all the traffic on Klipfontein Road. My mother baked her special bread as a treat for me, and I felt safe in our small, neat home.

Over the years I witnessed an uneasy transition in the family in Punts Estate. Heather distanced herself from her siblings, but refused to say why. I often wondered what she felt about that terrible day, if she even remembered what happened, but we never spoke about it, not because I didn't try. Heather was not comfortable with sharing her feelings, but she was a good listener. The two of us were close like sisters, sharing an unspoken bond.

“Betty stop trying to figure me out; my word, you never stop.”

Auntie Ellie had a long life, wracked with all kinds of ailments. Heather cared for her in the last years, after she had neurosurgery to remove a benign brain tumor. It had gone undiagnosed for decades, while she was under the care of various public hospitals.

The two older boys didn't fare well, while Dickie pursued studies overseas, and became a science lecturer. Uncle Leo found a job on land, but was never the same again. His drinking caught up with him, and he passed away from cirrhosis of the liver. I avoided the two older boys. They had become unpleasant, always complaining about how life had done them in.

Only once did I talk to my eldest cousin, Simon, about that day when we were little kids. He was an awkward fellow, off-centre and temperamental. We were long past our youth and getting on with our lives. He was living in the house on Chudley Road with his family. I saw Heather's beautiful piano, on the same spot it had always been. I suddenly had a flashback.

“Do you remember that day, after we played in the bushes?”

“Of course. It was Heather's own fault because she was always so spoilt. We boys had asked for a drum kit, but she got the piano instead.”

“What do you mean? What does the piano have to do with it?”

“Because she always got what she wanted - everything from toys to clothes. There was never any money left for us. Daddy paid R2000 for that piano, just taking up space and no use to anyone. She had to pay for it, if not with money, then with a hiding?” He had become overweight, his double chin trembling as he spoke.

“But how could you? She was just a child. Do you do that to your children?”

“Ag, it was just a hiding; it served her right.”

Again, I was speechless but made some excuse about the time. I never returned to the house on Chudley Street.



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Sixteenth Birthday

For as long as she could remember, Cindy would climb up on the highest rung of the old wooden ladder in their backyard and look up to the sky. She watched the plane in the clouds, thinking to herself, “That is where I’ll be when I finish school and university and find a good job”. This place off the ground was her safe haven; she knew that no-one would dare to bother her there for fear of the neighbours seeing. She wondered whether the busybodies surrounding them had heard the commotion and screaming that came from inside the walls of the pink house earlier that day.

The day had started off normally enough, with Cindy and Iona, her best friend since primary school, making plans for the weekend. Cindy’s family did not celebrate birthdays because her mother was a Jehovah’s Witness. Iona tempted her with promises of baking her special chocolate cake; and Cindy could go over to the beautiful stone and wood house, which Iona’s father had built himself.

“It’s your sixteenth birthday, Cee, so it’s special; and it’s just you and me, not really a celebration.”

Cindy was excited about this escapade, even if it meant telling a small lie to her mother.

“Ma, I’m first going to be at the hall the whole afternoon, tomorrow, for drama practice.” She and Iona were part of the play, *God’s Bits of Wood*, which their English teacher had adapted from the novel, as part of community mobilization activities.

Her mother wasn’t even thinking about her birthday. She was too busy, kneeling over the bath to do the weekly washing by hand because the machine was broken.

“Okay, make sure you’re home by seven o’clock. I don’t feel like walking to fetch you. I want to rest.”

“I’ll get someone to give me a lift, Ma.”

Cindy started doing her homework so that it could be out of the way for the weekend, when suddenly she heard shouting and banging from her brothers’ room. She knew that the mood in the house was going to change, and quickly tried to escape down the passage to her mother. It was always like that these days. Victor, her second oldest brother, couldn’t find the t-

shirt he'd been planning to wear to one of his wild parties. He burst out angrily from his room, bumping into Cindy in the narrow passage. Before Cindy knew what was happening, she felt her head snap back as he slapped her.

"You creep," she screamed. Her mother came rushing out of the bathroom, with foam dripping from her hands.

"You two, stop. Is this what I get for breaking my back, cleaning up after all of you?" Cindy seethed inside; her mother had not defended her, making as if being slapped was nothing. Victor slammed his room door in his mother's face.

"Why don't you shout at him, or smack him?" She hissed at her mother.

"Hey, don't talk to me like that. Let him get done so he can leave."

There was a time, years ago, when they had been happy. Her mother had taken pride in the house and the garden. It seemed as if things would never change, but slowly, their world turned topsy-turvy. For Cindy, it started with that brute of a boy. She could not bring herself to mention his name. She was embarrassed by the endless school yard fights that escalated into drinking and more serious brawls by the time he reached Standard Seven. Her mother constantly made excuses, once even dashing over to the school, which was across the road from their house, to deliver a few smacks to the boys who were fighting with her son.

"That will teach them, and now they can run to their parents. If the principle can't discipline them, I will."

Cindy cringed with embarrassment, but said nothing, anticipating a tongue lashing if she dared to disagree. The next day, she walked silently to her desk, praying that no-one would mention the scene. Fortunately, most of the other pupils were too pre-occupied with the upcoming exams. The principal spared her this time by talking to her mother directly on the phone, unlike other occasions where she was called into his office, to take messages home to her parents.

"Cindy, do your parents know what your brother is getting up to?" She would feel like crawling into the corner, while her principal, whom she admired, carried on. Her face would turn

red and flushed. To make matters worse, she had already surpassed Victor; who had failed twice and was stuck in Standard Nine.

Now once again Cindy escaped to the top of the ladder, vowing to escape this mayhem. It helped to sit on the narrow footstep and think about things, ways to escape. She would study hard and finish matric with As and Bs, maybe at worst, some Cs. She thought back to her recent interviews with lecturers from different universities, which had gone well. She had been confident and not afraid to talk her mind. One of the interviewers smilingly noted, “You seem very angry for such a young person.” She thought of replying, “You would be too, if you had a social conscience and had to live the way I did,” but thought about Ma warning her not to be so cheeky, and instead responded, “That’s why I want to study medicine so I can help to make a change.”

What she hadn’t said then, but felt silently that morning, was the lingering resentment deep in her body. Just before leaving for the interviews, she had to dodge the unpredictable fists and explosive shouting from Victor, who was tall and well-built, and three years her senior. He made everyone’s life a misery with his constant demands, even to be the first to use the only bathroom in the house, staring at himself in front of the mirror, just when everyone else was rushing to prepare for school and work.

“Ma, can you tell Victor to hurry up? I have to get ready for my interviews.” Cindy refused to engage Victor directly, but he heard her and responded, “Ma, tell that bitch of a daughter of yours to fuck off. I’m busy with my hair, unless she wants me to take this hot iron and slap her with it.”

“Victor watch your mouth, and the both of you get out of this house, and go to school.” Cindy could see that her mother was losing control.

It did not help that Cindy, the only girl and the youngest in the family, was in the same standard as Victor in school, as if she had plotted his failing. Worse, she was in the ‘A’ class while he was in “D”, generally reserved for the less ambitious students. Apartheid even in school, but one that she was grateful for, because it meant that at least for eight hours of her day, she had some peace and happiness. She could spend some uninterrupted time with her books,

which she loved; and there was no need to escape spiteful outbursts and threats of physical violence. Cindy could just be her happy, inquisitive self.

Now up on the ladder, with her face still smarting from the smack, she prayed quietly that her second term results would be good enough to ensure that she was offered a place with a full bursary at any medical school in the country. If she didn't make it for medicine, she was prepared to do a Bachelor of Science degree as a step to re-applying for MBCHB. She believed it was her only chance of escaping the madness at home, and proving her worth; but her father was not encouraging.

“When you turn eighteen, you must get married so that you can move out. There's no money for you to study; and besides, that's what girls do. I have enough on my plate, with your eldest brother's studies.”

Cindy had stared at her father in disbelief. She regarded him as a sort of benign fool, who never had much of an opinion on anything, but this display of prejudice left her speechless. She refused to cry in front of him. Even her mother was taken aback.

“Why do you talk such nonsense, when you can see she is working so hard? It's not like you have any money to give in any case; she is applying for bursaries. Never mind, my child, God will provide.”

Cindy couldn't figure out what was happening to her family, whether there were other problems she didn't know about. It was clear, though, that her parents had lost control of Victor. They were too proud to admit that. She wondered why her parents allowed such awful behavior in a child who was simply a bully, and at heart, a coward. Her father was a tall and well-built. He could have knocked that boy flat with one fly-away slap. Instead they tolerated an endless battery of bad behavior. There were drunken outbursts, poor school reports, rushing off to the hospital emergency to have him sewn up after numerous fights with the neighbourhood *skollies*. Her parents insisted that Victor wasn't a *skollie*, just a boy going through a difficult teenage phase. The fact that their father worked most of the month at sea was used as another excuse for his violent outbursts.

Ma would make excuses, “You must be patient with him. I know it's not right, but he's going through a phase; a teenage boy needs his father around.”

“What phase?” Cindy challenged her mother. “He’s just a common bastard, whom you keep spoiling as if you have no other children.”

“Come here and I’ll show you what spoiling is. I treat all of you equally. You think too much of yourself. Wait till you have your own children.”

Cindy had never considered herself as growing up poor, but knew that money was tight, and that her father worked hard to put food on the table. She knew that there were financial problems, but that wasn’t anything new. Her father’s job was under threat because the sudden good run in the crayfish trawling season had come to an abrupt end. It was as sudden as the start, that had flared up a year ago. The monthly good catches had come crashing down, leaving her parents worried that they could not afford the monthly car repayments for the second-hand Mercedes her father bought, when things were looking up.

Her mother stayed at home to look after them, even though she really wanted to be a nurse.

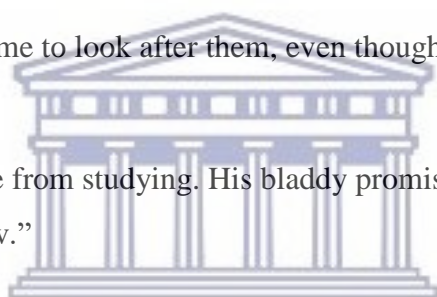
“Your father stopped me from studying. His bladdy promises that his job would cover everything; and here we are now.”

“Shame, Ma.”

“I’m glad I can keep an eye on all of you, don’t you worry. Look at the Coetzees, both parents are working but look at the children ... always on the road.”

Having let her thought runs over all these details made Cindy feel more sympathetic towards her parents. It was dark by the time she climbed down from her ladder. She consoled herself with reading her book, *Not yet Uhuru*. It had been a present from her Latin teacher, Mrs Wilcox, because she had done so well in her mid-year tests.

For the second time that night, she was disturbed by the sudden noise coming from the passage. She heard her mother scream, which was a frightening sound, like someone was trying to twist her vocals chords. The unearthly sound became increasingly high pitched. Cindy panicked, thinking that someone had broken into the house. She rushed down the dark passage that separated the three bedrooms from the rest of the house, and quickly realized that the commotion was coming from her brothers’ room.



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“Victor, Vicky, what have you done? What’s wrong?” Her mother was pleading with him.

At first Cindy thought he must have been pissed again.

“Cindy, come quick, come see what’s wrong with my boy. He’s not moving.” Her mother was hysterical.

Victor was lying sprawled out on the ground next to his bed, with a white paste-like mess streaming from his mouth. Cindy thought that he must have thrown up from drunkenness. Her mother was shaking him, trying to make him talk. Cindy gingerly had a closer look.

“Ma, I think we should call the ambulance. I think he swallowed tablets.” Mandy had spotted an empty Panado tablet container, and smelt strong alcohol fumes on his breathe.

Her father and older brother stood by watching, not saying a thing. Surprisingly, the ambulance arrived within thirty minutes, and Victor had opened his eyes. What a mess this was, and to make matters worse, she was the one whom her mother shoved into the ambulance with him.

‘But Ma ...’

“Don’t start now Cindy. My blood pressure. And your father is drunk.”

Ma pushed R200 into her hand before disappearing into the house. She looked broken. Her gown was hanging off her shoulders, and her swirl stocking was bunched on the top of her head, instead of covering all her hair so that it could come out straight in the morning. Cindy was torn between feeling sorry for her mother, and wishing that it would all end there, as the ambulance attendant closed the doors behind her firmly. It felt surreal to be so close to Victor, at the back of ambulance, and Cindy was glad that the attendant was there to watch over him. She checked that Victor was securely fastened on the thin metal stretcher, as if there was a chance that he would jump up and hit her, out of spite.

She thought, *the world could be put right, just like that, just there, if the ambulance took longer to get to Victoria Hospital.* In fact, she could pull out one of the pipes the ambulance staff had hooked him up to. *But true to form, typical, you even fucked this up,* she stared at him

maliciously. *The teachers say you have athletic potential, artistic talent, but no, you have to mess everything up. You, flipping fool, only twenty Panado, not enough to do serious damage.*

He looked pathetic after they pumped his stomach clean, while she was forced to explain to the medical staff, “No, he is not a gangster, just an unhappy boy, I think, but I don’t know. My mother found a letter about some girl.”

“Are there gangs in your area?”

“We don’t live in a rough area. We live in the southern suburbs”. She felt like spitting at them. *Why in the middle of all of this would you also add your rubbish? Could they not leave behind their jaundiced eyes, and just see to him without interrogating her? What in hell’s name does it matter where we live?* She felt strange, as if she were drugged, answering the hospital people, who gazed at her suspiciously.

“Where are your parents? Do you know how much he drank?”

How the fuck should I know why I’m the one to be here with the idiot. She heard her polite voice reply that her mother was ill, and their father was away at sea, working. Not the truth. *I don’t know why I was forced to accompany this arse-hole. Maybe you could do me a favour; one little mistake, and my misery could be over.*

Her heart softened thinking about her mother’s face when Victor finally opened his eyes before the ambulance came, and started crying and mumbling about taking the tablets. It was just too much for her mother – this endless battle to keep the boy on the straight and the narrow. Part of her wanted to console her mother. *He wanted for nothing, not clothes, not food, not good education, not love. Just a case of miserable, teenage angst, or whatever it was that kept him constantly on the warpath.*

She wanted to ask *why do you always make excuses, Ma? Why do you think he’ll get over his bad patch, find his way, like a blind person suddenly opening his eyes to a bright, beautiful world.* Cindy hoped beyond everything that something would change, *like never having to lay my eyes on this vicious person ever again.* The compassionate side of her fought a yin yang battle against her outrage, the indignity of the burden thrust on her shoulders.

She refused to let Victor lean on her when they released him just as morning was breaking. Cindy walked faster ahead and let him stumble along the uneven, uphill road to the taxis, parked on the perimeters of the hospital. *You're used to being drunk and falling around; and I don't want to feel your dirty hands on me.*

He looked meek and squashed in the taxi back home from the hospital, not speaking a word. Not even a thank you. She thought of smacking him. He looked too weak to fight back; she could reverse all the years of pent-up rage. *You can feel what it's like to be attacked; not to be able to fight back against a towering goon.*

She could beat him to a pulp and then deliver him to his adoring mother and say *here are the remains of your son, freshly pumped clean from Panado and the venom that runs through his veins, mixed with your blood.*

Here is your Vicky that you've been praying for every night. Is this the best your God could do? Or is God trying to tell you something? Maybe that same poison runs through me, we are family after all, sharing the same genes and roots. What do you say mother? Here lies the promise of your family tree, the one who will carry your family name into the future. So maybe I should show who I really am. I should stomp on his head and return the favours he's bestowed on me, like that time I searched for my precious Latin reader, which my teacher gave me, only to find that your boy had shredded it in a fit. Do you remember how he hit me because I asked why? How I fell back as his fist connected with my cheek, and how I had to run out into the road with my friend watching my shame. Do you remember the times I had to climb through the tiny toilet window just because he had locked all the doors while you had gone shopping? That was the only way out of the rain that was pouring down. I had to relieve myself, because I had no key to the back door.

Mother, do you recall that Friday night we had to go looking all over the school yard, at one o'clock in the morning because we had found his bloodied jacket, but no body, lying in your rose bushes? Do you remember that mustard jacket which you had bought earlier in the week so that he could go to the party at the hall? How we called his friends' homes to find out what happened but nobody could say. They were either too drunk or their parents answered and said they were sleeping. Do you remember how, after hours of looking through the neighbourhood, your oldest boy cycled towards us and almost fainted because he had found Victor stabbed, and

lying at the back of the shopping centre just down the road from us? Even then you stuffed me into the ambulance because you said I could speak better than you, that your high blood pressure was going to give you a stroke.

When the taxi pulled up into the driveway, Victor skulked into the house. Mandy handed over the instruction note from the doctor to her mother, who was waiting at the door in her faded pink cotton nighty. “Read the note, Ma. I want to sleep.” She wasn’t bothered whether her mother understood the doctor’s instruction. She was tired, and crawled into bed, without washing.

A few hours later, Cindy heard the phone ringing shrilly. She could hear her mother saying, “I’ll wake her up, Iona, don’t worry. She was studying till late last night. You know how Cindy is with her books - both of you. But I’m glad.”

When Cindy took the phone, Iona laughed, “Happy sixteenth birthday, and remember to bring your things for dress rehearsal. I’m done with the cake.”

Her spirits lifted. For the next few hours she would be with her friends and comrades, having fun and doing something worthwhile. She thought about telling Iona about the hospital episode. They had grown up together and had shared so many things- music, first romantic crushes, learning to ride bicycles, and competing for top marks in class. *But how can I explain to Iona that her usually bright and strong-willed friend was subjected to this humiliation and torment? Or the helplessness and conflict?* Cindy knew it would be too hard to reconcile the image she portrayed to her peers with the girl who was beaten up in her own home. Maybe she would find another time to explain to Iona, whom she could depend on for most things, but this was too complicated; and she didn’t want to think about all of those things now. She wanted to forget about Victor’s existence.

Cindy felt her mother watching her down the passage.

“Are you okay, my baby? I’m sorry for all these things going on, but you must trust in God. I don’t want you walking alone in the dark. What are you and your friends doing at that hall?”

“Practising, Ma; I told you last night. Stop worrying. Where’s my African print dress for the play, please?”

Cindy quickly bathed and changed into her favourite jeans and flowing blue cotton blouse, and matched it off with earrings she and Iona had made from long threads of colourful beads.

She half skipped, half ran down the road past the hall to Iona’s house. What did it matter that she was sixteen? She still felt like the same person, so she hummed one of her favourite tunes, *Oneday I’ll fly away*, and imagined that she heard a voice calling her name. She looked up to the sky and smiled. She felt light and free.



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Dress from Luanna

A sunny winter's day in Cape Town is so soothing, Mandy thought, especially after days of non-stop rain. A blessing from above the old people used to say. She usually listened to the Gary van Dyk jazz music program during Sunday lunch, but today she was half-dozing in the comfortable deck chair, under the tall lemon tree, which bore juicy fruit year after year. The garden was her sanctuary, where she could gather her thoughts. She breathed in the warmth and aromas of the liquorice and garlic buchu, bought at the Kirstenbosch flower show. There had been rows and rows of indigenous, water-wise plants to choose from, but the buchu had been top of her list for years because they were easy to grow according to the newsheets she had picked up at her weekly garden club. Their aromas were a rich blend of sea and mountain, and comforted a deep longing in her, some sense of yearning or restlessness, she could not define. Mandy had made a point of following through on promises she had made to herself. When she could, she would indulge herself with little luxuries such as plants and books, or the implements for her hobbies.

Growing up on the so-called 'coloured' side of the line, as people referred to the superficial but real divides of group areas, life had been very different. There was only money for the essential things, despite her parents doing their best to provide extras. Their family of five depended on her father's salary as a seaman to put a decent roof over their heads and food on the table. The fishing business was unpredictable, and there was no telling when the sea catch would be so poor, the men would return after a month with only basic wages and no commission. Even having gained her degree in law was no guarantee of a well-paying position. She had huge student loans to repay, while saving every cent after paying her bills for the past year to give herself a hard-earned break. Finally, she had managed to, and so last night, she had returned from a two-week trip to Italy, to visit her friends whom she had met almost thirty years ago, on a student exchange programme. The prospect of seeing her old friends, whom she had intermittently communicated with over the years, was meant to be a reunion of kindred spirits, but also a distraction from the dissolution she felt for the politics that came with her administrative government post. Her senior supervisor was part of the new class of officials, who represented everything Mandy had ever struggled against – corrupt, paternalistic and brutal in reaching their agendas. She wasn't sure if the pressures of work had tainted her judgement and

enthusiasm, but she kept feeling a dark cloud threatening to eclipse her euphoria, destroy her recollections of past times.

She was awakened by the screeching of birds overhead, and squinted into the fading light. The contents of a big box covered in flowery wrapping paper lay spilled on the dusty ground. Mandy stretched out half-heartedly and picked up the mess. She stared at it, but now without the tingling feeling of joy she had previously felt along her spine, when unwrapping it and showing it off to her friends. Still she couldn't help but gently stroke the soft black knit material, edged with a long satin bow along the wide neck. The dress, was a simple cut, tapering just above the knees, and was worn with a satin sash that fitted around the hips.

Mandy had treasured this dress ever since she had received it as gift from Luanna, a young woman of her age whom she met in Lucera, all those years back. It held all the memories she had cherished about her first trip to Italy – the smells, the beauty, the elegance – in such stark contrast to her life at home, not that she was ashamed of her humble roots, but there were times she felt some guilt in being so indulged while back home people had no jobs, no homes and were being arrested more and more for the most absurd reasons. It was such a striking difference to her exhilarating awakening. The dress was a symbol of her first, youthful taste of freedom and what could be, away from apartheid. She had at first felt some hesitation at the newness of intermingling freely with Europeans and speaking without bothering who might be listening, but soon grew confident and blossomed. It was more than just growing up, it was a passage to deliverance, some sort of salvation she had been handed. Luanna's dress embodied the spirit of her revolution.

Mandy suddenly sat upright and took a deep breath. She had to confront what she had learnt a short while ago, on her last day in Italy.

Mandy's love affair with Italy started soon after matric, when she left to take up the International Exchange Scholarship in the last week of November. It was a cultural exchange programme that gave her a choice between Italy and the USA. She had chosen Italy because she had loved studying Latin and was intent on studying law when she returned three months later.

As soon as her last matric paper was over, her mother and she had rushed around all over Cape Town preparing for the trip, collecting her passport and going to the bank to arrange for traveller's cheques. Her parents had saved up R1000 for her spending money, a huge amount for them even though Mandy would soon realise that it wasn't much. Her father wasn't that happy about her going, so kept grumbling about the money. He had wanted her to start working as soon as school was over, let alone go to university, because he thought that 'a decent young girl should find a good boy to marry'. Her mother, Una, was determined that she should go and that she had everything she needed. Una saved and scrimped for months ahead of her departure, and somehow sent Mandy off with a suitcase of mostly new clothing, some having been bought on account at Foschini's.

Her mother said, "Don't worry about the old man. Just because he never went out of town when he wasn't on the boat, doesn't mean that you mustn't. I'm not going to have those Italians ask what kind of people we South Africans are, that can't even afford a warm jacket and a decent suitcase."

Mandy's mother could be very dramatic when she went contrary to her husband's wishes. Everyone knew who really ruled the roost. Mandy understood that her father didn't know how to let go of her, so he tended to babble nonsense, that he probably heard from his friends.

"Shame, Ma; I think he's just worried. You know how he can get when he's nervous."

"He is such a bladdy cheapskate. And, come hell or high water, I'm going to make sure you study. You'll be the first in the family."

Mandy's South Peninsula High matric class had a farewell party for her the night before she left for Johannesburg, while her political friends were not so happy that she had accepted the cultural exchange opportunity. Some even claimed that it was a way for the CIA to brainwash youngsters and to infiltrate the networks. She felt bad but spoke to some mature mentors who said that it should be alright, so long as she used the opportunity for growth, and development. Her school mates, on the other hand, had gone the extra mile to set up a disco with revolving lights and a smoke machine, in the garage of Karen's home in Fairways, one of the nicer areas. They bopped along to a mix of music from the latest funk to reggae beats and jazz.

Early the next morning, her mother's brother-in-law, Uncle Johnny, drove them to the airport in his big old green Peugeot. Her father was quiet while Una kept asking every few minutes, "Are you alright my baby?" It was going to be her first flight, and she put on a brave front, not really in the mood for chit-chat, "Yes, Ma, it's not like I'm going to the moon." If only they knew how excited she was. Fear was the last thing on her mind. Her uncle's hug reassured her as she jumped out of the car at DF Malan Airport, "We're proud of you, my girl, just look after yourself."

She took in everything - the plane, passengers, the five other students in the group that was leaving for different places. They had come from all over South Africa and were from different backgrounds; she was the only 'non-white' student, but she didn't let this put her off. She wasn't about to allow anyone to make her feel inferior; she had her mother's feistiness. After the initial uneasy introductions and a few testy conversations, Mandy clearly signaled that she was nobody's pushover, "I'm from Heathfield, and you are from? Good to meet you." From the confident offering of her hand, it was clear that she felt very much an equal in spite of the pecking order of the regime. Still as everyone settled into their pre-booked seats, Mandy had a few moments of doubt that there might be some attempt to shove her at the back of the plane, but fortunately it was an Alitalia flight so international protocols applied.

The group of teenagers had a good time together, no matter their political differences; probably because young people can adapt more quickly to circumstances. The issues of everyday South Africa did not raise their ugly heads. Mandy mused that maybe a simple solution would be to send everyone away on a trip, where they were forced to live together and share; but she was aware that this was not normal life back home.

In Rome, they were joined by forty students from the rest of the world. It was fun to do silly teenage things like drinking a bit too much wine at lunch, which she had never had before at home, and then playing the latest hits loudly on the cassette player which John from Australia had carried all the way. The favourite hit which was played over and over again was Spandau Ballet's "True", that seemed to capture the reason they '... bought a ticket to the world.' The students did a lot of real research and sightseeing as a gateway to learning about Italy and each other's cultures, going to the historical sites such as the Roman ruins, the Colosseum, St Peter's Square – many of the historical sights which Mandy had learnt about in Latin class. One of the

few occasions Mandy felt annoyance, but kept it under check, was when Herman, a fellow South African, raised his surprise that she had studied Latin. “Really, you people have that as an option?” he cut in while she was talking, and she immediately responded, “Who’s you people?” The other students quickly dispelled any potential fights by moving on to a new topic.

Her first sight of Rome was mind blowing. The highway was buzzing with Fiats hooting impatiently, while Vespas wove in and out of the traffic. The drivers shouted at each other, “*Che cosa fai*, what the hell are you doing?” The pedestrians looked like they were walking the runway, strutting away so confidently.

One of Mandy’s enduring memories was the seriousness with which Italians dressed.

“There is something about the way Italians dress, like every day is their last. Even the men doing manual jobs change from their overalls into slacks and long overcoats, to walk the plazas at night.”

After three days in Rome, all the students left to meet the families they were assigned to. Mandy boarded a train to Lucera, which was about six hours’ south-east through the mountains and many beautiful little villages. Lucera is situated in Puglia, in the Spur of Italy. She stared through the windows and was thrilled by the layers and layers of snow, her first sighting of the fluffy, white flakes. She quietly observed passengers jump on and off the train; not at all daunted by the unfamiliar. This would never have been possible back home; her sitting in the same carriage as white people. Her picture of a train was one clearly separated by first class carriages for whites at the front end of the train, joined by a couple of first class carriages for non-white people, ending with several third class carriages. The only whites in the third class section, now and again, would be those using it as a thoroughfare to the front, or defying the state. When Mandy felt a pair of eyes looking her over thoroughly some two hours from Lucera, she felt her heart jump. She thought, *Why now, dear Lord, in the middle of nowhere?* Then she saw the outstretched hand offering her the biggest and greenest olives she had ever seen. At first she didn’t know what they were until the middle-aged woman with twinkling blue eyes and wrapped cozily in a thick, black cape said to her, “*Oliva ... mangi, mangi*”, gesticulating with her fingers to eat.

When her stop came about half-an-hour away from Lucera, the conductor helped take her suitcase down to the platform. Suddenly she heard a cheerful voice, “*Ciao, Manda. We wait so long for you and finally you here. Comestai. How are you?*”

It was Donata, her host mother, who didn’t look like a mother at all. She was young and petite, with long blond curls, wearing a short, bright red mini and a long, red cape, with dangerously high, black leather lace-up boots. She looked like she had stepped out of a glossy magazine. She hugged and kissed a somewhat surprised Mandy on both cheeks. That was the beginning of their decades’ long friendship; they were more like sisters, since Donata was only five years older but was already married to Renzo. They had a two-year old baby girl, Jani.

Also in the welcoming party was Luanna, the beautiful, cream skinned cousin of Donata. She was Mandy’s age, and would be twinned with her during the exchange programme, especially for attending school classes, which was one of the few compulsory conditions of the programme. The two younger girls hit it off immediately. Luanna spent much of the time at her cousin Donata’s apartment, on the second floor of an attractive block of flats on Via Mazzini, Lucera. She was a thoughtful, kind girl, with an intense interest in architecture, a pursuit she hoped to follow in tertiary studies. Her parents lived only a few blocks away, but it seemed simpler to stay over because they were so busy. Mandy and she shared a bedroom and many happy hours prattling away, sometimes resorting to sign language and drawings. While the three females became inseparable, it was the younger two who developed a special bond because of their similar intellectual interests and their plans for studying further.

Italian people make one feel part of *la dolce vita*, enjoying life in the here and now. One moment they are dramatic, clustering their fingers and puckering their lips in disdain; and the next they are laughing. Settling everything with a “*capiche? You understand, no?*”. Mandy felt safe even when people stared at her with her caramel skin and bush of curls. She wasn’t offended, when people patted her on the head to feel the texture of her hair or to stroke her skin. They would say, “*bella*” or “*carina*”, and if she didn’t at first know what it meant, it felt good to be appreciated, unlike back home, where the talk, even in her own community, would often focus on the desirability of sleek hair and high sculptured noses.

Luanna was no exception, but subtler and more aware of how intrusive it might feel to be prodded and pried at every turn. It was her thoughtfulness that helped Mandy accept that Italians

are visceral, that they like to touch and feel, like how they always rub the material of a dress or coat between the thumb and forefingers to gauge the quality or the weight. Her discussions with her new friend helped her to be less offended by this familiarity of being touched by strangers, whereas back home she would have reacted very sharply to being patronized. “No worry Manda, this is how we are, but if you don’t like, just say, *basta*.” As it were, she hadn’t been brought up with constant hugs and kisses. Her mother had often reminded Mandy that you never knew what people had been doing with their hands and what they were up to.

But the people she met in Lucera were so kind to her, their intentions clearly good. Luanna was protective if she sensed anybody crossing whichever lines became blurred. She and Donata took Mandy to the cafes where they taught her about the joys of post *siesta espressos* or *cappuccinos*, and what became her favourite, *cornetti* filled with sweet pastry cream. Then they would stroll with linked arms showing her the glamorous rows of high fashion shops - for women, men, shoes, jewelry – carrying big name labels. Some she had never heard of before such as Gucci and Kappa. By Mandy’s expression, the two Italians could see that she was enthralled. She had not seen anything like it before. It became a daily pattern for Luanna and Mandy to wrap themselves in warm capes and stroll along the cobbled streets to meet up with friends in the town square before dinner.

Mandy thought what a sight she must be in her skin tight jeans, pink jacket, yellow clip-on earrings, and orange suede boots that her mother had bought her. She wasn’t too bothered though. Donata, and Luanna got working on her image, slowly and gently. Luanna was very trendy in her fashion choices, reflecting her taste in modern architecture. She also started wearing jeans and boots, so that Mandy would not feel too odd, and said they looked ‘cool’, but even she was clear that taking care of appearances, was part of the cause. They would make time once a week and pretend to be sophisticates. “Manda, *cara*, we must never let a man define us. When we have had our fill with one, we must prepare ourselves for our next adventure. We must prepare for sleep, once a week, like we are going to a banquet. Then you will live a long, happy life. Always remember this for *la dolce vita*.”

Donata treated Mandy to a salon visit, where her wild frizz was cut into a high Mohican that was the rage in Europe at the time. The punk hair and strange colour combination of pink bomber jacket and orange suede boots made her blend in more, if only as a point of interest.

Mandy mused that Luanna had always been a deep thinker and given to quirks, but enjoyed a good social occasion, like the New Year's party which they had prepared for so thoroughly on her last stay. They fussed as if they were going to a ball; from the clothes to the make-up. Their dates landed up being two of the Russo boys, Claudio and Adriano. Early one morning, Donata had rushed them out of bed to go shopping on the fancy side of town, close to Renzo's work. There was a designer clothing and jewelry shop she wanted them to see, but Mandy's heart sank when she saw the prices. Her R1000 spending money would not cover the cheapest item, certainly not the dress that Donata was holding up.

“Oh, Manda, this is so beautiful, and it will look perfect on you.”

The soft material felt good against her skin; and with the sash around her hips, it fell just above her knees, showing off her legs, which for the first time in her life, she thought were rather attractive. But it was far too expensive.

“Don't worry, my father is giving this to us as presents,” Luanna announced. “I am taking this yellow silky one. We must enjoy it while we can.” Mandy felt showered with generosity without feeling ashamed or that she was taking advantage. The two girls looked elegant but still youthful in their dresses and high heels.

Claudio and Adriano fetched Luanna and Mandy in their Alfa Romeo, and went off to Babu, the nightclub where the entire circle of friends spent the night, dancing away. It was a wonderful New Year's Eve experience. Luanna and Mandy had the time of their lives, even though Claudio and Adriano were not such attentive dates. They went from one girl to the other, twirling them around like tops. Finally, at three in the morning, everybody stepped up for the last dance humming the lyrics of the Michael Oldfield song, “...carried away by a moonlight shadow, lost in a riddle ...”

That was one of the last times Mandy saw Luanna, whom she was told, had to prepare for her first year at university and take care of family matters. They said their goodbyes a few days before Mandy left for South Africa, swearing to keep in touch forever.

Maybe she was young and naïve but Mandy had reveled in the newness and the freedom of being away from home. It was exhilarating, and she learnt that anonymity in a foreign place

could be liberating. She was exempted from norms and customs and could indulge in her favourite activity of observation.

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Now back from her recent trip, in the dusky Cape light, Mandy thought about the old wisdom that cautions against the eye that only sees what it wishes, good and bad. She was no longer the bright-eyed teenager on her first international trip, treasuring the smallest of memories. Yet, she had missed some vital signs along the way, she chided herself. What had she been thinking; that time would stand still and the picture perfect Italian reverie would last forever? Was she so desperate to escape her own life and social realities that she was immune to the tell-tale signs that all was not well?

The first change Mandy had felt was soon after landing at the airport. Donata was as glamorous as ever in her high heels and jeans but her face was creased with deep worry lines, cleverly disguised with make-up. When she laughed, the lines receded; but Mandy noticed the subtle changes in her friend. Donata and Renzo had separated many years ago, but remained close. While Renzo had moved on, indulging in several relationships, Donata remained solitary, and lonely. Their daughter, Jani, was a grown up woman with a family of her own, and was the reason that Donata had moved to Brindisi, some 300km south of Lucera where they had lived thirty years ago. Donata had made the best of her single status, having put herself through night school to become a successful journalist. As for Luanna, Mandy was aware that she had gone to the University of Rome, where she completed two years of an architectural degree. She had met and married a fellow student, and never completed her studies.

While she and Donata tried to pack years of memories into a few minutes, Mandy kept looking to see whether Luanna was also at the airport. She hoped that she had misunderstood Donata, and that Luanna was waiting, maybe in the parking area. Her Italian was very rusty; but she could barely disguise her disappointment.

“Don’t worry, my Manda. All is fine with Luanna; we will see her later. But, *andiamo*; let’s go. We will have a quick coffee and *mangi*, eat, something small. Tonight, it is just you and me; I live alone and we will make a quick pasta, and we talk and we remember the old days.

Then we will visit all the old places, including Lucera. And the people, Manda, everyone is old now. Look me too, *vecchio*.”

While Mandy had been looking forward to see Luanna again, and thought it strange that her old friend was not there to meet her, she was happy to see Donata and feel so comfortable after so many years had passed. There must be an innocuous reason for Luanna not being there.

These many years later, when Donata and Mandy finally arrived in Lucera after driving three hours from Brindisi, it was not unlike the first Saturday she had been to the opposite side of town, more industrial and less affluent than its centre. They were here to visit Renzo’s parents, where everyone was gathered to meet her. The flat was new and modern, but there was no mistaking the genuine warmth and hospitality that welcomed her. Never mind that Renzo had a new girlfriend, Donata was treated like she remained the daughter-in-law. Any discomfort, disappeared as soon as the homemade dishes appeared, and the long eating festival began, which was only broken by a walk around town, before dinner was served. Mandy was almost brought to tears by the effort that had been made in her honour.

“Dona and Renzo you should not have gone to so much trouble. I don’t deserve to be spoilt like this; you make me feel blessed. It’s been very hard for me at work the past year, and ...”, she paused, “hesitating to say what she was thinking, “This is such a happy atmosphere, so different from how things are at home.” Mandy quickly changed the topic though because this wasn’t the right time.

There were so many people there, and there was one family she was especially looking forward to seeing again. The Russo family had been such a big part of her previous visit. Donata and Renzo had visited Gino and Maria Russo, and their brood of seven children, a few times a week. Their house was abuzz with people, amongst the sausages drying along strings nailed to the ceiling, and a fire used to make toasted bread flavoured with Italian tomatoes, olive oil and garlic. Mandy often wanted to ask where they all slept, but good sense stopped her. After a taste of his special bruschetta, *zio* Gino would ask, “Buon?” It was delicious; and was topped off with homemade *limone* liqueur, which Mandy sipped on delicately. She did not want to let on that it was her first taste of liqueur.

“*Ching ching*, we are happy you are here with us, again, Manda.”

Mandy was roused from her memories. It was tiring to keep up with the conversation, which often crisscrossed the table, and then had to be translated from English to Italian and back. So many of her old friends had made the effort to see her, that Mandy couldn't help wondering. She was perplexed by Luanna's absence. They had written intermittently over the years, and in her last email about two months ago, Luanna had clearly said that they would meet. And, none of the Russo brood was there. Mandy tried to convince herself that she might have missed something in all the translations.

Renzo noticed her staring. He had risen to a high post in the banking sector and had a certain gravitas amongst the guests. He said quietly but firmly, "Things did not work out for the Russo brothers. Drink, drugs, women and crime. That's *la vita*, sad but true." His meaning was clear. Everyone else shrugged and pulled up their shoulders. Mandy understood that the Russos were not a topic for that occasion.

"Soon Donata will take you to see your friend, *cara*."

The next day there was still no word from Luanna. Mandy now understood that something was keeping Luanna from the reunion; and that like the Russos', it was not a topic for discussion. But she had to ask, because her time in Italy was coming to an end soon, "Is something going on with Luanna?" Donata insisted that all was fine, and squeezed Mandy's hand gently, and said, "No, no, nothing serious. See I send her a WhatsApp. I will explain later when we back at my place." She linked her arm through Mandy's, while they walked one last time through the centre of Lucera. So much had changed. The shops with their beautiful designs and natural fabrics had disappeared in favour of cheaper, synthetic brands. Here and there were shops that Mandy recognized, like Enzo's jewelry shop that had been on the same spot thirty years ago, on Via Mateo. The cobbled streets were the same but there were now mostly bustling malls housed in ugly, multi-story buildings. There was much more traffic, and they had to weave through lines of dog droppings on the narrow pavements.

"Italian peoples have become rude," Donata said with unusual irritation, "people don't care anymore."

Mandy felt an uneasiness settle over her, and thought how her mother could dampen her spirits with, "All good things come to an end. After jolly comes sorry." It would irritate her to

hear that, a dark cloud waiting to snuff out the joy inevitably. She was forced to acknowledge that after waiting four more days, she had still not seen Luanna. Every day Donata had a fresh excuse, and time had run out; Mandy was already packing her suitcase for the trip back home, when the words burst from her.

“A lot has changed, Donata. I wish I could have seen the Russos and Luanna, like old times.”

The older woman sat down on the bed and took Mandy’s hand, and tried to placate her.

“Manda, *piano, piano. Si*, it is time to leave again, but we are not going to cry like we did the last time. Did I tell you that everyone, including the men, cried when you got onto the train?”

“Really, Dona? Grazie, from my heart for everything.” Mandy touched her heart to make sure her meaning was clear.

“And, Luanna, why is she not here? What is really going on? A few weeks ago, she sent me a message to say that we will meet, like old times. So what happened, Donata?”

“Ah Manda, that, too, is very sad. Luanna and I are still close, but things are not like before. *Capiche?*” Donata stared at the floor. “It’s her husband; he is a very jealous man, and *bruto*. He beat Luanna badly just before you come.”

Mandy was stunned. It took her a few moments to take it all in. Of all the reasons she thought about, this did not occur to her. It could not be Luanna, her feisty, exuberant friend. Over the years they had remained in contact, and there was never a hint that anything was wrong. She seemed to be doing fine, if not doing all the things they had dreamed of as teenagers. She was working as a science teacher, at the school Mandy had attended during the foreign exchange programme.

“This is the way of Italian men, Manda. They like women, many women. Luanna’s father, Guido, does the same to her *mama*. He gets angry and smacks her or breaks the plates if she asks about his many girlfriends.”

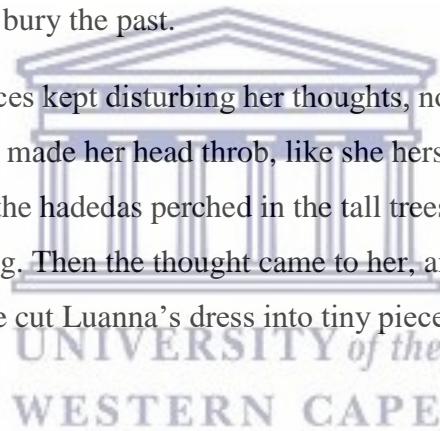
Mandy sat on the bed looking bewildered. She had never imagined that in the midst of all the joy, she had missed the signs.

“Don’t worry Manda, it was for the best. *La vita*. Luanna will write to you and you ask her what is going on. I couldn’t tell you because it’s family business. Private. I could do nothing. Maybe when she feel better, Luanna will tell you.”

On the flight back home, Mandy was restless. Donata’s last words stuck in her mind throughout the long flight. The more she reflected, the more resentful she felt towards Donata and everyone, including herself. She felt guilty and confused; as if she had been complicit in the violence Luanna had endured.

Now back home in her beautiful garden, Mandy stared at the dress she had taken out of the beautiful box earlier in the day. She had planned on packing it away for good in the top part of her cupboard, where she stored all the things she had collected since childhood. She was somewhat of a hoarder, but could not bring herself to bury the dress with her favourite things. But it was time to move on and bury the past.

Her friends’ circumstances kept disturbing her thoughts, no matter how she tried to push them to the back of her brain. It made her head throb, like she herself had been beaten. Suddenly, the screeching from the hadedas perched in the tall trees shook her out of her haze, a reminder that the sun was setting. Then the thought came to her, and she jumped up, to grab the scissors from the sideboard. She cut Luanna’s dress into tiny pieces.



Lila and Seth

Lila and her younger brother, Seth, were intelligent, articulate and sure of themselves, coming from a well-to-do family. Her father, Doc Davids, was a well-respected member of the community – a doctor and a political activist. Their home was a meeting point for all kinds of activity, with lunches, suppers and a string of community activists popping in and out after consulting for medical advice and political meetings. Sandra, their mother, was an elegant housewife, managing the visitors and everything else that needed domestic attention. She was an excellent cook, who combined the many flavours of Cape Town under one roof. There was always a pot of breyani or braaied meat on the table, with copious cups of milky, good quality coffee. Liquor was hidden for special late night visitors. The Davids' blended tradition with modern, activist attitudes.

One night when her parents had gone visiting, Lila and I locked ourselves in her father's study and shared a few tots of *Old Brown Sherry*, only escaping discovery because Seth warned us that her parents' Mercedes had pulled up into the driveway.

“*Ouens*, here's the laws.” Seth was trying to sound street-wise, to hide his baby-face and squeaky voice.

“What you mean *ouens*, do we look like *ouens*?”

“You will, if I tell Daddy what you did with his bottle. That thing has been there for the past year. Quick. If they ask, I'll tell them you two are sleeping. Remember you owe me Lila, otherwise it's the last time I help when you're *gesuip*.”

“You can exaggerate, seriously.” Lila retorted, while they tried to hide the bottle behind a collection of medical encyclopedias. We dashed off to her bedroom, locking the door, before her parents came through the attached garage, another emblem of their social mobility.

The entire family was politically active, and included extended family members who may, or not, have been blood relatives. There were many sleepovers in their spacious and modern home, which stood out in the otherwise modest but pretty neighborhood. The southern suburb of Heathfield was literally divided by a train line running between the coloured and white

group areas. On our side of the line, most people lovingly tended their gardens and painted their houses in preparation for the festive season, whatever their religious leaning might be. A few neglected their properties, so that there was no doubt that the area was not entirely middle class. The different religions were practiced alongside each other without any problems, except for the occasional gossip-mongering that occurred over fences because so-and so's relative was going to 'draai' for the sake of marriage. Mostly, families got on with the business of putting bread and butter on the table; and ensuring that the children got an education.

I once heard Aunty Sadie, the neighbourhood *Herald*, giving my mother a long rundown of the latest news, while we were walking from the station with heavy parcels.

"My word Una. Can you believe it? Mrs Isaacs' daughter is pregnant, *drie maande al*, and now she must leave school

"Really? Wooly- ha."

When we reached our house I told my mother that she embarrassed me. "Please don't talk to that woman when you're with me." Their gossip offended my fledging sense of social justice and equality.

"Mandy, if you think you're better than the rest of us under this roof, pack your bags and move in with your fancy friends, you bladdy silly child. I want nothing to do with your politics, nothing good will come of it."

I ignored my mother's tongue-lashing; I was too fervently involved in the cause and impressed with my ever-growing intellectual emancipation. In Lila's family, religious affiliation was not important. What was of essence, was the struggle for freedom, our collective fight for justice against the oppressor.

"United we stand, divided we fall," we'd shout at the rallies we went to with Doc, who was often part of the organisers, but never really one of the speakers. That was left for the firebrand leaders who could rouse the masses to action. Lila and I were always trailing Doc to these events, while Seth would only go along to the big rallies to hang out with the other teenagers. I wondered what his parents would do if we were separated from each other. Lila and

I were older and knew many of the comrades. I warned Seth about the crowds when they grew agitated in response to the police, or threatened to do something radical, like march down Klipfontein Road.

“Seth stay close; stop disappearing, man. How are we going to find you, then?”

“Jussus. I should rather have gone to soccer with my friends this weekend.”

Lila pinched his ears, “Soon. I promise.”

Through all of the political meetings, we managed to have normal teenage lives in and out of the classrooms, which served as sites of mobilization. Under the watchful eyes of older comrades, we had spontaneous parties, and were taken on fun drives through the Cape Peninsula often ending with wildly daring swims in the icy beaches clearly marked for ‘blankes’, racing back to the waiting cars in case we were caught; moving on to the beaches marked ‘nie blankes’ where we would throw our blankets down on the sand for picnics. Srandfontein Beach and Sunrise Circle were our favourite spots to frolic in the icy water, even on windy days, when we would seek shade in the dunes covered in *suurvye*. The more athletic of us would hike for hours through the beautiful lush mountains along Constantia’s Bridal Path right through to Lions Head. During school holidays, there were youth camps in Genadendal, the oldest mission station in the Cape, where we were politically mentored by the elders. We played hard, and struggled hard.

Our political schooling involved prepared readings of Marx and Engels, deciphering and internalising the Freedom Charter, debating what the mass democratic movement entailed and what we envisioned for a free South Africa. Our mentors, mostly teachers and academics from various disciplines, would encourage us to read, stressing that education is the basis of building a free nation.

Lila’s home was often the meeting point for the activities of the youth organization, as well as the more strategic discussions for the seniors from different political persuasions. We operated through the civic organisations and SACOS, the non-racial sports organization, which emphasized ‘no normal sport in an abnormal society’. Over weekends, we would do ‘*huisbesoeke*’, going from house to house dropping newssheets containing information about strikes and marches and venues for huge mass meetings.

As members of our respective high school students organisations, the Student Representative Councils or SRCs, Lila and I were immersed in student mobilisation across the different ideological streams and racial divides, from Gugulethu to Mitchell's Plain. We defined our common nationhood as oppressed people, not by the racist labels of the regime. The more we mobilized, the stronger our commitments to overthrowing apartheid became. We happily gave up some of the activities that other youth were doing, like going to weekend discos and dates. The struggle became our lives.

Seth remarked on our dedication, "You two, don't you have time for some fun? You're too *erg* man; there's more to life."

"What do you know? We must sacrifice now for our futures, including yours ... luigat." Lila chided him.

I did think about the masses of school children like Seth, who were only concerned about making it through school and leading normal lives. It was different for students like Lila and me, who lived by slogan 'education for liberation'. I didn't hold it against Seth – he was a likeable boy, always fooling around, to the annoyance of his feisty sister.

"Come on Lila, you can convince Doc to have a *jol* in the garage. It's *darem* my birthday, and I'll work on Mommy. I've got the DJ organized already. I can see you two bopping to Kool and the Gang. Please."

He made us laugh, and Lila promised to talk to her father.

The school principals' sympathetic to the cause allowed the politicization of the schoolroom, so long as we paid attention to our studies, and handled the protest action on the school grounds responsibly. As a show of solidarity for detainees or against emergency measures imposed by the state, we marched around the school grounds, signing freedom songs. A favourite was '*die mummies, die pappies, die broertjies, die sussies, die aunties, die uncles ... die hondjies, die katjies, almal in die struggle*'.

Back in our neighbourhood, we were received with varying responses by the community, from benign tolerance to open suspicion. There were many conservative households who prided

themselves on not being ‘political’ and minding their own business, as if Cape Town was perfect. It would incense me when these people slammed the doors in our faces, or rudely shouted at us, “Get off my property, don’t bring your nonsense here.” Other times, we could sense them watching us through the slits in their curtains.

“Bloody reactionaries,” Lila would hiss, “comfortable in their slavery.”

We were undeterred.

Inevitably, occasionally the class differences between Lila, Seth and myself would lead to ugly scenes. Lila would become bossy and issue out instructions.

“The path to democracy and freedom is not lined with roses. We have to double our efforts and recruit more youth. We need to get them off the streets and into the meetings.”

Once walking home from a long day of dropping off newssheets, Seth chipped in, “Look at what you’re wearing Mandy, no wonder the people were so *woes* with us.”

“Don’t be defensive, Mandy, he’s just joking. Maybe we should think about our outfits, though.”

“Fuck off Lila, Seth is onbeskof. Nice to talk when he’s wearing a leather jacket, and you’re walking on padded tennis shoes, while I’m hobbling on my plat takkies from Ackermans.”

But Lila and I set these differences aside quickly and rallied around our common goal. We worked out a system of letting the phones ring a certain number of times, to alert each other of arrests that had taken place overnight or possible raids by the police. Parents were unaware of the ringing at strange hours, and would become irritated by the dropped calls in the early hours of the morning. Our primitive efforts at keeping informed of developments grew more ineffective. Comrades quietly disappeared or were arrested at unsuspecting hours of the day. The ignorance and innocence of youth shielded us from the depravity of the state forces and how they plotted to curtail our serious but harmless activities.

At a report back meeting in their lounge, Seth teased us. “You people better watch out. Jokes aside, it won’t be so *kwaai* if they take you two in.”

The day it happened, I had a pre-arranged meeting with Lila at the civic hall. She was sitting, in a cold corner of the empty hall, away from a window. Unusually, she was ashen faced and puffy-eyed. I was immediately wary.

“Doc and Seth were taken into custody at 4.00 this morning. I don’t know how Seth is going to cope; my poor baby.” She was babbling. Her lip quivered and I noticed her hand shaking, as she wiped her face with a tissue.

“What, what do you mean? Why didn’t you call?”

Lila just shook her head. She pushed her bottom lip out.

“My mother was the first to respond to the banging on the door. She said five policeman stormed past her.” Tears streamed down her face.

“Come Li, let’s sit in the sun, there’s our spot on the stoep. You look pale and tired.” She needed comforting.

Lila shook her head again, and then started speaking.

“The police rummaged through the house pretending to look for banned literature. They were pushing my father and Seth around like they were filthy criminals. Smacking them. Can you imagine that? The fucking pigs.”

Lila cried when she described the look on Seth’s face as they threw him into the van. He had looked around bewilderedly at his mother.

“For fuck sake, he’s only a baby, why do you have to take him?” Sandra shouted at the policeman.

“Then next time *Mee-sies*, teach him not to get up to *kak*,” the plain clothes security policeman growled back. “Do you want me to take you and your daughter as well, since you’re so clever. A night in a cell away from this nice house will teach you not to mess with the state.”

“You rubbishes!” Sandra shouted at the back of the van rolling down her driveway. None of the neighbours had even stirred during the raid, and were later shocked to hear the details.

Lila became more agitated as she related the story. “Why didn’t they take me instead? I’m the one who is active. And my poor father, who are those rubbishes to treat him like that? The bastards!”

Remarkably, Lila and Sandra bounced back and stoically set about the business of engaging the services of a lawyer, Dickie Adams, a fellow activist and family friend. He ensured they were able to see Doc and Seth, who were moved from Pollsmoor to Victor Verster Prison. This meant they had to drive at least an hour to Paarl.

After one of these visits, I went to check that Lila was okay. Sandra was drained but she was meeting Mr Adams to plan the next steps. We were having coffee and her homemade chicken pie, when I heard her ask, “Why are they making this so hard, Dickie?”

“Pure vindictiveness, when they can’t even provide the charges; but one step at a time,” Mr Adams said.

One week quickly turned to a month, and then finally three months later, we were told that there would possibly be a number of people released, early one morning. By now there had been several more arrests, for all sorts of petty claims such as having banned literature, posters or holding meetings for political reasons.

It was with enormous relief that we received confirmation that Doc and Seth had been released. The David’s home quickly returned to its former bustle. Within an hour of the news, there was a welcoming party with a constant stream of people and cars lining the road – neighbours, patients, comrades, other released detainees and family. A tape of Abdullah Ibrahim’s “Mannenberg” played softly in the background while Lila and her mother cooked several pots of lamb curry and roti, basmati rice, fried masala fish and sambals. It was like they never tired while Doc sat quietly in his favourite spot at the table hardly speaking, but patiently greeting and answering the same questions over and over as new well-wishers filed in. It was not a day for energetic dancing, but one of relief and gratitude that Doc and Seth were safe. We also had news that other detainees had been released; there was a circulation of visits between homes.

“Hello Doc. *Salaam alaikum*. Welcome home, glad to see you again. It wasn’t the same without you.” Poor Doc was hugged and kissed and his hand squeezed. He must have been exhausted, but he stayed in his spot till the last guests left, well into the night. Doc was thinner, but said he was well enough.

Seth disappeared into the house, with his parents assuming that he was with the other youngsters. I wanted to welcome him back, and looked for him. I found him alone in his bedroom.

“You okay?”

“Ja; everyone keeps asking me, but you know it’s *kak* in the *tjook*.” He didn’t look at me, and I could see that it had been very hard for him.

“But tell me.”

“I don’t want to talk now. I’m tired. I just want to listen to my music now. Sorry.” He looked up, and I saw the dark rings around his eyes. He had a sprinkling of hair on his upper lip. I felt like putting my arm around him.

As the months passed, Lila would mention that Seth was being difficult; that he didn’t want to participate in struggle activities, which I thought was understandable given the circumstances. I suggested that we leave him to sort out his moods and figure out what he wanted.

“Shame, Lila, the struggle can spare him for now. He’s gone through enough.”

“I suppose so, but he needs to pull himself together. He’s not the only one whose gone through that, and he must get good marks now. He must decide what he wants to study.”

Doc went back to his practice, and meetings. Lila told me that her mother had said they must pay more attention to Seth. “He needs our father, especially now.” Doc promised to go to his soccer games on the weekends, but the frequency soon dwindled, as the government clamped down more.

Life went on, although I sometimes witnessed the strain on Lila's face and demeanour. She had matured rapidly, and at times was even more sharp tongued. We continued to engage in protest activities, but things were never the same again – probably because we had become more cautious, and many of us had moved on from the youth organization to other civic and political parties.

Later in 1986, we met up again when our local community in Heathfield took in the victims of the treacherous *wit doeke*, regime sponsored vigilantes, who had descended on innocent people in Guguletu and Langa causing absolute havoc. Entire families were displaced, separated and left with nothing but the clothes on their bodies. Somehow, comrades managed to enter the townships and relocated the traumatized victims to safe houses across the Cape Flats, one of which was the Heathfield Methodist Church. We gathered food, clothes, medicine and sanitary goods to provide some sort of intermediate relief, for the mostly older women and girls who were brought to the makeshift shelter in the church hall.

I was in the midst of preparing for exams, when I received a call from Ralph, one of our friends who was always up-to-date with whatever was happening, or about to happen.

“I have you and Lila down for joint overnight duty tonight, so make sure you're here by 6, and, keep it quiet.”

There was no asking whether one was able to; it was a gentle command. I was happy to obey; my exam preparations would have to wait. We did our best to provide some comfort to the terrified souls, whose lives had been ruptured. We prepared food, and sorted out the medicines that had been donated; but also served as overnight guards to raise the alert should any mischief arise. I was hoping that Seth would help, but he never pitched. It was scary by ourselves, but Lila and I were reassured by the support of the Heathfield community who had rallied together to share their resources and place themselves in sight of the security police. It made us proud. Lila cheekily remarked, “Our innocent youth was not wasted on the *huisbesoek* after all, Mandy. We've even managed to get the conservatives to respond to the call for action.”

When I asked why Seth didn't pitch, Lila shrugged me off, "Ag, you know he's into some other girl now." I had heard rumours, but didn't pay much attention to my mother's network of *skinder-bekke* who were always ready to share doleful news.

"*Siestog*, that boy is becoming a problem for his parents. Imagine, Doc Davids and Sandra, so proud. Now this nonsense, and they had to move him to a private school because the old one kicked him out for drinking."

I stopped my mother in the throes of her story. "Ma, I don't have time to listen to this. That woman can exaggerate. It was probably just schoolboy pranks; Seth was always a good boy."

Still, I felt uneasy, and thought about asking Lila directly, but didn't want to embarrass her. She would tell me if something were going on, like she had the time Seth and Doc were arrested. Seth was kind and funny, even if he had become more reticent.

Everybody changed; even the struggle dynamics had changed. I pondered that perhaps, the act of living did not follow or yield to ideology. The old youth organisation stopped operating; family, studies and work life consumed our time. We kept in touch mostly for old times' sake.

I heard that Seth had finally finished a college diploma in IT, after dropping out of university. I assumed that he would find himself regardless of what had happened in his youth. Everyone in his family was successful.

After years of studying and travelling, including to Lucera in Italy, I moved back to the neighbourhood to take care of my ailing parents. 1994 had come and gone sooner than our youth had prepared us for but we were all still activists in some form or other, we liked to believe. Some of us were involved in NGOs, some in government, as a noble act of realising the nation-building programme. Others were happily engaged with capitalism as a *necessary* means of growing the economy. Liberation came with its own complexities; other than the vote, not much changed for the marginalized masses.

I was listening to Robbie Jansen's singing, "Freedom where have you been hiding; I've been looking all over ..." on the radio at home, when my cell beeped. It was Lila telling me to meet her at her parents second house, close to the Cape Flats train line that ran through the back of our old suburb. I jumped into my car without thinking and sped off down the road. All she had said is, "Just meet me in Maybank Rd, at the house. I can't talk now." I hadn't heard from her for some time, and had even forgotten that the Davids' still had that house. I was too busy juggling work and looking after my parents, to catch up with what was going on in the neighbourhood.

"What in the hell is Lila doing there?" I mumbled to myself as I tried to recall the most direct route to their house, which her parents had bought as an investment. I vaguely remembered that it was close to the I & J Factory, which the apartheid planners had, in their wisdom, granted permission for, tarnishing what should have been one of the 'smarter' coloured areas.

I hoped Lila hadn't become bored with her lavish life and was now expecting me to help her decorate the place, but there was such urgency in her voice that I didn't want to second guess what was going on. She was living in Constantia, after her return from a few years abroad. The entire Davids' family had eventually left for New Zealand, to rebuild their lives away from the constant harassment that continued after the detention episode. They only came back well after 1994, when they were assured that they could carry on with their lives.

It took me about ten minutes to find the house. The light was already beginning to fade, and at first I thought that I was at the wrong house, it looked so dilapidated. The gate was hanging and the garden was very untidy – weeds everywhere in between the broken paving. Then I saw the number ten, painted on the vibracrete wall, or what remained of it. This was not what I remembered to have been a small but pretty garden which Sandra looked after with the help of their gardener.

Then I saw Lila in the doorway, pulling something. "Lila, what the hell are you doing? What's going on here? This place stinks."

"I can't talk now. Grab his feet." She was breathing hard.

When I got close, I froze. Lila was pulling on a dirty blanket, wrapped around Seth, whom I barely recognised. His eyes were closed, but I could see that he was gaunt, bald and smelt like he had soiled himself. The house was trashed, with garbage, mostly empty bottles and cans strewn across the floors. An old cell phone was lying next to him. I balked at having to touch the blanket. He was barefooted, and I stared at his crusty heels and bulbous toes with long, thickened nails.

“Fuck it, Mandy, are you going to help? He’s heavy but we’ll manage, it’s just a short way to my car.” She jerked her head towards the BMW SUV.

“But why don’t we call the ambulance? What’s wrong with him?”

“No time, let’s just get him into the car, please.” I heard her voice break, and jumped into action. She started speaking to Seth even though he was clearly unconscious. He had a deep gash above his eye.

“Seth, please get up. Open your eyes.” She pleaded with him, while we stumbled to the car, our feet slipping on the broken, uneven path. He was heavy, even though he looked skeletal, with sunken cheeks, like he didn’t have teeth. Only hard drugs could have done this damage, I realized, finally acknowledging the gossip. It had devoured every inch of his once angelic, baby face. My mother’s local network had been right all along. I felt guilty; maybe I could have helped him had I not been so arrogant.

“Christ, Lila isn’t it better to call for help? Or the police?”

“No, we’re nearly done. You open the door and then go round and pull him onto the back seat. I’ll push his legs up. If you can’t manage, I’ll call someone else.”

As soon as we had him stretched out on the seat, Lila took a deep breath and turned to me, “Thanks Mandy, I’ll call you.” She checked that he was still breathing.

“Where are you going, I’ll follow.”

“No! I’ll call, and don’t tell anyone.” She sped off.

She called a few hours later. Seth was in a private hospital, in Constantia, under the care of one of her father's medical contacts.

"They broke him all those years ago in Victor Verster. They should rather have taken me. All he did was go with us to rallies."

"I wish I had known, Lila." I remembered that many years before I had bumped into Seth at a restaurant, just as I was about to leave. He was waving at me, but seemed unsteady and was slurring, "Howsit, Mm-an-dee?" Before, I could reach him, his friend grabbed his arm, and lead him outside. He must be tipsy, I had mused.

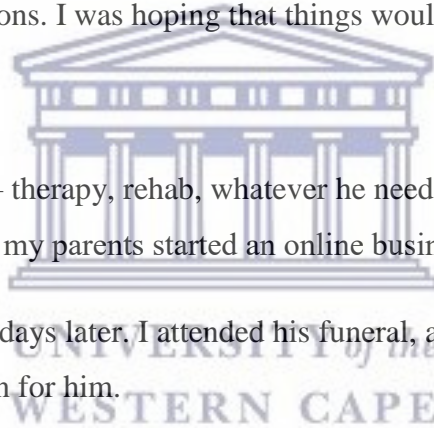
"I didn't know how to help him, anymore." Lila sounded hollow but needed to unburden these long hidden secrets, that not even I had noticed. It must have cost her pride dearly' but this was not the time for recriminations. I was hoping that things would turn around.

"And your parents?"

"They tried really hard – therapy, rehab, whatever he needed. My uncle gave him a job as a driver, for a few months; then my parents started an online business for him, but they gave up."

Seth passed away a few days later. I attended his funeral, a small family affair, where Lila read a poem she had written for him.

That was the last time I spoke to or saw Lila. I hope that, perhaps like always, something will happen and there will be a need to meet.



The confession

From: exilerest@gmail.com

To: nicky@yahoo.com

Reasons why

Yesterday at 20.30

Hi Nicky

You haven't heard from me in a while and I hope you're okay. I've been thinking a lot about things, that should have been said a long time ago. So why now, you're probably thinking. *Wat nou?* So here's it. That fucking *skuinheilige* Theo Britz, of all people, came to visit. Found me on Facebook, *nogal*, and said he was passing through for some sort of conference. Can you *believe* he actually works for a narcotics company – those bastards, but that's another matter. Anyway we got talking – all the shit we got up to during the struggle, how fucking naïve we all were. And you know him, how he can make a person laugh, while puffing on some good stuff. And then he let it all out, as usual. What some of you (including you, Nicky) had thought about me, had been *skinnering* and saying about why I left. I got the *moer-in*, and almost *klapped* him. But then he told me to calm down, that it wasn't him alone thinking all that crap. He poured some neat shots of whiskey and we got *dronk*. He left the next day. Typical. Dumped his nonsense and was gone.

I know it was long ago but I'm not going to lie. It hurt me, what people were gossiping even if Theo made like it was joke. Like it was all bygones. So I thought hard, that maybe it's time to share and to set a few things straight.

You all know about that night with the security police, that time I kept saying I didn't know all the details. I just said that because I didn't want to talk about it. But I'm going to tell you now. You already know some things - the security police, the constant moving from one hideout, Langebaan, my aunty. But there's a lot I didn't tell anyone.

It was a Thursday evening late, raining like hell. You all thought I was alone that night. But I wasn't. I was with Mark. Ja, that Mark that you know. But wait with that. We were at Pam's flat. Suddenly there were these footsteps trying to be quiet, but you know those fuckers couldn't even be subtle with that.

We *skrikked* and tried to hide the literature behind the bookcase. Next thing there was this *moerse* bang. They kicked the door in, and came straight at me. I thought of running but there was four of them, with one blocking the door. The biggest *vark* you've ever seen. Smirking at me. It was Kaptein, that one from Shortmarket Street Police. Spyker was his nickname. You remember mos why he was called that, because of what he did to detainees. I didn't say anything. Refused to talk to the bastards; so they just dragged me like that in my shorts to the van. I didn't want to go quietly but they threatened to take Mark too. Poor bastard was *bibbering* away. So I kept my mouth shut when they said if I go quietly they'll leave him.

“*Kyk hierso jou bliksem*, do you want us to take your little friend too, so that we can fuck you both up? You know what we mean.”

They *klapped* Mark before throwing me into the van and promised to get him if he told anyone. They took me to Athlone Station for the night (this part you know); and moved me to Paarl the next day with some other guys who had clearly been *moered* within an inch of their lives. Those Special Branch guys are mean; you know how they looked at you. It made you want to piss in your pants. And I didn't have clothes with. In the middle of winter, *nogal*. They threw me straight into a cold, bare cell, with no light. Just a broken loo, that stank of shit.

I just went more silent, didn't answer them, when they kept pushing. At first Kaptein wasn't around; but they kept saying they would call him if I didn't co-operate; tell them what they wanted to know. Strange that they didn't touch me. Just kept taunting me. But that's the way they did it, *mos*. That was their style; so it didn't worry me, yet.

But then something changed. I think they were getting frustrated; and I sensed my time was coming. They kept pushing harder; pressing me for details. More than one cop at a time would come to the cell. A few times they made me pull down my pants; and just stand there sneering at me. It almost took everything from me, to control myself; and they could see that I was no longer so *hardegat*.

There were two doors to the interrogation room. A door would open at one end and a cop would come in, and would start, “Yes big boy, we know what you did. If you don’t tell us where the others are, you know what we’re going to do with you. The way you like. And Kaptein knows just how to get you to talk. To sort you out, once and for all.” He would leave, and bang the door.

Then suddenly the other door would open and another cop would cut in, “They don’t call him Spyker for *niks*. He knows all about boys like you; *a paar harde kappe* like no-one’s ever given it to you before, and you’ll be finished. *Klaar*.”

I wanted to cry, badly. I even said a prayer. The fact that they didn’t touch me, made me even more scared. *Jirre, meisie* ... I’ve never told anyone how scared I was. Mark and I had talked about this once, what they did to break people. Filthy bastards, and then when you see the news, it’s all about keeping the fatherland safe and secure from terrorists, making sure that their families were safe from the *rooi gevaar*. I wonder if their women knew what they got up to.

I think I blocked it out all this time. And there was nowhere to escape, just that fucking cell ... solitary, which they said were for special cases like me. Not even a bladdy mattress. Just two filthy, stinky dogs’ blankets. Worse was when I figured what they were going to do to me. Part of me even wanted Spyker to come, just to get it over with. Maybe I would survive.

In between the tough guys, there was a younger *ou*, whom they sent in. I sensed he was kinder, and had a gentler side. He would bring me water or ciggies, some Rothmans Blue, and tell me to say what I knew so they could stop. I sort of knew they were doing good cop, bad cop. But I felt something, like he really understood that I didn’t know anything. I wasn’t on that side of the struggle, where they were bringing back arms into the country or planning attacks. He was a good looking guy, and I really felt like he was a friend. I felt calmer when he was around.

They kept this up for a week. At least by now my mother knew where I was, and was allowed to bring me clothes. They said for in case I got out, alive. I prayed like I never did before – on the Bible, the Koran, anything that could just see me through. They would come at all hours and just drop things like, *you slipped through our hands once, not this time, boeta*. Your time is coming.

Do you remember that time I managed to escape through the window of the civic hall, when we were supposed to be having a youth fundraising function ... *min te wiet* what we were actually up to. That time I ran like a *perd* through the streets of Athlone, and escaped. Now, I was truly stuck, nowhere to maneuver, not even a damn window.

And through all that, you will never believe, I resolved that if I got out, I was going to run, very far, where they could never get their filthy bloodstained *poote* on me. I was going to leave. For me! Do you understand? For me! I was terrified, fuck it. *Bang*, like never before. I had worked out what they wanted to know. Who they were really after.

Vaderland, thanks to the riots that fired up all over the Flats, they had too much on their hands, and the *selle* were vol. They had to let some of us go. Do you remember how you guys on the outside were kicking up a *moerse lawaai* about detention without trial, and the international media were onto them? I have never been so happy to feel the rain on my back; and to talk shit with you people. Do you remember my debriefing party at Pam's place? You guys don't let up, always needing details, even when I was still so raw. I just dropped a few things, enough to just clear the air a bit, before I could think of my next move. I got so *dronk*, and was *tjanking* on your shoulders.

Then I started thinking back to that cell. There was no way I could go back there; waiting with my pants hanging around my ankles, and for them to do *God wiet wat* to me. I know it was mean not to tell my mother that I was leaving, that I had no intentions of coming back, even if my father had died the previous year. She was still mourning and stressing how she was going to get on with just her factory salary. And here was her eldest son, who had promised to look after her and the other children, announcing that he was packing to study overseas for a short time. I just gave her some info, that it was an opportunity to finish my studies, with a full bursary. I couldn't go back to UWC. It was hard, man, just thinking about the look on her face. You know *mos*, I'm a mommy's boy.

But thinking about telling you lot was worse. I couldn't. I had just had my soul stripped bare by those SB thugs. I knew people thought that I was a coward, that there were rumours that Spyker had gotten hold of me. To make it worse, a short time after I got out, there were more arrests and that Williams guy was re-arrested. I think that is maybe why some people were fingering me. But no one had the courage to come and make your accusations to my face. I

remember now, some of our comrades started to behave funny with me, especially that Davey creep. Remember? How he wouldn't even look at me and made those comments about me getting out so quickly, and how come it was just before Williams was taken in? I even spoke to you about it. And then there was that meeting that I wasn't invited to. The one about the pamphlets at Sally's house. Imagine! And all along I'm sure you, too, were thinking the worst. But you underground intelligence types can keep straight faces, even with a friend, not let anything on, until you burn a *ou*. Even your best *tjommie* ... anything for the struggle.

Anyway, I didn't have time to think about what the sudden funny vibes towards me were all about. I just pushed everything aside and focused on getting my things ready. My passport and some money, which Dawood had to organize through his connections in Germany. Can you believe going all that route to get something approved here? He also organized some money through his other links. A week before I left, I went to his shop. If only the police knew what went on behind that groceries counter. He took me to the storeroom, and *sommer* there in-between cool drink bottles, gave me a package. I panicked a bit, thinking what else was in that envelope, because you know Dawood, ever enterprising. I didn't want to stick my neck out again, not for anyone or anything. So if he had slipped something else in there with my visa, something to maybe pass on to a comrade in Germany I would have had to say, no thank you. I was finished and *klaar*.

After all, it wasn't Dawood sitting in the *tjook*, it was just me out of all of you *slimgat* armchair politicians. You all, with your big ideals and gossip that maybe your pal was a traitor after all. Ja, ja, maybe you will say I was rationalizing but I was finished. My life was in tatters. I didn't know who I was – struggle hero, aspirant academic, whatever. My relationship with Sarah was *klaar* too. She had left me. Maybe she had heard some of the gossip too. I don't know. It may sound strange, but I was truly heartbroken. I felt abandoned by her.

The next part you kind of know. I settled down in Germany even though it took a couple of years. But I still felt like I owed explanations, especially to Sarah. It was also supposed to be a practice run before I told the whole world, including my mother. By then I think she suspected, and that's why she left me. But *jussus* man. This is confession time. I told Sarah that she mustn't worry about the way things ended. That I was okay, that I was happy for her that she found someone she liked and had married. Ja, it took me five years and I don't know how many

versions of that letter, but I told her. Besides, I was worried that Barry, the *eierkop*, would go running off home with a *klomp* stories. He had popped out of nowhere, and I wonder if it was really so innocent, pretending to be touring the continent. Very unusual for a ragged- trousered *commie* to be just touring, loitering without a purpose. Besides, if those slime bags had figured me out, surely other people must have. I wished one of you would just come out and say what you thought. Anyway, I knew the time had come, to share. So I wrote.

I had found someone who cared about me. I almost wanted to leave the part in saying who wouldn't want to care about me. Who wouldn't want to be with me? But seriously, I told her that I was living with my partner in a beautiful apartment on the edge of a forest where we walked the dog. I finally had my own dog because for once my life was stable. I was happy, even studying and doing all the things that normal couples do.

Sarah wrote back saying she was happy for me, and that maybe she always knew. She was actually so soothing, with her proper English. I felt liberated, like I could live openly, not always looking over my shoulder. But then after a few months, I started stressing again. Sometimes I wonder if those bastards hadn't damaged my brain permanently, so that I could never relax for long before something made me doubt my happiness. Always scared that what I had would be snatched away.

Then I thought what if Sarah told everyone back home, and my mother got to hear like this? You have to understand this. I wasn't being deliberate or deceitful. It was a boulder in my path. I know that it was sometimes convenient because I could live in different worlds simultaneously; but I wasn't completely comfortable for too long and then the worry would start to eat at me. And more, you guys were always onto the other exiles for hanging out in Germany too long. There was all that talk that people were being *draaied* by the Social Democrats, to spy for money and a safe home. It gave me anxiety – so I drank and smoked.

It was Heinz who made me do it. Yes, I finally said his name. He'd been hinting that we had to move on, but I resisted. Made excuses. It became a thing, a tug-of-war between us. Until he sat me down, and with German precision, looked me in the eyes.

“Tell her, tell them who you are, what you are.”

I was so frustrated with him; he could be pushy. I didn't understand what it had to do with him, when I chose to tell. This was my new life. It wasn't like I was planning to introduce him to everyone.

He just kept staring. "Do it, do it. What about your dignity? Are you going to live like an escapee all your life?"

I finally understood. I had to confront this thing. Everything, from the political exile, partially self-imposed, to who I am. That it was okay to be me. Even though I did wonder whether Heinz had another motive, but let's leave that for now. I know I'd become super suspicious even in my newfound liberation.

This thing that I found so hard to deal with, and was hiding like a big, dirty secret, was what the police knew and threatened me with, used against me. The thought of being physically violated by them and then my relationship with Mark being outed to everyone, repulsed me. But what repulsed me the most was that that feeling had made me do it. Betray Williams, sort of.

Ja, I can I admit it now. It was me who spilled the beans, but it wasn't like that I was having nightmares about Spyker breaking me, with my integrity in tatters and in the end they didn't even need to use him. Just showed me some pictures they had found of Mark and I. Photos they said they would send to my mother. And that was enough.

It was that nice, good looking cop they used to send in to the cell to ask if I knew Williams' nickname was Shoes, and before I knew, I had said yes. That was it. I didn't have to say anything else.

I hated myself, knowing that. I would cry inconsolably. Heinz was the one who understood. I realized that those morons had managed to infiltrate my mind. They used who I am to get to me. They made me despise myself - they could make me do things, sell out, to protect myself.

To top it, all those fucking commissions started up, supposedly to wring the truth out of all and sundry. Before you know it, there's news about another commission. Ever so serious; and people are rapping, sometimes the biggest load of *kak*, throwing suspicion anywhere but their own feet. And I didn't want you people to start up your rusty brains, making links that lead back

to me. Because it seems to me that anyone who doesn't conveniently fit the bill, or foot the bill more likely, is now a spy or spilled the beans or something.

I want you to understand what I did. Ja, I know that all of you thought I was a traitor, leaving like that, and now living it up in Europe. Maybe a part of you didn't really believe it Nicky or you wouldn't have maintained contact all this time. So now you know from my mouth what I did. I feel bad about what they did Williams, but I never meant to let my *bek* run over.

I'm sorry that I'm not just your *moffie* friend, not just your big lovable rowdy comrade. Maybe you think that I'm a fucking communist homosexual traitor. But I've told you the truth now and you can decide for yourself.

Fluit, fluit, my storie is uit, and my cupboards are spring-cleaned. Love.



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

T.O.P

Dr Snyman greeted her in his friendly, comforting manner.

“You’re looking good Wendy; everything went well. It was the right decision.”

“I’m glad, Doctor.”

“Your womb was enlarged from all the fibroids; I was surprised that your cervix looked like someone who’d given birth.”

He paused and looked Wendy in the eye. Her jaw went stiff, and she didn’t respond. She felt her eyes betray her. Her Std 3 teacher had long ago told her, “You can’t hide your mischief; it shows in your eyes.” She had been reading a novel under the lid of her desk, while he was talking and writing up the arithmetic lesson on the chalkboard. Now, the gynecologist made her feel like she had been caught out.

“But from here, you should be fine. If you feel a bit off in about three weeks, don’t worry. That happens as your body adjusts, and a bit of depression is normal. Give me a call, if you need anything.”

“Thanks Doctor Snyman. I feel better already.”

She wasn’t interested in depression, it took too much energy and time which she had wasted enough of in her thirty-eight years. She was relieved to be leaving the Pretoria East Hospital. Waking up in the post-op room had been frightening, it felt like she was waking up in the middle of a war-zone. The pain was bad, making her moan, until the nurse pegged on a morphine drip to her middle finger so she could dose herself. “Just press when you need to.”

The next six weeks of post-op recovery left Wendy with lots of time to reminisce. She was not allowed to do any strenuous activities. For a second in Dr Snyman’s surgery, she wanted to confess. He had a reassuring gentleness about him; just like when she had called him two weeks before the operation.

“I can’t stand the pain and discomfort any longer, Doctor. Just do the op as soon as you can.”

She had constantly worried that she would have an ‘accident’. It was inconvenient when she was trying to build a career, and she was determined to make the best of the promotion she had received, the next level up into senior management. This was a victory, finally having a decent job almost a decade after the new democratic regime came into being. Before that, she had sent CV after CV, searching for work. It had been disheartening to have struggled through three degrees, and barely have a job to look after herself and pay off her student debt. Never mind that she had to move from Cape Town and start a new life in Gauteng. To celebrate, she had bought her dream house on a huge plot of land with beautiful gardens for her two beloved Jack Russell Terriers, Nina and Scott. They might be small in stature, but they were curious and energetic, needing plenty of exercise. While recuperating, she wouldn’t be able to take them on their daily walks, but they could explore the garden. Fortunately, they were not barkers, so she wouldn’t have to monitor them too much.

Now, Wendy thought back to what Dr Snyman had said. It made her uneasy, taking her back to a time she’d long put behind her. Maybe, this was the depression the doctor had referred to; and all the sleeping in the winter sun streaming through her bedroom window. Or, it could be time for her to start walking more. She’d been spending most of the day watching the dogs through the window, and listening to Radio 702 for the news.

Her parents, Jimmy and Neezy, had flown up from Cape Town to help to take care of her. They had jumped at the opportunity to visit. Her father was recently retired, and was irritating her mother.

“Wendy, you’ll have to maar book your father a ticket as well. As soon as the old man heard me talking to you, he said he was coming with.”

“Okay, Ma.”

“I was looking forward to spending time with you alone. He’s under my feet all the time; not a bladdy moment to myself.” Jimmy had worked at sea for fifty years, and was lost on land.

Neezy had brought a cooler-box full of fresh fish, which she fried in batter, and served with chips. The kitchen was filled with enticing aromas from fish cakes to stews. On Saturdays, she made her cinnamon carrot cake from a recipe she got from a book on Malay cooking in Cape Town.

It was comforting to have her parents pottering around the house, but Wendy could not shake off the conversation with Dr Snyman. It felt like the loss of her womb was the price she had paid for a foolish night of fun, fifteen years earlier. It was a drink-fueled night of pleasure. *Not even that much fun* she recalled, just drunkenness and bad choices. She had forgiven herself, and by now, held no grudges against her equally drunk and hapless friend, Brian. A frivolous escapade, that ended with serious consequences. Many young women had fallen into this statistic, and at least she was more fortunate. Or was she?

Wendy believed in the role of fate in Mother Nature's Circle of Life. She had been open about the choices she had made, now and back then. Why should it not be acceptable for women to be talk about the challenges facing them? But being a private person, made her short-tempered when the more argumentative, conservative of her friends pressed her for the details. She was curt and retorted, "My body, my choice, my business." Wendy was secretly relieved that there were not many people who wanted to engage on the issues though. It was still taboo, and it was painful, no matter how she tried to rationalise it.

She wondered, how her life would be, had she chosen differently. *Why did I do it? Do I regret it?* Nothing was ever as simple as merely walking away from a difficult choice. There were always consequences.

That's why Wendy was so surprised by Dr Snyman's inference, and there was no turning back for her now, even though he tried to be tactful. "Medical science is so advanced that you still have options. Maybe you can consider surrogacy when the time is right. Your ovaries are still in place."

Wendy could never forget that night, late in the nineteen- eighties when there was so much turmoil in the country. There were hints of a revolutionary breakthrough, but the comrades were as committed to continuing the struggle.

The second of August, was her parent's thirtieth wedding anniversary. It was the one celebration her mother allowed herself and the whole family to have. Everything else was not allowed – birthdays, Christmas or Easter, according to her religious beliefs. Wendy would tease her mother, "Did God give you approval himself?"

The night before, Wendy and her friends including Brian, her on-off boyfriend, had a fund-raising party for the *Release the Detainees* campaign, till well after midnight, in the hall of the UCT residence, Woolsack. They had drunk too much, and Brian never knew when to stop. "Let's go, man. I have to submit an essay on Monday."

Wendy had woken up, shouting and fighting her way out of a nightmare. She was having the *horries*, from guzzling the Pick 'n Pay no-name box wine. Brian rolled out of her three quarter bed, and pulled on his jeans.

"Check you." He slunk out; his head was throbbing, and he didn't need any performances.

She was grumpy and groggy but put on a good face for the anniversary party, at Cape Town Harbor Café, a seafood restaurant, where her oldest brother had reserved fifteen places. It was certainly a treat for their family to be feasting on crayfish and champagne. The sip of bubbly her mother took caused her to pucker up her face, her false teeth shifting into an underbite position. Everyone laughed.

Necy reminded them that she had only given up her Sunday evening sermon to indulge them. "After thirty years of marriage to the same swine, there is really nothing to celebrate. But I'm doing this for all of you."

It was good to see her parents having a good time, even though her father wasn't entirely comfortable. He was tightfisted and kept bothering the waiter, "Can we have a look at the bill, just to see?" After a while, the waiter caught on and ignored him, except for topping up his glass of wine.

At ten o'clock her mother called an end to the evening with a prayer. "Lord, we thank you for the blessings you've bestowed on us, your humble servants." The throb at her temples

reminded Wendy that she had broken more than one of the Ten Commandments earlier, but what her parents didn't know, wouldn't hurt them.

Six weeks later Wendy did not need a doctor to tell her why she was feeling so sluggish, dragging herself up the long sets of steps to the Leslie Building, which was on the southernmost corner of the upper campus. She was shocked and disappointed with herself, but kept a level head while she worked out what to do.

After a week of rushing off to the bathroom, Wendy went to Dr Meyer, the GP her mother had recently started seeing, believing he would be discreet. No appointment was needed beforehand, and his surgery in Steurhof was an easy walk from the station. She was tired of the suspicious gazes her friends had started throwing at her.

Sitting across from the middle-aged man, Wendy became nervous. Not everyone was progressive, doctor or not.

"I can't do this, I can't go through the process, please Doctor."

"What symptoms are you having and for how long?"

She told him, and he said, "Ah-ha, that's it." He disappeared into a small room lined with shelves, and returned, holding out a packet with two pink pills.

"Take these immediately you get home. One today and one tomorrow morning. There'll be some bleeding, but you'll be fine. If you have pain, come back."

"Thanks Doctor Meyer. Where do I pay? The receptionist had left."

"Don't worry, and I won't tell your mother. Just kiss me here." He pointed to a spot on his unshaved, grey cheek.

Wendy was disoriented – nauseous and disgusted. Without thinking, she brushed her lips on his flaccid skin and rushed out. On the pavement, she turned round to check if he was watching. *Filthy fucker*. She would never go back there again; and felt stupid for kissing him.

As soon as she was back in her residence room, she swallowed a pill, but didn't feel any cramps or anything else during the night. In the morning she took the other pill, talking to herself. *You messed up so you better make this right. Swallow.*

Wendy had promised herself that she wouldn't be one of those who dropped their mistakes off into their parents' care. If she wasn't able to take care of it, she'd rather not have it, as painful as it was. Neecey had already been disappointed by her other daughter.

Two weeks passed and nothing deterred the now obvious swelling of her belly, gently jutting out of her slender frame. Wendy's conflict increased and she panicked, breaking her determination. She bought a few pieces of baby clothing and a feeding bottle to test herself. *It's do-able*. And it felt nice to rub her stomach. She almost forgave Dr Meyer for obviously giving her dud pills.

She still had not confided in anyone, but it was clear that something was up. Gone was her over-eagerness to party any day of the week, assignments or not. It was easy to escape her friends, on the pretext that she was studying for her finals. She even evaded one of her best friend's, Nicky, who lived in a flat close to the Baxter Theatre.

"Wendy come down for coffee; we need to plan for December. Are you going to work at Woolworths again?" Nicky was forever planning activities.

"No Nicks. Too busy right now."

"Come on. I haven't seen you. Why haven't you been in class?"

She wouldn't be able to hide for much longer. Fortunately, long 'Indian' print, wrap-around skirts and freestyle clothing was 'in' and easily hid the small bump. Wendy loved the vivid prints, besides they could be worn with different tops in winter and summer.

Eight weeks passed quickly, and she remained in limbo, hoping for something to happen. She couldn't go back to the creepy Dr Meyer, nor was she brave enough to try something riskier, in the backstreets.

Then, one dreary morning, she could no longer bear the stress; she had missed two days of classes. She dragged herself out of bed and thought of calling Nicky. It would be comforting to talk to someone, and Nicky was kind and romantic, but also one of the more conservative of her broad circle. It would mean 'coming clean', confessing, which was better than dangling between bouts of doubts and anxiety on the one hand, and a waste of time on the other, Wendy see-sawed. What she needed was a quick solution. The anxiety overwhelmed, making her

thoughts more and more random. *What if the pills damaged the foetus?* Her punishment would be having a deformed or disabled child. Wendy became frantic, something would have to be done soon.

She dragged on a tracksuit and rushed to the public phones lining the exterior walls of woolsock. Hopefully, it would not be crowded with impatient students pacing up and down to hurry up the person hogging the line. There was no-one around, and Wendy grabbed the phone furthest from door, so she could have more privacy.

Her mother answered jovially. “Hello my baby, I’m just putting on my shopping shoes, to walk to Diep River station. The train is in thirty minutes. Hold on.”

Wendy could hear her mother shuffling around; it made her even more impatient to let go of her burden.

“I should have learnt to drive. Aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

Wendy didn’t give her mother another chance to ask more questions. She blurted it all out in one long sentence. She was beyond caring of the consequences, which, in any case, had already been manifested. She was hysterical but grateful.

“Mommy, I’m sorry, but I don’t know what to do. I can’t take it anymore. I know I’ve disappointed you.”

“I’ll tell your father to fetch you right away,” is all Neecey said.

Wendy was surprised that her mother didn’t sound angry or lunge into a religious sermon about her state of sin. She waited nervously, wondering how long it would take her father to drive Punt’s Estate.

One hour later, she spotted the blue Cressida pull up in the parking lot for the campus residents. Her mother sent her father for a walk around the block of gardens, surrounding the bland university buildings.

“Give us a few moments, but don’t disappear.”

Neecey was calm, a bad sign. Wendy felt even more nervous and guilty. She waited for the sermon, “How could you disappoint us so badly, such a sinful deed.” Instead, her mother

only said, “Where can we sit? What about here in this sunny spot. You look pale.” And then listened, only interrupting once.

“Who’s the culprit?”

Wendy ignored her.

“I’ve sat here listening to you. Don’t play with me; or else I’m calling your father.” This was one of the few occasions Wendy was ashamed to face her father. It had always been easier to deal with him. “Who?”

“Brian.”

“Bloody swine. I always knew he was a good-for-nothing, but we’ll deal with him later.”

“Mommy, please...”

“Let’s call your father. I’ll do the talking; you know how he’s going to perform. I don’t want to deal with two patients.”

Wendy felt immediately relieved; better than since the whole mess started, and had no doubt that her mother would break the news to her father, and that he would not be given much chance of oo-ing and ah-ing. The poor man would probably be blamed for all the sins of men, and be reminded of his own long list. All her father said was, “Pack your bags, while I bring the car round.”

She spent the next few days at home. She was grateful for father’s silent show of support. He didn’t say a thing to her siblings, a secret which he carried to the grave. “When you’re ready, you can tell them yourself, my girl.” There was still one more confession to make, but that would have to hold.

Soon, Wendy felt strong enough to put her plan into action. Her mother gave her money to do medical checks that all was fine. She called Dr Jesse Richardson, an activist and gynaecologist, whom she had seen a few times for her dysmenorrhea. Wendy wished that had gone to her in the first place, but a consultation was expensive; and she was embarrassed, after all her education and gender conscientisation.

Dr Richardson did not beat about the bush, or plague her with moral dilemmas. “You are very advanced, so we have to act quickly. I’ll ask a colleague, Dr Smith, to see you tomorrow at Groote Schuur Hospital. He’ll take good care of you.”

Whatever medical costs to be incurred would be minimal because it was a public hospital. Dr Smith said there was a chance that they could help.

“But you’re so advanced we have to be cautious. There is a legal option though.”

“Thanks, Doctor.”

“The safest way, Wendy, is for you to undergo an assessment that proves that you are in a precarious mental state that could affect the foetus. I can arrange it quickly.”

Wendy saw a state psychiatrist the next day, in a dodgy building in one of Cape Town’s side streets. The small waiting room was full of patients, who were agitated and impatient with waiting too long, but the psychiatrist was thorough and not as sympathetic as Wendy thought he would be. Things had been going so smoothly.

“So, tell me, how are you feeling? Are you sleeping well?” He took notes in between. “Are you going to lectures? Have you spoken to your partner? Do you have a support plan?”

After thirty minutes Wendy felt like giving up. She hadn’t even thought of these things. She had always known what outcome she wanted. She didn’t want to think about options. Her life was complicated enough, and this was not part of her plan. *Fucking cold-hearted, pro-lifer*, she swore, but this was her last chance, as far as she was concerned. The alternative would be one of those gory processes which she had heard about from one of her friends, who had disappeared for a few weeks pretending to have been on a political mission somewhere across the border.

“I can’t afford to have the baby. It was a mistake.” She even said that Brian was a drug addict, which was quite close to the truth considering the amount of pot he smoked every day. She was amazed at the sound of her voice, and the words rolling out.

“Okay, Wendy. I’ll motivate. But you’ll have to go to a special hospital.” The doctor pulled his note pad closer and wrote out an admission letter, reminding her to see him in two months’ time to talk.

“Ma, they’re going to give me therapy for the stress, as a stay-in patient for a couple of weeks.” This was not completely untrue; she needed the time to think and prepare herself for what was to come.

Two days later, Wendy was admitted to the Avalon Rehabilitation Centre, a long bus ride up Klipfontein Road on the edges of Heideveld. She was unprepared for what awaited her – the intensity of the therapy, the medications and the other patients.

It was not all bad; the nurses and therapists were helpful and kind, but followed the treatment schedules strictly, something Wendy had not anticipated. The day started at 6.00am with breakfast, then medicine time, followed by group therapy, exercises, and rotated individual psychotherapy. Wendy enjoyed the variety of occupational therapies that involved basket weaving and making macramé nets. The day ended with medicine time before bedtime, by which time Wendy was worn out. She resisted the tablets the nurse pressed on her.

“If you want to feel better, swallow. Everyone must, girlie.” She did the first few times but felt so restless and shaky, she spat out the tablets as soon as the nurse moved to the next dormitory. After a week, Wendy wanted to leave, but knew this was her last chance; she was far too advanced. Her skinny frame was barely fitting into her clothes.

The other patients and their life stories were a revelation; Wendy’s life had been sheltered in comparison. Listening to the ‘sharing’ that took place at group sessions, made up for the feeling of imprisonment. As soon as breakfast was done, a bell would ring, signaling the start of therapy. About ten male and female patients sat on cushions arranged in a circle, unless someone was acting out and refused to be part of the circle, and would then be allowed to sit in a corner, or go to the dormitories which were otherwise strictly off-limits during session time. Since patients were at different stages of therapy, the ones who had been around longer would “share” more freely.

Wendy was reticent when the senior nurse, Glenda, introduced her, “Let’s welcome Wendy, everyone.” The other patients clapped. “Wendy tell us about yourself.” Wendy stared at the stubbornly at the carpet as if it would answer her prayers. *They must know I’m just here to go through the process.*

Glenda rubbed her back. “Okay Wendy, your time will come to share. You can listen for now; but everyone must take part in all the activities, no matter. Laurie it’s your turn today.”

Laurie had short hair gelled into spikes, and multiple earrings stuck in one ear. She had a horrific tale of violence and pregnancy. “I pressed a long knife up there to get rid of the foetus; I didn’t want his child.” It was difficult to follow Laurie’s erratic stop-start telling of the details. Wendy understood it wasn’t easier to spill one’s guts in front of everyone.

Then there was chubby Tim, a soft-spoken alcoholic who joined the open therapy sessions initially as a day patient, but later became a stay-in, on the men’s side. “I was a chef at the Jolly Carp. I liked my job; it was my life. At first I used to have a glass of wine after work, but then I started drinking at work. I didn’t have anyone after my mother died. It was *lekker* to drink while cooking.”

Later on in the week, it was terrifying to see him struggle without liquor, when the DTs got hold of him. The nursing staff removed him to another part of the hospital where he could be watched closely.

In the next two weeks, the nursing and therapy staff worked hard on Wendy to consider her options, encouraging her to share her story. This was mostly done in one-on-one sessions; and she was grateful for the privacy. But she was mindful of time passing.

When she finally revealed her secret, she was blushing and didn’t look at anyone. “I’m pregnant; and I’m here because I’m really stressed out, with my studies and everything.”

The other patients clapped. “It’s about time, you spoke,” they teased her. Laurie hugged her later that evening. “You’ll be alright. I wish I hadn’t been so fucking stupid. I should’ve stuck the knife in that bastard.”

Laurie, had damaged herself badly and she couldn’t finish her studies. All her savings from working at a nightclub went towards her medical bills. For the first time Wendy felt really guilty; at least her parents were helping her to pay for things her bursary didn’t cover.

One motherly nurse encouraged Wendy to tell the ‘other party’. “He has the right to know, even if you don’t think so now. You must speak to him.”

“I don’t want him to be involved in this.”

Wendy thought about what the nosy-parker nurse said and understood that she was trying to change her decision. “Once you tell him, it will be easier to prepare for the rest of your time.” Her resolve softened, momentarily, until medication time came round. The anti-depressants could not be safe for a foetus; she wasn’t ignorant about the effects of drugs on unborn children. The Western Cape had a history full of damaged off-spring of people paid with ‘*dop*’ in return for their labour on farms. She wasn’t about to go that route.

There was some wisdom to sharing her secret with Brian, she realized; so it might be good to play along with the nurses. She was given a day pass to talk to him. Her father collected her, on the pretext that she was weighing up her options, and dropped her off at Brian’s flat in Mowbray.

Spoilt brat. She thought of Laurie; and had a brief desire to carve a hole deep into his happy, sloppy, perpetually high face.

“Howsit, haven’t seen you,” Brian said while trying to wrap his long arms around her. She was not in the mood for his silly moves. He smelt like pot and beer, and she wanted to puke.

“I’m pregnant.”

Instantly, his mood changed. He looked crushed and defensive, looking for a way to deny any culpability or responsibility.

“Are you sure? Yoh, are you sure, you know what I mean, whose is it?”

Wendy stared at Brian for a few seconds.

“There may be few things that I’m certain of right now, but that question, I know. And just so you know, I was advised to talk, to do the right thing. Now that I’ve done that, see you around.” *Fucking useless arsehole with your stinking Peter Stuyvessant hanging from your fingers.*

She opened the door and let it close before he could open his mouth. She had had enough. It was liberating, being so assertive, without anger, just matter-of-fact. For the first time in fifteen weeks, she felt in control, and certain of what had to be done. Wendy would make her decision and take responsibility for her reckless behavior.

Things moved quickly from there. Dr Smith booked a bed for her in the maternity ward at Groote Schuur. There was one person who would be deeply disappointed.

Necy thought that she was accompanying Wendy for a routine check-up, that she had accepted what nature had bestowed. Wendy had confided to her father earlier, so he was aware of her plan, and had decided not to come. He would deal with his wife's disappointment later.

When the doctor started to prepare her for the procedure and asked for her consent, Necy turned to her daughter, staring.

"Mommy, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you." The brief look of betrayal and hurt in her mother's eyes stung Wendy. She said a quiet prayer.

Dear God, forgive me. Please help my mother through this; and make her see that this is for the best. I don't want to be the cause of her suffering again.

It was a painful, exhausting process. Necy stayed by her side, while the medical team examined her, poking her stomach from all directions, and then connected her to a drip with prostaglandin. They explained to her that they were using a new methodology for post-eight weeks' terminations.

Wendy wasn't sure about being their guinea pig, but there was no turning back. She breathed deeply in between the terrible cramps that started after five hours. Necy squeezed her hand and wiped her face with a damp cloth.

"My poor child, it will be over soon."

Five hours later, there was still no progress with the induced labour. Necy had to leave for home. On her own, Wendy screamed for pain medication, which took a long time to reach her, even though the nursing staff were unusually patient with her.

"It's nearly over. This injection will help."

After ten excruciating hours, it ended. A nurse helped her to clean up, and brought her a glass of water to sip on.

Afterwards, Wendy felt serene, maybe as a result of the drugs. She was relieved that the nurses had been sympathetic, and that she had not been subjected to the gross crudities that

public maternity units are known for. It was over; and she had seen with her own eyes the lettering on top of her personal file. T.O.P. – Termination of Pregnancy.

Now years later, Wendy sought that the same grace be cast over her.

“Every action has a reaction.”

That is what she had learnt in physics during her student days. Now, years later, the hysterectomy had confirmed her final choice, and she would find the best way of living with it. Wendy would do what she always did in these moments- reflect and ask for spiritual guidance, something she was feeling more comfortable with in her middle years.

It had taken her many years to make sense of what had gone before – the loss, guilt, self-forgiveness and the confusion. Her mother never confronted her directly about her choice, and Wendy never felt judged. If anything, her mother’s silence perplexed her the most, and made her more eager to understand what choice she had made.

Wendy resolved that in the end, it was not about her choice of feminism, politics, economics or any grand theory. It was about reconciling the excruciating, lonely journey that she, and many millions of others, had undertaken. She now understood that the T.O.P was a journey, one that would stay forever with her.

Auntie

The weather was unpredictable - glimmers of sun in the afternoon and turning to a roaring, chilly wind after sunset. I loved these elemental changes of Cape Town, my hometown and favourite place to visit. I was reminded of my childhood on nights like these, when my father entertained my sister, Patty and I with spooky stories. We would screech so much that my mother would intervene, scolding my father.

“Jimmy, for heaven’s sake. What about the neighbours? And you lot get into the bath and straight to bed.”

“Ja, ja Neecey. To hell with them, we’re just having fun.”

Those were good times. Both my parents were long gone to ‘the happy hunting grounds’, as my father referred to death. I was living in Centurion, but visited the Western Cape as often as I could, to treat myself.

Now I could hear the plop, plop of the rain on my zinc roof, a welcome respite from the long spells of drought the town was experiencing for a number of years already. The scientists said it was the El Niño effect. I was happy to see the dust and discarded dirt disappearing into the overflowing storm water drains.

The neighbours had turned down their goema-goema music. I hoped they had run out of beer and money to make a trip to the smokkie to stock up again. I was nestled into the thick blanket I had inherited from my mother. My iPad was set up so I only needed to expose my finger to the cold, as I flipped through News 24 articles, while listening to Smile 90.4’s greatest hits from the 80s.

I was startled when my cell phone rang at 11pm, and I considered not answering. The ringing stopped, and then started again.

It was Bella, my sister’s daughter.

“How you, Auntie?”

I could hear she was trying to sound cheerful. I knew my niece well, especially those inflections in her voice.

“Just wanted to say hello, to check you’re okay and that you got here safely. Are you sleeping already?”

“Ha ... was trying to.”

I lied, but as much as I liked hearing from her, I was enjoying my quiet time. I had planned on doing a round of visits of the next couple of days. There was never enough time to say hello to everyone.

“What’s going on Bee? Sounds like you have a sore throat?”

“No, just a bit of sinus.”

“I thought you were out for your birthday, big girl, all of twenty years.” Something wasn’t right; she could not be calling for chit-chat at this hour.

“No Auntie. I’m just visiting Kyle. We went out for supper in Kalk Bay, earlier. It was just the two of us.”

This did not sound like my usually cheerful niece. Her family was mad for parties, never missing any chance. Maybe she was grown up and too besotted with Kyle, a nice boy from the northern suburbs. My husband called him an ordinary, down-to-earth boy with potential. I told him not to be patronizing.

“Where are you now Bee? Its late; not safe to be on a taxi so late.”

“I’m going to stay at Kyle’s place, Auntie.”

It took a moment to register.

“What? Since when do you stayover at your boyfriend’s place? Where are your parents?”

My conscience flickered momentarily. I had co-habited for more than a decade, and was still not convinced about the ever-after of inspired marital bliss.

Bella ignored me. I liked to think of myself as broadminded, but there were limits. She had her future to think about.

“His parents invited me to Sunday lunch. They’re so kind, Auntie.”

Kind indeed, I coughed into my blanket. *Wait till something untoward happens, then it will be someone else's problem. Or the Auntie's problem. Never the boy's problem.* I kept quiet. It was hard for me to be harsh with Bella. She was a loving, kind child despite her heritage, one which we shared; one I was not too proud of. It amazed me how well she turned out, the contradiction - warm, generous offspring from nasty, selfish, abusive parents. She had survived two decades of these characters, probably because they palmed her off to my parents as soon as they could.

“Don't worry Auntie. Kyle's parents said I could use the spare room.”

She was cutting off my thoughts. The two of us had not crossed the line of discussing intimate relationships, or how advanced hers was. Except, a few months before she had a fit of rebellion when I suggested I go into the doctor's room with her.

“I need privacy, Auntie. I'm already feeling anxious.”

For what, I wondered. Childishly, I refused to pay for the bill, and made her walk to the pharmacy.

“Use your mother's medical aid; and exercise will be good for your tension.” She flicked her eyes in an upwards motion, the way youngsters thought was so chic these days.

Fortunately, we always made up or rather, she made the first advance by offering to make me tea. I could be stubborn, like her mother, but that's where it ended. I was relieved that the doctor hadn't given other news. I wouldn't have known how to respond.

I didn't want a repeat of that episode. The nuances of modern parenting were beyond me, but at least I had learnt to hold my tongue, and I felt that now would be a good time to listen, while drawing her out. My eyelids were getting droopy, but there must be some reason for the call. Maybe she and Kyle had fought and she felt bad about his parents being so nice.

“I'm not going home tomorrow.”

My eyelids shot open.” Where the hell are you going to, Bee? What do you mean exactly?”

“Aagh, Auntie, it’s that time again.”

“Bee, talk clearly and tell me what’s going on. I can’t take this waiting.”

“My parents are at it again. My mother is beside herself, fighting physically with my father. She’s starting it.”

I wasn’t expecting to hear this. Things had been peaceful for a while now, as far I knew. These were not people I wanted to see or hear about, if I could help.

“What? Bee, how do you mean your mother was fighting?” I had resolved to be disaffected the next time this happened, but caught myself shouting.

I could not imagine my sister, Patty, tackling her husband. I had cut her out of my heart long ago, but it still stung to hear about her turbulent life. She knew the violence that resided just under her husband’s skin. The slightest scratch and it would pour out. She had chosen to stay in the relationship.

“It’s been going on since before Bella was born. I’m just his punching bag when he’s drunk; or whenever he feels like it, since he lost his job.” Patty explained when she was desperate ten years ago, covered in bruises and about to lose her flat. My parents tried to intervene numerous times; but they were no longer around to offer a buffer. Before long she always returned to her home and Luke, anyway. It had been particularly difficult for my father, to stand by helplessly.

“I can break his neck, Neezy. It kills me to see my daughter like this.” He would be close to tears, while turning to my mother for answers, after another episode of fists and tears.

Neezy would soothe him, while her own heart felt like it was breaking. “We mustn’t make things harder for her. I’m going to talk to his mother.”

Luke’s parents apologized for his behaviour but made excuses. They said he was going through a bad patch, that Patty and Luke had married too young so he couldn’t finish his studies.

“Bullshitters, they should have done something, disciplined him.” My father stopped speaking to Luke and his parents.

After every scene, Patty would make up with Luke and hand over her nurse's salary as if nothing had happened. "Who's going to keep my house going?" She had been a vivacious and athletic teenager; now she was unkempt and overweight. She claimed that she needed to work extra late night shifts for the money, but I think she was escaping her lot at home.

Bella's voice was heavy. "It's been crazy, Auntie. I got home in the week, and they didn't even know I was there, they were so busy shouting. My mother threw a bottle at my father's head. And she smacked him.

"Oh, my lord, Bee. Why?

"Don't know, Auntie. I just saw blood all over the bed. I was freaked out."

"And your father, what did he do? I can't imagine him just sitting there, and not fighting back."

"I couldn't believe it myself Auntie. But he didn't."

I wondered whether she was being honest. Years ago, she had been offended when I told her what I thought about Luke. "That's not fair. He's my father."

Bella carried on. "My mother was hysterical, screaming about money that he owed for so many years - he had again taken from her account. Everything was hers because she had worked for it. She said she was done with him."

"What did you do Bee?" I felt bad that she had to go through this again.

"I shouted at them to stop; then my mother started with me. She's always like that, telling me that I think I'm all that."

"Your mother is losing her mind because of that man. He's to blame for driving her to breaking point. The bastard. Ma never liked him." I could hear Bella suck in air. She didn't like to hear me speak badly about her father, even worse when I included my mother. Her relationship with her father was surprisingly good; Luke even indulged her in his way, driving and fetching her to and fro from friends and classes.

"My mother was being unnecessary, Auntie. I still don't know why she was carrying on like that, then. She doesn't usually fight back when he's drunk, so why start a fight for nothing?"

“Has she been taking the meds the doctor prescribed?” Patty had been told to use a mild anti-depressant to help her through the day. But, she had always been headstrong, dismissing advice.

“On and off, says it makes her woozy.”

“Rather that, than crazy. I don’t know anymore, Bee.”

“Anyway, Auntie, I just packed in a few things and left. It’s so embarrassing because the neighbours can hear everything.”

I was stumped. I had sworn that I was done with this but I was worried about Bella.

“Bee, you don’t deserve this. You must find a way to move out and set yourself up, even if it’s going to be tough for a while.”

“Yes, Auntie, it’s just the money.”

Bella had a casual weekend job while studying for her BA degree, so money was tight. I could help out for a while, but I was reluctant to take on my sister’s responsibilities, once again. I became angry; my peaceful holiday ruined.

“My parents don’t listen to anyone; even my father’s brothers have been speaking to them.”

“Those darn fools will never change. Trust me, they need professional intervention. That’s why I turned away Bee. I told you before, and it makes me mad that the both of them keep doing this.”

“I know Auntie. Sorry”

“It’s not you. Don’t apologise for them. I just worry where you’re going to stay. You can’t be on the road, moving around. Ma and Pa must be turning in their graves.”

“Don’t worry Auntie. My friend, Nadia, is writing exams for two weeks and needs someone to babysit. Everything will be fine. Go sleep now. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Night Bella, be good.”

I put my phone back on the charger. My sleep was gone. I wished I hadn't let my own feelings through, that I'd listened more to Bella. Maybe I should have been more forthcoming, like promising to help her find accommodation. I could find the money to pay a deposit, at least. These days rental agencies demanded double the rent, upfront. What if encouraging her to move to her own place would make her drop out of UWC, or even into early marriage? *No, Bella is more sensible than that* I reassured myself.

I jumped out of bed, to put on the kettle, wishing that my parents were still around. They hadn't been able to stop their daughter's troubles but at least they had taken over rearing Bella. There would have been no need for her to be on the road now.

I had turned my back on my sister, refusing to run to her rescue every time she wanted help, just to go back to Luke. Worse, I had resented how she had chosen Luke over Bella. Dealing with them was draining. I told myself that some things were never meant to change, but I wanted things to be different for Bella, that she was going to work things out.

She needs help, I imagined my mother's voice in my kitchen, *please*. I often spoke to her when I was figuring things out. I wished my parents were still around, to deal with the mess my sister's life had become. I felt bad for having added to her burdens with my own nonsense, not having appreciated both my parents more when they were still alive.

But I don't want to be involved with Patty's mess.

It's not about Patty this time. It's Bella. She needs you.

My mother always helped Patty, no matter what, even when she was rude. "Don't tell me how to live my life." Then, at my mother's funeral, Patty cried louder than me. I had to drag her away gently from coffin. It was one of the rare times, I let myself soften towards her in a long time.

It was different with Bella, though. I always felt protective of her, from the first time I looked after her. One more time would not hurt me.

I returned to my bed, and switched off the phone. It was still raining, and I felt soothed.

Johnny, Lee and Love

It was good to see Johnny, even though it was already 9.00pm and I wasn't expecting visitors. When I peeped through the lace of my bay window, I was surprised to see a large shape banging away at my security gate. It was a barrier between the tiny garden patio and the pavement, typical of the row houses in Salt River. The area always went from early evening bustle to an eerie silence, only broken by passing cars, and visitors who hoot, expecting my neighbours to come out of their homes to fetch parcels of food or children. I enjoyed staying in my holiday house.

Johnny and I had been friends for more than thirty years. I looked up to him as an older brother; he was dependable and likeable. I hadn't seen him for a long time, since I was living in Gauteng and he had his responsibilities, unlike those years when we were students, foot-loose and reckless.

"Howsit?" He gave me a tight hug, almost lifting me off my feet.

"Where have you been? I've been calling and calling."

Johnny looked better than the last time I had seen him, when he'd been sullen, only agreeing to see me for thirty minutes because he was too busy. I knew that it was something else eating him up. Now, he seemed to have regained his confidence.

"*Jissus*, are you still racing from one end of the Western Cape to the other. I don't know how you do it. If it's not community service, then it's your rugby or chess club."

"Yip, just got back from taking the boys for a community clean-up along Hawston. We have to teach these privileged kids to be useful, so I *somma* took them to paint the old houses and clean up the streets, for Mandela Day."

"I almost feel sorry for the little blighters."

"They have to play good rugby, and look after the community. I'm *moeg gery*, but I had to say hello otherwise we'll never catch up again."

“What do you mean never again? You know I come to Cape Town at least once a month. It’s because you’re all over the place that we don’t get to visit.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I smiled. He was definitely on top form, with his long legs sprawled out from the rickety chair, all the way under my yellow seventies formica table. He liked to call me Fifi, because of my afro of wild curls.

“Fifi, put the kettle on, and tell me what you’ve been up to, first. No more rum and coke for me, thanks. Life can be a funny business. Things happen so fast, even in sleepy Cape Town.”

I gave him a silent looking over as I made the tea. Johnny could amaze me at times. I was never sure whether I really knew him after all this time. Still, I was happy to see my friend, here in my house which was like a safe haven inside, away from the dust and floating garbage in the streets. Far-away from the stresses of my life in Gauteng. I cherished this time, breathing in salty air from my walks along the beach and only seeing people whose company I chose. I amused myself with the dilemma of having a holiday lock-up and go in Salt River, which most of my snooty acquaintances regarded as too working class. Yet, the neighbourhood had recently become the focal point of greedy investors, plotting its ‘gentrification’. All it meant, in reality, was that the old houses were being sought after by those with millions to spend on the opportunity to live close to the city. This was not a new story for many cities – up and down the fortunes went, changing hands from rich to poor and back again.

My house in Burns Road had its own tales to tell, having formerly been a ‘blue movie’ house, before my husband rescued and refurbished it. I had made sure to have it washed with all kinds of strong detergents before I would even enter it. What a sanctuary it had become, its thick walls blocking out all the crassness and noises of the streets. At times, all I heard was the creaking of the Oregon pine floors, that felt as if they were gently swaying as I rushed off to the bathroom in the dead of the night. What a contrast to its former life. It was so soothing that I needed no medications and herbal preparations to sleep or to help me through the tensions of my normal working life back home. I came here to rest my mind and to catch up with old friends, and to make sense of my life. Little did I know what lay ahead.

“Johnny, *asseblief*, be careful with my old kitchen furniture. *Jy lag so lekker, dat my stoel amper onder jou breek.*” He was laughing so that his whole body shook. “You will need a back op, if you carry on like that.”

“Fifi, I can’t believe you’re offering me Earl Grey tea. *Dis mos te ordentelik.* Give me a Castle rather, man.”

Indeed, it was a far cry from our youth, in the eighties. Back then it was hard liquor, and whatever else went along with our spontaneous parties that sprang up any day of the week. We seemed to party and laugh our way through life, never having much cash but living it up somehow.

Away from our friends, life wasn’t easy but we always got back on our feet, reminding ourselves that there were many people worse off. I wasn’t sure about the logic of finding strength in the wretchedness of others’ lives, but it seemed to work.

“How’s Lee? When last did you see her?”

I was being circumspect because the topic of Lee was a touchy one. She was his former lover, and was one of the reasons I had seen less of him, both of them, over the years. This was the one issue that had come between us. Not because I did not approve of Lee, but because Johnny had dealt so poorly with the extra-marital affair.

“We’ve been talking again. Haven’t seen much of her for the past few months, since you-know-who came on the scene. She asked me to help fix her car.”

I could see he was trying to avoid the topic. For the first time that night, I saw a shadow cross his face, but he quickly brought the conversation back to old times. I felt an urge to ask more. When Johnny pondered over something, his forehead crumpled into deep creases, just like it was doing now. Why would she ask him to help if she were newly married? He ignored me, by pulling out his cellphone and staring as if he were reading from it.

I persisted. “But why is she asking you? I’m glad you’re speaking again, though.”

“Ag Fifi, you know I have connections all over for cheaper parts.” He changed the topic quickly. “Do you remember Savannah? She’s moved to Thailand to teach English. She finally

finished her studies and decided that teaching is her passion. But she was *darem* a fast one. No-one was safe when she had a few *doppe* in her.”

He was evading, only telling me bits and pieces of catch-up on our friends. I thought I knew Johnny well; we’d always gotten along through thick and thin. We had even shared a house together in Woodstock’s Roodebloem Road for about a year, when he had supposedly separated from his wife, and was seriously considering making his relationship with Lee permanent. We had lots of fun together, and seen each other through tough times, pinching our cents to pay the rent. He would say that he had gone to his other home to be with his children, and to pay the bills. He did some odd things like disappearing for a few days, then re-appearing with a casual, “Hi, Fifi, I quickly had to do something for the club.” Sometimes, I wondered about his wife, whether she knew what was going on. I suspected that he hadn’t told his family that he was separated, but I thought that it wasn’t my business to pry too deeply.

Johnny would share information on a need-to-know basis, mostly about his love for sports. All through his schooling years, he was a keen all-round sportsman in the SACOS realm of sports, but he excelled in rugby. He had the sturdy frame and thick neck of a hooker, and his nose was squashed like it had taken a few hits. In the apartheid years, many talented sportspeople had limited opportunities to progress in their fields but regardless played their sports with pride and distinction.

When we first met, Johnny had taken a year off work to complete his teaching diploma at the Hewitt Teaching College in Crawford, a suburb close to Athlone. He had started his studies some years before, but dropped out to work as a salesman at Edgars to support his wife and two toddlers. Lee, on the other hand, had been on the brink of completing her law degree, part-time. She was petite, pretty, and flirtatious but at times used her sharp wit as a weapon. Still, she was a good-hearted and happy-go-lucky little bag of dynamite. How the two got together, I couldn’t figure out, but they were as unlikely a pair as anything. They were inseparable; anyone who did not know the back story would only see two infatuated individuals, behaving like a normal couple. Johnny was protective and at times, possessive. Lee basked in the warmth of his affection. I had never seen her happier in a relationship, and I had known her since high school days.

“You two are so attached, I don’t know who’s who.” I teased them.

Even though he was some ten years older, Johnny became a permanent part of our bohemian circle. He wasn't abrasive or trying to catch a *skelmpie* when we were drunk, like some of our other friends, who justified their behavior saying it was 'free love', a sign of our anti-establishment principles. We trusted him to behave and look after us. Some of the other boys couldn't hold their liquor, and would try to force themselves on us, behind their girlfriends' backs, or just because they needed to have a quick roll with anyone who was there and available. Johnny only ever had eyes for Lee; he was crazy about her.

We each had a cross to bear and Johnny's was particularly heavy. When I realized that Johnny was leading a double life, I wasn't sure how to handle the situation at first. I only summoned the courage to broach the topic a good few months into his affair with Lee.

It took him a while before he said, "I've been married to Bertha since I was twenty-two, long before I met Lee. My children are Venus and Tyrone. You know that I love Lee, completely."

I never met Bertha, but from Johnny's attitude, I gathered she was baggage which could not easily be disposed of, because of his sense of loyalty to his children. "She's my kids' mother; Fifi. Who's going to look after them if I just walk out?"

Johnny convinced me that he had the situation under control, when the topic turned to the issue of his split commitment. I tried to avoid it because it made me uncomfortable, despite my theoretical leaning that marriage was a capitalist notion to ensure patriarchal suppression. And youthfulness made everything seem possible; maybe he was indeed able to lead his life comfortably. I reckoned that Bertha could choose for herself; find herself a job and move on if she wanted to.

Johnny's voice brought me back, and I was taken aback to hear him say, "Ja, I know you think it's strange."

"What?"

"That Bertha and I are still together. I mean, what's the point to leave? Lee's married. But I do think what if things were different?" He looked down gloomily. I was sorry that the

topic had come up, but I'd been thinking about it, all these years, so maybe it was time to get it off our chests.

“Let me be honest, Johnny. Sometimes, I thought you were an operator. I didn't know how you did it, but you managed to juggle things.”

“Fifi, I couldn't just walk away from Bertha and the children. She was totally dependent on me. She still doesn't have a bank account. She only passed standard seven.”

“Sorry to be *krapping* in your business, but I wished it could be different.”

“Me too. I messed up. But you never know, maybe I can still fix it.” His confidence was perking up again; Johnny was never one to stay down for long. He must have been one heck of a hooker on the field.

I nodded and poured myself more tea. Johnny grabbed another beer from the fridge. I was starting to feel unsettled, that he was still thinking about fixing something that had broken so long ago. He was a smooth operator indeed, keeping Bertha ignorant about Lee for all those years, and maybe even now. I started wondering if something had reignited between them, even after all this time and in spite of her marriage.

There were times when I felt a touch of sympathy for Bertha. I was always defensive about Lee. Then I would become angry at Johnny for his duplicities. The three seemed like accomplices, with no one wanting to let go. Was it cowardice? Selfishness? It wasn't noble like Johnny tried to frame it, by claiming he was only protecting Bertha and his children. He had hurt two women - his wife and my friend, Lee. He had hurt himself. Johnny looked across the table at me, as if reading my mind.

“That's one thing about you, Fifi. You never forget. I've been wanting to explain to you about the divorce for so long, but it's complicated. Life happens.”

“What do you mean?”

We had gone over some of the details a long time ago, but he never said why things didn't work out the one time he claimed to have a divorce date in court. I didn't want to embarrass him, by pressing him for an answer.

“You remember the time I was supposed to go to court?”

“Ja.”

How could I not remember? I had stopped speaking to him for a couple of years because I was so angry, and for once took a position. He had promised Lee that he was going through with the divorce, after three years of romance. I waited to hear from him; but instead a disheveled, drunk Lee arrived at my house. She said Johnny had gone to ground.

“He didn’t do it?”

“Didn’t do what, Lee?”

“There was never a court date. He lied. Again.”

I put Lee to bed on my spare bed. The love part of their relationship died a slow death until they were merely friends, as far as I knew. I refused to speak to him for a long time afterwards. It was cruel what he had done, for all the parties involved.

When he eventually came round to see me, he was pathetic.

“I couldn’t do it, Fifi, you know it’s a lot of money that would be wasted on lawyers. I need it for my children.” He sat on my sofa crying, but I felt no pity for him. I wanted nothing to do with him and his excuses.

“What kind of life will I give Lee?” He looked at me pleading, as if I had a solution.

I wanted to say, “Your children can have you, and Lee can look after herself!” but I kept quiet like so many times before and after. All I could think of was what Lee had looked like when she told me. Her bouncy bob of straightened curls was squashed on one side, and her mischievous eyes were lifeless. I stared at Johnny with a scowl, wanting to tell him, “Stuff all your *kak* stories and self-pity and fuck off to your wife. You deserve each other.” I kept my mouth shut.

Now as Johnny sat in my Salt River kitchen, I wondered why I couldn’t bring myself to tackle him head on; tell him what I really thought and felt. Maybe, it was that brow beaten expression, so opposite to the proud man who’d made it out of Mitchell’s Plain.

Outside I could hear the last of the children playing in the street. It was my neighbours' kids. Their family had lived here for three generations. Recently, their mother had stopped me and told me that they were thinking of selling. A developer had offered them R1 million for their house.

“That’s good money. When will my family see an offer like that again?”

I didn’t tell her that the developer would give her place a lick of paint and then sell it for double. I was no longer the young idealist of my youth. Life and my job in government in Gauteng had taken all the idealism out of me; it was a battle not to become cynical.

Johnny was staring at the wall. After the divorce that never happened, Lee and I drifted apart for a few years. She had become embittered and nasty, hitting out at anyone who crossed her path, especially when she was tipsy.

“Do you think that man is seriously going to marry you?” She asked after I fell out with my boyfriend of five years.

We lost contact until she called and I didn’t have the heart to continue the battle. I missed her and the fun we used to have.

“Hi, Fifi, how are you? Can we meet for tea at your favourite place, Kirstenbosch?”

Then, something astonishing happened a year ago. As soon as I heard Johnny’s voice, I knew why he was calling. I had heard from a mutual friend that Lee had secretly married Manny, a fellow lawyer she met in court.

Johnny was outraged that he learnt through the grapevine that Lee was no longer the unencumbered girl of his dreams.

“He’s a fucking flop and fraud. Look at him, no-one wants him.”

I let Johnny vent; but I was surprised at the depth of his outburst.

“How could she marry that fuckwit on the spur of the moment? He’s using her.”

I thought that Lee deserved happiness; companionship was not a bad thing to see us into our twilight years. Instead, I smoothed his ego. “She waited a long time for you, even after that other business.” But Johnny was inconsolable, and I didn’t hear from him for a long time.

So, I was surprised to find Johnny at my door earlier looking spritely and boisterous. He was trimmed down and healthier. Now, listening to him for the past hour, I reminded myself that Johnny was a good man with a kind heart, but awkward and conflicted. Love could be exacting.

“Johnny, you know all of that is in the past, long ago. Do you remember how I was making a fool of myself and sacrificing my pride for that scoundrel, Franky?”

“Ja nee, shame Fifi.” He laughed raucously. “But I still need to explain to you, when I figure it out. Maybe you’ll understand then.”

I imagined what was coming, and prepared myself to go easy on Johnny. Maybe I would finally have the chance to ask him whether all the sacrifices were worthwhile. He sipped his beer deep in thought.

“I’ve been spending time with her again. That man has gone off to America to study.”

“Oh, really. Is Lee going to join him?”

Johnny lifted his eyes and stared at me briefly. I wondered that if he had been spending time with Lee, he would surely know more.

“Lee doesn’t seem so happy with that bugger; says she’s glad he’s gone.”

Suddenly, Johnny launched into a side story.

“You remember my niece, Dessi? Her husband moved up to Joburg for work and *somma* got involved with his friend’s wife.”

It was not unusual for us to hop from one story to the next, especially when he was avoiding the topic of Lee. Maybe if I had summoned the courage long ago to stop listening to his prattle things would be different, but there I was.

“Dessi demanded that her husband come back to Cape Town, but then he left again after a month to go back to his affair. The friend, I think his name was Mike, started calling Dessi to tell her the lovers were out in the open and how they were carrying on.”

“Really?” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Mike stopped calling, and guess what? They say he jumped over their third floor balcony, but the police are investigating.”

It made my skin crawl, the way Johnny seemed amused. He finished up his beer, and said, “Ai, its work tomorrow.”

“Ja, it’s almost midnight. Give me a call so you, Lee and I can have coffee before I leave.”

I showered and nestled into my duck feather duvet, thinking that Johnny and Lee were still playing games with each other. I drifted off into a deep sleep. It must have been some hours later when I heard a banging on my door, accompanied by the shrill voice of the neighbor, Wayda. The woman must be nuts, waking me up in the dark, while the fog was spread out like a damp blanket. It was too early for Wayda’s gifts of *koeksisters*, which she would usually push through the burglar bars between our two semi-detached houses. Begrudgingly, I left the warmth of my covers.

“Hold on, what’s going?” I shouted back grumpily through the keyhole. I could hear the rain dripping in a steady beat.

“It’s the police looking for you,” Wayda answered.

“For what?”

“Open up, we need to talk to you please.” It was a man’s voice.

Two hours later, after dislodging myself from Wayda and the police, I sat at my table. My eyes were aching but I couldn’t stop the turmoil in my head. I kept asking myself why and how I had missed the signs.

The police had been polite, but anxious for facts.

“Can we sit down?” The two policemen pulled out their notebooks.

“We found a car at Blue Waters, Strandfontein. There were two bodies - a small, middle-aged woman and a well- built man, older.” They described the car and the features of the two dead people.

I screamed, and the older policeman sent the neighbor to fetch me a glass of water. They waited for me to calm down, before continuing.

“Looks like a double suicide, but we’re still checking.”

“You mean a murder-suicide, there’s a lot about that nonsense in the papers these days.” Wayda kept chipping in and I wished she would leave; but she stayed, rubbing my back.

My brain felt dull. It was too much to process. While the two policemen pressed me for information, I connected the threads. Johnny had left a note in the car, but pointed a finger at Manny for this atrocious act. The police would confirm Manny’s whereabouts later to be sure, even though he was supposed to be far-away in the USA. At the back of note, the police had found my address, scribbled in what was clearly Johnny’s handwriting from what they could connect to the other bits of evidence in the car.

“But why?” I kept asking no-one in particular, until I heard a voice beside me.

“You never know. Remember that Indian chap from England.” Wayda persisted. “The bastard got off free, because of our stupid system, and still her poor family doesn’t know why he did it.” I stared blankly at her, but she carried on. “At least your friend did the decent thing and took himself also. ‘Why’ isn’t going to change that he was *mal in sy kop*. The poor woman. And her husband, still newly married. Ai.”

I couldn’t deny her logic, and I wanted to cry, but my energy was spent. I finally understood why Johnny had been so cryptic earlier. The disjointed story about his niece must have been his way of hinting about this final act of obsession, or malice. I wondered how he had duped Lee into going on a drive. Had she been ready to turn a blind eye like me? Was she lonely, with Manny overseas? What was she thinking? I berated myself for having being part of this deception, possibly enabling it. Now I had lost two friends. My mind spun, until I fell into an uneasy sleep.

Long after, I wondered how I had been so gullible, a victim of my own naiveté. It had always been Johnny, Lee, and treachery.

Lilly

The four-roomed house on Aloe Street, Retreat, was packed with dozens' of neighbours, aunts, uncles and friends for his graduation party. Even the tiny stoep fringed with hanging flower tins had no standing place left; somehow they managed to find a spot to take photos. The party was meant to be by-invitation only; but you couldn't stop people from coming to say their congratulations. Wayne's mother, Lilly, looked as if she could burst with pride.

"Never mind, it's a special day; you can't stop the neighbours. I mean how many Dr Wayne January's are there in this street, the whole of Retreat?"

"Ag, Mummy, don't go on." He hugged her tightly.

"This is your day, my boy. Wayne, it's been a long time since we had some fun in this house."

After five long years of studying, he had put that smile on her face. Lilly wasn't a show-off; but today she couldn't help herself. Her hair had been blow-dried at the hairdresser down the road, and she had bought herself an outfit instead of sewing one to save money. She looked refreshed and smart in the dark blue dress suit, and black pumps; so different from her faded jeans, gingham shirts, and workers boots, all bought on special at Makro.

"I've been saving while you were studying, so we're going to enjoy ourselves. Daar's genoeg kos vir almal. Auntie Fatie sent an extra pot of breyani."

Earlier at the graduation ceremony, she stood up, clapping, when the Vice-Chancellor of UCT tapped him on the head. She even kissed Prof Viljoen, his supervisor, telling him what a smart boy her Wayne was. Prof grinned awkwardly and said, "I've been most honoured to work with him and to learn from his research."

"Ma, here comes your sewing group. Must I fetch more chairs from the hall?"

Before he could escape the kisses straight to his lips, he was grabbed and passed around to each member of the group of women, who looked as proud as if he were their own.

"Jirre Wayne, ek weet nie wat 'n Ph.D of wat ookal dit is nie, but well done my boy. Jy't nou virs ons almal proud gemaak. Daars skoons wit mense hier in die ou pad.

“Thank you Auntie Fatie. Let me fetch you a chair.”

“Now you must just help with the young ones, so that they don’t become skollies.” Years ago, Auntie Fatie had looked after him and his brothers when their mother was at work.

While getting ready that morning, he and Lilly only had a short time to themselves before people arrived to help set up the party. He almost broke, remembering what it had taken. Maybe it was all the emotion of the day, of finally graduating as a marine biologist, that took its toll. It had taken him long enough to get to this day. Sometimes he doubted whether it was selfish to pursue the crazy studies. Once when he had tried to explain to his mother’s friends what he was studying, they were awed.

“Jirre Waynie, wat praat jy nou? It’s okay to eat fish, but still to study them, where they live in the sea. Nee, boetie.” They teased him.

Wayne loved exploring the secrets of the ocean and the coast; it had opened a new world to him. In his poor but tightknit community, fried fish and chips were for a fun outing. There were many times when he felt like giving up, and finding work, maybe as a junior lecturer or researcher so he could relieve Lilly’s stress, and her aching joints from scrubbing floors for rich people. When he started talking like that, she would cut him off quickly.

“Have I ever asked you to feel sorry for me? And now the one thing I want from you, you just want to somma throw in the towel. Give up, just like that. Nooit.”

“But Mommy ...”

“Don’t ‘mommy’ me. I will bliksem you if you talk nonsense like that. Don’t you use me as an excuse, want jy’s te lui om te study.”

“I just want to help.”

“I didn’t finish school and I’m from the farm but I’m not lazy; and your father wasn’t also. I don’t want to talk about this again.”

So today, he made her dream come true but he couldn’t but help feel sad. Wayne would have given his Ph.D away to see the one person who should have been there, besides his long departed father. Devon, his nephew, with his big toothy smile should have been by his side,

making fun of Lilly as she tried to play hostess. He couldn't say that to Lilly; it would upset her all over again.

At least his eldest brother, Boetie, had arrived earlier in the morning and helped his mother to clean up the garden, which wasn't big, but was full of her herbs, spinach, tomatoes, pumpkin, carrots and goodness- knows-what. The garden was her pride, she created miracles in the small space. Boetie had swept off the dust from the paving and put up a half tent so that the guests, mostly the older men, could sit in the shade, while the women squeezed into the house. He had even helped Lilly to cover the trestle tables, which she had hired from the Community Hall, and covered with her best white linen that she had embroidered with fine feather stitches, and finished off with bright red blanket stitches around the edges.

Wayne was grateful for Boetie's help, that he had turned up looking sober and steady. The past few years had been hell for Lilly with her two older boys falling through the cracks, those not strong enough to resist the pitfalls that terrorized the forgotten communities of the Flats. The tears and the pleas of hardworking parents could not compete with the bottles of cheap liquor, guns, tik and whatever else was paraded as quick fixes. The new democracy had failed to reach here, Wayne pondered, as he looked out of over the mix of neat and squalid two-bedroomed box houses, many of which had 'servants' quarters' added on for extra space, or for paying tenants.

Wayne and Boetie had teased their mother, "But Ma, what you going to do if people spill and break your things? You know mos these people are niks gewoonte nie." They were surprised that Lilly had unpacked the special cups and plates, which were all out on display. As children, they were never allowed to touch any of her trousseau, which she kept hidden in a locked cabinet.

"Ag never mind; I'm not going to worry about that today. The moths are just going to eat this nice cotton before I have a chance to use it."

Lilly even hugged Boetie." I feel blessed today." Her heart was full of love and joy, so small spills and ruined trimmings were not going to get her down. God knows there were enough real problems, just down the road waiting to happen.

Two of her best friends, Auntie Selma and Auntie Fatie, arranged the biscuits and chocolate cakes they had baked especially for today, while directing the other guests to their chairs. They were Wayne's favourite aunties and were carrying on as if he were their son.

"Ja, that's our boy. It just goes to show what a bit of sacrifice and hard work will do. He didn't run around with girls after school."

"I watched him myself om seker te maak he was in the house. Do you remember Selma, we used to take turns with him, waiting for Lilly? Not like those bladdy skollies on the corner."

At least one of their kids had made it, and it was right to celebrate, to forget all the other dreaded days, praying that the children would make it home safe, on top of worrying about a job to pay the bills. It was amazing how this party was overflowing with gifts of sweet things, savouries and drinks, although no hard liquor was put out. The men sat separately, under the tent, taking nips from their secret stash. The uncles were proud that one of them had made it.

"Wayne is kwaai; not running around with a fokking gang. Made something of himself."

The combination of heat and liquor soon had them singing Eddie Grant's "Give me hope Johanna", followed by Zane Adams' "Give a little love". Their voices were roughened by harsh cigarettes. They were toughened by their circumstances, and their jobs as painters, bricklayers and seasonal fishermen. Wayne's own father had made a living selling vegetables from a bakkie, and had passed away in a public hospital which would not offer him dialysis for his failing kidneys. There were needier patients who had a better chance of survival.

Wayne watched his guests with mixed emotions. It amazed him that these people, tested by their daily dues, could summon the courage to laugh, to find joy in something so simple as a few treats spread out on a gaily decorated table. A few of his relatives had travelled from other parts of the Cape to join them. His mother had sent them invitations, she and Boetie had made from coloured tissue paper, to request an RSVP.

"No man, Boetie cut straight, and be quick." She was waiting impatiently to write on the squares with the calligraphy pen she had bought specially for this task. Boetie was chewing his bottom lip as he tried to handle his mother's sewing scissors. Not that the guests responded; a party was a party, and more and more people squeezed into the lounge to wish him.

“Well done Wayne, we had to come. We’re not staying for long.”

Still, he couldn’t help his mind drifting from the chatting and loud laughter. Wayne slipped off to his bedroom, to compose himself before his speech. What if he hadn’t listened to Lilly, and gotten a job instead of studying? He might have been able to take his mother and Devon away from this place, which he loved and hated. Things could have been different.

He and Devon used to daydream together about what was going to happen after he graduated. The Marine Science Unit had promised Wayne a research post, so at least he could plan.

“Dev, first I’m going to buy a car, maybe a second-hand 4-by-4”. Wayne needed to replace the old skidonk that stood in their driveway. Maybe, he would fix it for Devon.

“Then I’m going to get you the latest computer games, your choice. But I promised Mommy to take out an education policy for you.”

Wayne made sure that Devon kept fit and healthy. They used to hike in Silvermine and Tokai Forest, enjoying the pack of food Lilly prepared. Sometimes he would take Devon along on fieldtrips to Groenrivier, the UCT research site, to help him set up the quads for his inter-tidal research. These trips were mentally hard and boringly repetitive, but they had such fun while waiting for the tide to go out. Wayne would show Devon interesting things like the marine lichen on the rocks, or explain what is meant by ‘littoral drift’. Devon was receptive - the time spent with Wayne was completely different to what his friends were doing in their neighbourhood.

Wayne and Lilly tried everything they could to keep Devon away from the street corners and the evil that lurked there, especially for boys like him, where there was a history waiting to repeat itself. Before Devon, Lilly had clung onto Wayne, thankful that he liked his books and his experiments and talking to his teachers. He was different from his older brothers, who fell by the wayside.

First it was Boetie, who was built like a sturdy tank and had a promising rugby career. After repeated injuries to his knees, he collapsed. Gone was the proud, happy young man. He was married to bottles of cheap liquor.

“Go fetch Boetie. Bladdy fool, his friends won’t even bring him home; and they know he can’t walk when he’s had too much.” Lilly sent the other boys to drag him home from the field, or from the bushes close to the local tavern, from wherever he had stumbled. Then Kevin started acting up. “He’s been like this since his father died.” Lilly made excuses, and hung her head in shame and desperation as the tik and booze took over his life.

These memories were making Wayne emotional, but couldn’t help himself. He could almost hear his staunch Apostolic grandmother’s sharp voice, “Trouble begets trouble.” She had despised Wayne’s father because he was not good enough for Lilly, with his dark skin and kroes hare. When Lilly sought her mother’s help with her wayward boys, the old woman wiped her mouth with her cotton and lace handkerchief before responding, “I warned you; now it’s too late.”

Devon was Kevin’s baby from his drunk, but pretty, girlfriend. From the first day, Lilly loved the chubby, quiet child, and swore that it would be different for him.

“No matter what, you’re my boy.”

Her boss helped out with school fees, when she was on her last few rands, her pride shredded after asking for a loan. She took on extra jobs – cleaning, sewing repairs and baking.

Now, Wayne stared at the picture stuck up on his bedroom mirror. It was of a pretty, young Lilly perched on a wooden fence, with her arm flung freely out in front of her. She looked carefree and happy.

Lilly used to tell Wayne about growing up on the farm in Wellington where she learnt to work hard, under the tutelage of Tannie Sara, the farmer’s wife.

“I was the old woman’s favourite, so as soon as school was out, I would run over to the main house to help my mother in the kitchen, but Tannie used to let me play in her bedroom.”

Lilly never regretted growing up on the farm, where she met and married Benny. She wished they had never moved to the city, dreaming of a better life, that ended with her two boys broken. Wayne once heard his mother explain to Pastor Brown.

“It’s not so much the embarrassment, but I can’t stand to see how Boetie and Kevin can’t come right. That hurts me, Pastor.”

“It’s hard, Lilly, because they’re your sons, but they’re also grown men. Try to focus on those who want your care and attention; and we’ll pray for the others.”

Lilly showered Devon with love. He coped at school, but it was a struggle for him - he was slower than his classmates; Wayne helped him with his homework regularly.

“It’s his parents; the drink and drugs before he was born, and afterwards that woman must have fed him liquor in her daze.” Lilly didn’t want Devon to have anything to do with them. Now and again, Devon’s mother would come by to say hello but Lilly scoffed that it was only to ask for money.

Devon started asking questions. “Where’s my mommy and daddy? My teachers keep asking.” Lilly and Wayne knew that the other children could be cruel. They were teasing Devon and making fun of him.

They would say to him, “Your mother and father *is* dronk-lappe, tik-koppe. You want to keep you fancy like your uncle, but you’re a joke. Rather come with us to the smokkie to buy some beers.

“I’m just walking with. Ma Lilly will donner me if I get home dronk.” Devon said this to shake off his mates, who were persistent, taunting him till breaking point.

By fifteen, Devon was experimenting, and then drinking regularly, and was kicked out of class with a warning of being expelled. Wayne managed to convince the principal, Mr April, that they would get him back on track.

Despite this spell of rebellion, Devon was always on Wayne’s mind. Lilly was mad that her own flesh and blood, her son, Kevin, had turned out to be such a useless father.

“Kevin always got the best, more than you and Boetie. I want this, I want that. Now look at him, he sells everything we give him ... sometimes I wish he could disappear. Imagine what it must be doing to Devon.”

“Ma, forget about that; everything will work out. Promise.”

Wayne hated to see Lilly suffer. She did her best for them, working in Claremont, and then rushing home to make him lunch. Often there was just enough money for peanut butter and

jam sandwiches, but there was always something. The best was on rainy days, when she had made pumpkin fritters, covered in cinnamon sugar, or freshly fried snoek and chips. The leftovers would be carefully packed for lunch the next day.

He wondered if Lilly had given him too much attention, to the detriment of his brothers. Lilly was adamant that she had loved each one equally. “They made their choices.”

Wayne gave Devon a man-to-man talk. “Boyttjie, you’ve still got a long way to go – no drinking, no nothing other than Lilly’s rules. It worked for me.”

They reached a truce. There was no need to be down each other’s throats. Besides, Devon was a good child; he was just navigating the complexities life bestowed on him.

“You know we love you, Devon. Ma only wants the best for you.”

“I know Uncle Wayne, I’m sorry. I just thought that maybe I must be like my parents. All my friends say I must try these things out so I can know for sure.”

“Listen here, how many times must I tell you that I’ve been through that. For every ten steps forward, someone will try to pull you back. You can’t allow those fools to do that to you, man. You don’t have to try anything to know.”

Wayne promised him to do something special for his birthday, maybe a trip to the Knysna Caves during the March holidays, if he did well at school.

That was a year ago, but Wayne felt the thud in his chest like it was now. He had forgotten about the guests and the speech. He stared at the photograph of Devon, when they stopped along the road, in George. A pretty German tourist had taken the picture, and Devon was smitten. “Yoh, Waynie, that girl is kwaai.” They had fantastic adventures, and Devon swore that he was going to keep working hard until he got through matric.

If only he could change the way things turned out.

It was about a year ago. Wayne was concentrating on one of the last chapters of his thesis when his cell beeped. He considered ignoring it but he recognized the school number, and

answered hurriedly, thinking that Devon had caught on mischief again. It was the principal, Mr April.

“Wayne, please sit down. I’m sorry ... but they found Devon along the line in Retreat. The train got him Wayne, you know how we always tell them not to jump train. You better get someone to take you to the station, before you tell your mother.”

He sank into the chair. What had happened? Devon was a strong boy, maybe not very quick with his mind but he was strong and fit. He probably fell and hurt himself. Wayne ran to his car, which thankfully was parked close to the Science block, and drove as fast as he could along the winding M3, and turned left towards Retreat station. It took him twenty minutes.

Mr April was standing with the paramedics, and grabbed Wayne’s arm.

“Sorry, Wayne, I’m sorry but there was nothing they could do for him.”

Devon’s broken, mutilated body was lying next to the line.

Wayne tried to speak but the words wouldn’t come. How was he going to tell Lilly? He wished the train would take him as well. The police and the paramedics were talking to him, but nothing made sense.

He heard voices saying that Devon was running along the line, a short cut to the station so that he could jump train and squeeze into the overcrowded third class carriage. As he jumped, a strong gust of wind lifted him. He lost his footing and he was flung into the oncoming train on the opposite line. Just like that and it was over.

Mr April drove him home, where Lilly was on the stoep waiting for him, looking hopeful that he would tell her that Devon had been naughty and had just hurt himself, like he had done many times before. There were neighbours standing along the fence. News travelled fast.

“Mummy, he’s gone. Our baby is gone. I’m sorry I couldn’t help him. I wish it could rather have been me.”

Lilly fainted.

In the days that followed the funeral, Wayne was angry. He neglected his studies. “Why don’t you take the gangsters, drunks and drug addicts? Lord; how many times do you make one person suffer; what did my mother do to deserve this?”

Lilly struggled. During the day she went about her business in a daze; and at night she dreamed that she was reaching out to Devon to pull him up through the open train door. She pulled so hard but his hand was slippery. Lilly had never before understood hate, but she wanted to lash out at anyone, anything. The neighbours whispered behind her back.

“Shame, if only she’ll take some time to rest.”

She collapsed at work, while mopping a floor, and was ordered by her boss to take leave.

“Your job can wait; don’t worry. Wayne needs you, Lilly.”

“Wayne ... Wayne, we’re nearly ready for the champagne, my boy.” Lilly’s voice brought him back from the memories. She saw the picture of Devon on the bed. Her eyes stung with trying not to cry.

“Come my boy, this is your day. Prof is waiting to make the toast ... before that forward Mary suggests he give her a lift home.”

“What do you mean, Ma?”

“You know how she is, can’t keep her hands off a man with potential. Come, Boetie already took the JC Le Roux out of the fridge, and we don’t want him to get ideas.”

Wayne laughed. His mother’s friend was irrepressible, always watching for prospects.

“I better go save Prof, then ... and maybe, I should take you on a trip so we can learn about real champagne.”

“Oh no, don’t get fancy ideas now that you’re a doctor. I’m happy, right here, with you, and all these silly neighbours, blessed and grateful.”

Falling from the watchtower

There must be some kind of way outta here

Said the joker to the thief

There's too much confusion

I can't get no relief ...

Bob Dylan, 1965

Audrey looked out over her new front garden, admiring how far she'd managed to rework the overgrown weeds and huge patches of dry red soil over the past year. The garden had a special effect on her. She welcomed its solitude. The birds and other hidden creatures created a symphony of lilting sounds that floated over the tall trees and stone walls surrounding her. Her flowers were just about popping little buds of colour with the first flushes of spring. Miraculously, the chilli plants resurrected themselves from bony twigs to bright green bushes, and soon there would be bright red chillis dripping from the stems. The original plant was from her husband's sister-in-law down in Vryheid, Kwazulu Natal, when they went to his brother's funeral two years ago. Many of Audrey's plants were nurtured from the bits and pieces she had snipped from the garden in the two other houses they had previously lived in; or which had been gifts from her mother. She especially treasured the lilies and the geraniums the old lady would wrap in newspaper and shopping bags; and then carry these in her hand luggage on her flights from Cape Town. There was even one bright yellow lily that popped up one day, a total surprise since she had never seen one before. She marveled how these plants kept growing, despite being uprooted.

In keeping with her passion for reducing waste, she had also rehabilitated the flowers that the previous owner of the house had planted, she sensed, with affection. The primulas and red sage were just coming to life again, mixed in with the soothing, confident reds of the amaryllis, the purple of the lavender and agapanthus, and the delicate whites of the dietes. There were lush lemon trees bulging with different varieties of lemon, together with the lemon tea bush that released a sweet aroma, a welcome break from the dry, dusty air of the Highveld. The fragrant

sage bushes reminded her of her visits to California, where the hills rolled into each other, eventually disappearing into the sky.

The house had been completely dilapidated before they had renovated and rescued it from ruin, without altering its bones too much. Audrey disliked how some of the neighbours were pulling down old houses and then rebuilding huge corner-to-corner mansions in this beautiful old suburb of Irene. These so-called Tuscan villas were in fact monstrosities that crept right up to the interlinking walls, disturbing the forest-like silence and ambience of the original old village, where the plots were huge but the homes modest.

She pondered that it was the serenity of the village that was precious, not the value of the building. She loved good solid old architecture and even some of the modern eco-wise structures that focused on recycling and re-using materials as far as possible. Her next project would be to build a structure using the old wood and iron method or maybe even repurposing old shipping containers. She mused that house-building should have been her career of choice. It would be such a life altering change from the drudgery of her government post, but she wasn't sure that at the age of fifty she still had it in her to make that radical change. The old house itself represented stability and security, an indication of having made something of herself, but at what cost she wondered. Sometimes it felt like a prison wrapped in burglar bars outside and inside, the price the middle-class had to pay for keeping the ever-present threat of invasion at bay.

“Ai, I've become too comfortable, and fat, with a monthly income,” she chided herself. While she was grateful for what she had, she hated the meaningless cesspool of discontent her job as a senior government official had become, choking her creativity and independence. When she had first entered into public service two decades ago, she was proud to contribute to policy creation that would lead to service delivery. Now, she had morphed into what she had decried as a young student activist – *a cog in the wheel of the petit bourgeois, consumerist establishment*. Mostly just fancy words and devoid of reality, she knew, but nonetheless the visions of effortless freedoms were gone.

About two years ago, Audrey had received the good news that her interview for a new post had been successful. It wasn't a promotion, but she was happy with the lateral transfer, an opportunity to start afresh before the inevitable doubts set in. Her doctor had warned her when she started.

” I’m not going to chase you with a needle through Sunnyside, if you collapse again. You should get out, and stay out of government. Join an NGO or an NPO or CBO. There’s a whole list you can choose from.”

“I’m stuck and scared to take the plunge. That I won’t be able to look after myself. The economy is really tough right now.”

“It’s always tough, when your dreams are shattered. All of us are battling to make sense of what’s become of this land; but sometimes you just have to move on. And you have the spirit of a bohemian, not an administrator. You must seriously consider it.”

“I don’t know, doctor. I feel bad for complaining and being so dissatisfied, when there are people who can’t even afford a loaf of bread or have a roof over their heads. Here I am raging about being abused at work, by executives I thought knew better.”

“Ja, the people who give the orders are struggle bevok. They haven’t been debriefed about their own traumas from all those years of fighting. How can they provide ethical leadership?”

Doctor Viljoen was irreverent, but wise. Having been a comrade himself, he was privy to the ailments of all sorts of people seeking his help. Audrey wasn’t sure if the last bit about being an administrator was a compliment though. She prided herself on her work output, even if she felt that every last bit of independent thought had been blached out of her. She’d been determined to make it through the remaining years before retirement. But now she was fed up with merely existing, going through the motions at work, holding it together. The longing for more, for living out the promise of a fulfilled life, consumed her at times. It was difficult to articulate, except for the recognition that she was consumed by these feelings.

“Anyway,” she sighed looking at her flowers, “Something is bound to come up.” She would keep to her lane and focus on her work in the meantime. It was so defeating though. Gone was the fire of those heady days when challenging the status quo was encouraged, when debating concepts and strategies sustained the resistance movement. Now, she felt like life had come crashing down into an opera of discordant instruments; and that she would be swept away by a cacophonous maelstrom. On one hand, her life was settled and comfortable with more assets than

the ever increasing numbers of poverty stunted masses could only dream of. Yet, here she was despising what had become of the nation and herself.

The solitude was broken by her three border collies dashing around frenziedly to the furthest corners of the garden and then quickly sprinting back to her, as if they had to check that she was still there, before rushing off again. This hyperactivity lasted for five minutes before they each settled into sniffing whatever dogs sniff; then happily loping off to gaze under the huge metal gate. She had fenced off the garden about two meters before the front motor gate as a precaution in case anybody was careless and left it open. The safety of her beloved dogs was one of the few priorities and rules she made in her life. She despaired how often messages were sent about lost dogs over the WhatsApp group run by the Neighbourhood Watch.

Still, she thought, better for the dogs to be found as quickly as possible than coming to harm. A chill ran through her, just thinking about the possibility of that. She loved animals passionately, and took their protection seriously. She disregarded the brigade that argued that animal lovers placed animal rights above human rights. They were poor apologists for not being able to care for the vulnerable - human or animal.

These few moments of bliss in her garden dissipated rapidly, the contrary thoughts impinging her aura. She fought the rising tide of panic that set in when thinking about life beyond her beautiful ancient stone walls. While she embraced the solitude of her life with her dogs, the realities of daily existence constricted her muscles into a spasm, breaking the rhythm of the conversation in her head. She patted her temples, as if that would bring back her calm.

“So what is really going on with you, why are you so restless?” She could almost hear her husband, Joe, ask from a distance, as if he were right there behind her under the shade of the billowing cycad. Instead he was far away in the Richtersveld, filming his new eco-documentary.

“Nothing’s going on. I’m just thinking of my options for the future.”

“You do that all the time, wasting time instead of just getting on with your life.”

“I’m planning, just like you do Joe, with your endless trips before you even finished the current one.”

“Looks more like lazing about, to me.”

“I just want to get out of government, but you keep pushing me back. You don’t understand what it’s like. Even talking about it hurts my head.”

“You’re never satisfied. You just changed jobs a couple of years ago. We moved house a year ago. You bought a new car. I’m not saying you must stay, but why can’t you hang in there for the next few years. I mean, you can then go on early retirement”

“You can’t be serious. Don’t you ever listen when I tell you how painful every day in that office is? It is breaking me. But what do you care, I will get myself out of this on my own.”

“Don’t go there. I told you that I will support your decision, but you must be realistic. I keep saying that I’m proud how you’ve hung in there all these years.”

“That’s exactly it. I’m tired of hanging. I want to live and work for something that I feel good about.

“It’s not like the private sector is any better. There’s corruption and kak all over. Besides it’s only a couple of weeks before we leave for the boat trip in Indonesia. You will really love snorkeling; you know how the sea always makes you feel better.”

“I’m not being a brat or spoiled or indecisive. I work fucking hard, only to be abused in all kinds of ways.”

“Euphoria and utopia. Maybe you should seek out some old hippies and find us some hallucinogens to relax and see the world through different lenses.”

She imagined Joe impatiently shutting her out, before her last words were over her lips. His schedule and plethora of activities was enough to set a nest of bees in a spin. She knew she wasn’t going to find any answers there, but at least she was considering the impacts her decisions would have on him. As singularly as they lived their lives, her decisions would have an impact on where they lived and how they lived. “There’s no need to be reckless with what we have. When the time’s right, do what you need to.” He had a point. They were not wealthy, but they lived comfortable lives, well beyond the ordinary South African.

Thankfully, there was no-one else to consider but themselves. They had made the decision years ago not to have children. Joe, at times, hinted that they should adopt. He was such an eco-warrior, always looking out for the good of the planet and the dispossessed. Sometimes

Audrey felt ashamed that she still wanted something else for her life, when most people had very little, and were satisfied with their lot in life. A few years ago she had discussed the possibility of adopting children as a way of giving back; but Dr Viljoen reassured her that adoption was not for everyone.

“There are many other ways you can contribute to society if that is your thing; which it clearly is.”

Yet, all her efforts to lead a meaningful life seemed useless. Enough was never enough. “Is it wrong to want something different?” she asked aloud. The moon was starting to peep through the tall pines. She wished she had someone sitting with her on the bench, to placate the questions that went round and round in her head when she was alone after work, trying to figure out the next step. The healthy salary she earned as a senior manager didn’t make up for the tedium of pushing of papers across the desk, the bullshit, the turning a blind eye, the petty squabbles. This is not why she had made social transformation the focal point of her life.

She was traumatized by the unending grab for funds, not only by the politicians who were easy to pinpoint by their absurd posturing in parliament, but the officials deep in the belly of government, itself. It enraged her to watch haplessly how the state coffers were looted from all directions. Audrey felt little solace or vindication in being right, now that the truth was being unveiled in alarming detail. The nation seemed to have reached the end of its tether, threatening a regime change to cast out the rapacious class hiding behind radical economic transformation. Audrey banged her fist into her palm. *As if every citizen is so bereft of intelligence that we can't see beyond the smoke screens.*

These ruthless and shortsighted acts of economic treason shredded the dreams of millions of people, in ways she could not even bear to think. For every gain made over the past two decades, multiple steps were taken back by the unabashed greed of those in the inner circles. It incensed her that the newly rich were only interested in immediate gratification, lining their bottomless pockets while whole communities had to find ways of surviving - without water, electricity, sanitation, health services. The list was endless.

“I just want out. Now. I can’t stand it anymore. I feel like my life has been wasted, for what I don’t know. This is not what we fought for, what we signed up for. All of this hoodwinking, chicanery.”

Of course, good work was being done throughout the country; and huge strides had been made in providing basic services. Still, the gap between good and bad was narrowing, instead of between rich and poor. Even the students were burning down the halls of learning in their demands for the long promised free education. The rainbow nation of Azania was fast fading.

She wished Joe could drop his pragmatic stance, and engage her outrage, even though she knew that he, like many others not part of the newly privileged and connected class, was only trying to make sense of this upside down world. “Can’t you see what is going on, dammit? Of all people you should be able to see. I feel like it’s going to break me. What are you going to do with me then?”

Audrey’s dissolution raged inside her, giving rise to divergent voices, and rousing her yearning for justice. *What has become of defeating the triple issims – racism, sexism, capitalism? Lifestyle versus social reconstruction. What to choose?* She thought about Steinbeck’s caution that when the impoverished, landless masses were pushed too far, they would claim whatever they wanted, in not so nice ways.

Through clever manipulation, politicians and their cronies were creating alternative narratives to feed their bank accounts rather than the masses. The idealism of Audrey’s youth was turned on its head.

Her mind turned to a recent incident at work. She had been utterly taken aback when a colleague had called her “a violent woman from the Cape Flats”. The silly woman was of Indian descent, from the largely working class suburb of Phoenix, Durban. She had been to a Mark Lottering comedy show, and thought that it was hilarious.

“I now understand you better. Mark explained why you people behave the way you do. Shame!”

Now alone in the dark, Audrey snorted loudly. *This is what happens when the leadership conveniently cling to classification of an old order, as if it is legitimate to label people, black,*

white, coloured, Indian and other. Cynicism and caricature rules the day, while petty-mindedness blossoms into discrimination.

Audrey was even more surprised by the response of management when she mentioned it. There was a rush to sweep it under the carpet as a cattish incident between two strong-headed women who would not bow to each other. “No, no, it’s very hard to prove racism, just like sexual assault.”

Suddenly she laughed loudly, startling the dogs who were accustomed to her solo rantings, but not the strange gurgling sounds coming from her. She had imagined Mark Lottering puckering his lips, in protest at the butchering of his words. He was funny, but it was easy to discern the message behind the mirth. The nation building project of the post-1994 Mzansi created platforms for artists like him and the Trevor Noah’s to craft theatre out of the forgotten communities across the nation. An opportunity to laugh at ourselves, while looking at the hard realities of a project held to ransom by filthy politicians and their networks.

It was good to feel the tension drain from her, letting go of the toxins. Joe often reminded her that one of her strongest attributes was her ability to laugh at herself. She had to learn to let go of that serious, inflexible streak. She could only take responsibility for her own actions and survival.

She wasn’t completely hapless. She knew deep down in her soul what it was that she dreamed of. It wasn’t so deep down either, just a way of expressing herself. ‘Overly dramatic’, Joe said; and would add, ‘like the Cape Flats’, when he was teasing her.

“Not my problem that you only realise now that you married the Cape Flats. You *mos* found it exotic once upon a time. And if you want to be patronizing, let me remind you where you come from, the land of the ox wagon.”

The light was fast fading, casting eerie shadows in her pretty garden. Audrey could make out the shadows of the rabbits which freely roamed the streets of Irene. Cute as anything, they were oblivious to the rules of orderly home and land ownership. They hopped around, setting up home outside anyone’s gate, while taunting the neighbourhood dogs, just out of reach behind the high stone walls.

Audrey knew that the sadness in her soul stemmed from her impatience with the transformation of her beloved South Africa. She loved this place with all its problems. *South Africa was the best place in the world. We just don't know what we have*, she thought. *Still, it would have to be aluta continua, for people who shared her thinking. The tiny glimpses of freedom had to be built on, so that everyone could have the benefit of the parks, the wide open spaces, the museums, everything the tiny place at the tip of Africa had to offer. Resilience and renewal, would win the day.* It was at times like this that she missed Cape Town bitterly, and Joe would remind her harshly.

“Cape Town has lots of problems, don't romanticize it. Do you see that the population has grown by 33% over the last three years? It's all those scared bliksems, escaping Gauteng?”

“Ag man, you're just being sour and irreverent.”

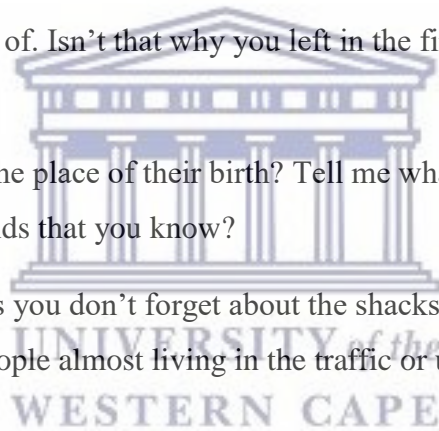
“No decent work to talk of. Isn't that why you left in the first place, to become an economic migrant?”

“Who doesn't long for the place of their birth? Tell me what is wrong with yearning for the familiar, the sights and sounds that you know?”

“You can yes, so long as you don't forget about the shacks lining the highways of your beautiful city. Do you see it; people almost living in the traffic or under bridges? Is that the change you want?”

Joe didn't know when to stop but his words reminded Audrey of when she was merely a six-year-old. It was her first memory of the harshness of apartheid. She had been with her mother and older brothers, doing the annual end-of-year shopping trip in the old Cape Town centre, before the time of the grand Golden Acre. She loved the excitement of going from shop to shop, and stopping in front of the Adderley Street flower-sellers, with their neatly packed rows of fragrant flowers. Her mother was happy with her new curtains, which was part of sprucing up the house for the holidays.

“Let's go eat lunch at the new OK Bazaars restaurant, on the top floor. Audrey, hold my hand and you two walk in front so I can see you. Quickly.”



As they were about to take their trays, a middle-aged waiter walked across, and said sharply, “You can’t eat here, you can get something in the supermarket section.” These many years later, Audrey could feel how her mother’s hand tightened as she glared at the man; turning without uttering a word. She was too young to work out whether he was ‘white’ or ‘coloured’; he was just someone who had hurt her mother, and she felt that pain sharply. It was that unseen scar that had formed the basis for what she believed in, and had fought so hard to eradicate. She was not about to let go of it, even if it meant regrouping her energies to find another way - her way.

And so it was, while she couldn’t change the world immediately, she could reminisce of what had shaped her, the good and the bad. She found peace in letting her mind roam free, her way of escaping from the watchtower. Audrey let the thoughts tumble, forming a cinema of pictures. The scene she cherished the most was of the sudden changes that came over Cape Town’s seas, and the clouds that rolled over the mountains, not giving a hoot if one was wearing short sleeves and skimpy shorts. She tasted the freshly fried snoek and chips from the Hout Bay harbor’s *Snoekies*. She ate so fast that the top of her palate was scalded and then cooled with sips of cream soda. This is what she missed and longed for. The breakfasts of Earl Grey tea and scones from Kirstenbosch Gardens when she was being lah-dee-dah, and doing things that tourists and *white* people did. But who gave a damn; the natural beauty belonged to everyone. There were the spontaneous road trips she took on her own or with whoever was willing to jump in the car on the spur of the moment, calmly driving through rain or blazing sun to the West Coast or along the coastal road to Napier to the jazzy beats of Heart FM. Audrey longed for the Sunday evening walk along the Sea Point promenade to watch the bi-weekly salsa dance-off, where an amazing assortment of people - many shapes, sizes, nationalities - danced together like they invented the rainbow itself. She would end the day with a cruise along the curving roads of Camps Bay, breathing in the smell of the bright blue sea and the breathtaking glow of the setting sun between the mountains and the sea, all the way through to Hout Bay and Chapman’s Peak. This is what her heart longed for. Just a slice of it, to hold close to her wayward and lost soul.

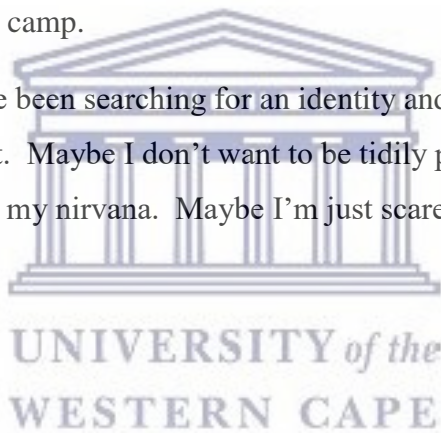
The light had faded completely in her Irene garden and Audrey gazed into the distance, bidding Joe goodnight, wherever he was. She would soon have to go in and prepare for work the next day.

In the meantime, this quest for freedom, she understood, would be just that. She would have to learn to enjoy it when she captured it fleetingly in her hands, like a lost dove pausing for direction. *What is a place without the people, the landscape, the languages, the smells, the sights and the sounds*, she pondered?

It was this endless yearning for something that she couldn't describe, but it sat at the base of her throat and felt it moving in her heart. She knew she was being foolish and nostalgic and ridiculous. But she was scared to admit to it; even though it was this that kept her head spinning at night, like those old pioneers pushing through the bushes and the rocks to find a new site to call home and lay down next to their weary animals.

Sometimes, she took a sleeping tablet just to shut out the data overload so that she could function the next day. Audrey sighed and whispered to Joe, who was probably fast asleep under the stars wherever he had set up camp.

“Maybe it’s because I’ve been searching for an identity and a home for so long that I can’t grasp that I already have it. Maybe I don’t want to be tidily packed in a box like a pair of old shoes. So I keep looking for my nirvana. Maybe I’m just scared of falling from the watchtower.”



SELF-REFLECTIVE ESSAY

1. Introduction

The collection of ten short stories, *Of Flowers and Tears*, aims to capture the events that have shaped my life, impacted on my community. It hopefully gives a voice to topics such as mental trauma, sibling strife, abortion, drug use and abuse, suicide, as well as political and social activism. Whilst none of the topics are new, the collection could potentially add to a growing genre of short story fiction by local authors which examine issues relating to trauma, loss, violence and the acknowledgement of identities.

As South Africans, we carry many metaphoric scars (including psychological, socio-economic, sexual) as well as literal ones, which act as testimonies to our violent and frequently traumatic past and present. Even though most of the material used in my collection forms part of my personal memory bank and will be interpreted in a wholly fictional way, I propose that such a collection speaks to pertinent, present and pervasive realities.

Rayda Jacobs poignantly comments in *Post-cards from South Africa*, “I left my soul at the bottom of Table Mountain. I want it back.” (100) This is probably the sentiment that replayed in my head as I tackled the task of writing my collection of short stories. Jacobs ventures into the territory of writing about the familiar to millions of inhabitants of Cape Town, while giving a voice to the many personal traumas, identity crises and triumphs of Cape Flats dwellers. It describes - without patronizing the characters - their desires, their failings and their daily realities, often defined by poverty, drug abuse, marginalization both in the pre-and post-rainbow nation.

It would only be fair to juxtapose this harshness with a narrative that celebrates the pride, dignity and joys of these disparate communities, while noting that all too often they are wrongfully

described as a homogenous culture and society. I have attempted to display this diversity and juxtaposition of different cultures in this anthology.

2. Background

The struggle years were informative, active times, and developed our mindsets to be anti-establishment and revolutionary; although looking back one wonders at the concept of revolution in its present usage. The incarceration of friends and comrades was painful, angst ridden times in South Africa. Hence, the eighties and nineties shaped my life view in terms of race, class, gender and community.

Underlying the politics and activism through the years, I had a growing awareness of the disconnectedness of the individual in society (even though a Marxist critique would disagree with any notion of the individual above the collective). I was quietly observing the traumas and pains that my friends, allies and myself experienced without being able to give expression to these challenges, in a way that would not seem weak in the face of the collective action required to resist the regime. It raised uneasy questions around individualism as opposed to the selfless actions in serving the greater good. I have come to the realization that it is the *individual* that forms part of a collective as part of a community, which could also be understood as a number of sub-communities.

I surmised that the denial of frailty while defeating an oppressive regime often led to under-or-mis-diagnosis of psychological traumas, illnesses, and familial dysfunction. This theme runs through a few of the stories – “Sixteenth Birthday”, “Lila and Seth”, and “The Confession” - which tackle the pains of growing up under strained family circumstances; amidst the need to be active in the struggle to change South Africa.

Human frailties and social ills were often hidden, not acknowledged, not spoken of. Consequently, no help was sought, or worse, was frowned upon. A hardened female activist of the underground movement recently shared with me how comrades were not debriefed upon release from detention; and how many battled to deal with the mental and physical abuses inflicted on them whilst ‘inside’. Yet, seeking help was rarely acknowledged in public. There was a silent but pervasive view that the working class could not afford to have ‘nervous breakdowns’.

The contribution my collection is making to the emerging themes in South Africa literature is, that by revisiting the past, the need for the individual identity against the background of trauma must be heeded in order for healing and reconciliation to take place at the core of our societies, in our homes and personal relationships. The narrator of the stories mostly has a female persona, actively involved in the plot; and as such will be a subjective and critical voice as the various themes unfold in their interplay with the complexities of forging both an individual and collective position. The exceptions to the gender of the narrative voice are in “The Confession”, which is male and relevant to the theme; and in “Lilly”, which could be either. I have done this to highlight the interconnectedness of trauma suffered by communities as a collective versus the individual as the recipient of the immediate life-altering experiences.

The theme of the role of women and the challenges faced because of the magnifying effect of the triple jeopardy – class, race and gender – in our society is not new. In my collection, I have aimed to raise their profile to active participants in the unfolding of the narrative, rather than secondary participants. My collection seeks to emphasise the uniqueness of the individual trauma and response that must be recognized above that of the collective solution, the convenient labelling of communities and the broad-based approach to solving the many dilemmas left by apartheid. The first two stories, “Declension” and “Sixteenth Birthday”, raise the issue of broken families and the

desperation caused by working situations, possible mental health issues, and the lack of support for women battling to keep control of their families. Inevitably or inadvertently, these very women become enablers for behavior that lead to abuse and dysfunction. In the face of adversity, even courageous characters like Lilly have to let go of their wayward offspring in order for their lives to progress and to give their other children a chance of success. I note that the father figure in most of the stories is often absent by way of employment or not actively involved in the action of the story. The father is often portrayed as working at sea, because that was my reality growing up and of other children I was exposed to. Unlike other communities where mining was likely the form of migrant labour, 'coloured' men often went to sea to earn a living.

The narrator of the stories - such as "Declension", "Dress from Luanna", "T.O.P" - will have the advantage of hindsight decades later to comment and provide a setting for the characters; and more pertinently, to recognize the efforts towards healing and reconciliation, if not forgiveness. The technique of reflecting on the past plays a role in most of the stories, but particularly in "Dress from Luanna" and "T.O.P", which allows for a background or introduction to the sequential story in the anthology - "Lila and Seth", and "Auntie" - in which characters are shared to provide further insight into the lives of the characters. I have used this doubling up of characters to show how the echoes of history and its tragedies influence the present.

Over the past two decades since 1994, and more particularly over the last few years, many contradictions in the implementation of the one of the most venerated constitutions, the South African one, have reared their ugly heads - from race, identity to gender debates. I have been asking questions such as, "When did I become a coloured?" "How is it possible that we are still debating whether South Africa is ready for a female president?" South Africa appears, unwittingly, to be stepping deeper into acceptance of patriarchal and racial disfiguration, polarizing

communities instead of leveraging the euphoria of democracy to change the narrative of the trauma imposed upon us. The protagonists in my stories battle with these scars, in an attempt to make sense of their lives.

More pertinently for my collection of stories, it raises painful issues of identity, belonging, disparity and trauma; as if the individual is being stripped once again of that longed for sense of unity. I remember fighting for a non-racial, equal South Africa where we would collectively forge our identities in the rainbow nation, through the working class struggles of generations of dispossessed communities, through the resounding theme, ‘... a people united would never be defeated...’

In the final story, “Falling from the Watchtower”, I reflect on the ongoing echoes of trauma inflicted over many decades, in spite of the new democracy achieved in the nineties. The story focuses on the impact on the individual, who is deeply critical of the current state of affairs in South Africa. This is not a cry of victimhood but one that amplifies the need for the individual to rise above the imposed traumas, to be part of the critical voice to enrich the dialogues of democracy.

The collection, thus, encourages ongoing literary activism, which is explored in the Meg Vandermerwe article, “Imagining the “forbidden” racial ‘other’: attitudes and approaches in the works of Anjtie Krog, Marlene Van Niekerk, Meg Vandermerwe and Zukiswa Wanner”, due for publication in 2019. She argues that an alternative discourse in contemporary South African creative writing is emerging, where “... the ability to imagine with authenticity and integrity” [with] the forbidden other; or as I have attempted to do, to engage intimately with the “conditions” of the characters. Without that healing and closure as hinted to in “The Confession”, our identities (that is of the communities similar to the one I emerged from) will remain fractured and imposed

upon our consciousness leading to a state of disconnect from the rebuilding of our nation, which clearly is still a work-in-progress more than two decades on from ‘liberation.

The stories draw on my autobiographical experience, both past and present, and in so doing, created both ethical and personal dilemmas for me. I wanted to do justice to the overriding socio-political events that superseded the action of my stories, and which, had very real consequences for the community I depict. I was acutely aware of the tendency to minimize or trivialize the representation of marginalized communities, in the way that characters speak or behave. Antjie Krog in the Vandermerwe article stresses “...these complexities and concerns regarding the representation of the ‘other’ in the following excerpt.

To write about the marginalized, the subaltern, the oppressed, the foreigner, the stranger, the other, demands an enormous destabilization of the writing and even more of the writing self [...]. You have to become decentred. Become minority, go where you can't, *and be honest in the text about how you can never get there.* (2017, 9)

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Thus, while coming to terms with the fictional nature of this project, I have conducted historical research and interviewed individuals with knowledge of some of the events I describe. I reminded myself often that this was a process of creative writing, and in so doing, I have not confined the narratives to accurate chronology and events, but used creative largesse in the unfolding of the themes. Ultimately, the narratives focus on the humanness of the characters who either succumb to their realities or triumph in spite of constraints and challenges, in forging their own identities. Vandermerwe concludes that an author has a right to creative and imaginative autonomy as part of the process of building “creative, social and empathetic bridges borne out of necessity”. (2019, 19)

3. Creative and critical context

While my stories bear similar theoretical contexts to postcolonial literature, I have focused on developing the female voice within a South African context, to practice what Soyinka notes is a way of forcing critics and readers to respond to trauma in a way "... that asserts the relevance of localized modes of belief, ritual, and understanding, thereby undermining the centrality of western knowledge and expertise." (Craps and Buelen, 5)

"The bitter truth is that in a racist society where a brown skin (along with other colours) can cost lives, people will embrace any ideology that seems to offer the hope of change. Even when that ideology proves counter-productive, the hope persists ..." (Elizabeth Martinez, *De Colores Means All of Us*)

Paula Moyo, in the introduction to *Reclaiming Identity* notes that "identity" remains one of the most contested topics in literary and cultural studies. Moyo notes, that in a discussion of gender theory, that a slave woman in ante-bellum America would have experienced her womanhood differently to a "free" woman on the other side of the globe, not only because of class identifiers but also because of different social meanings. Thus, "identity" is neither stable nor homogenous; and at best, a woman may be able to speak of her own unique, individual experience, a position which my collection of stories advances. Similarly to *Of Flowers and Tears*, Moyo concludes that the process of reclaiming identities is at the crux of understanding who we are as social beings, the choices we make for complex subjective reasons, not merely in response to structures of powers. (Moyo, PML, 1-5)

My stories note the imposition of race as an intrusion into and a disruption of the lives of my characters. On another element of the duality or denial of identity that many 'coloured' Capetonians display. Marx comments on Zoe Wicomb's observation that the inability to represent

an appropriate history of our origin has its "... roots in shame; shame for our origins in slavery, shame for the miscegenation, and shame, as colonial racism became institutionalized ...". (Marx, 2)

My collection explores the theme of the individual as a singular entity encountering the realities of life. The more painful the events the greater the likelihood for negative consequences to establish a cycle of continuous threat, undermine the individual, the family and the community at different levels. Inadvertently, the threat to stability and accepted social norms leads to secrets and denials; and thereby, entrenching cycles of abuse, dysfunction and isolation. The question, then, arises as to how individuals respond, how survivors recall the events that shaped them and how they recreate a meaningful life.

The act of recalling and recreating is both painful and therapeutic because it forces engagement with the anguished memory, yet satisfies the need to rewrite the course of justice and its outcome. My short stories, particularly "The Confession", "T.O.P", "Auntie" and "Falling from the Watchtower", display a similar element of an authorial or narrative voice that uses the text as an opportunity for self-reflection and critique of the socio-economic milieu that the characters respond to. It is intended that the different use of the narrator in the first, second and third person reflects the past and present as the author relies on memories or comments on a particular event.

The theme of triumph alongside loss is one that I explore in some of my stories, while being cautious of Stef Craps warning, "... that an appropriate response to accounts of trauma must involve empathetic identification with the witness evoking an appropriate empathetic response". He goes on to note that Bertolt Brecht was wary of art that invoked "crude empathy" because there is the possibility of estrangement from the critical awareness that the artist wishes to invoke. (Craps, 191-192) Instead it is suggested that through the imagination, a writer should be able to

create access to the lives of ‘the other’ and thereby, give recognition to a basic continuum of human experience. In “T.O.P”, the topic of abortion is treated as a process which has lifelong implications; yet, continues to be a silent trauma suffered by many women across the world. In order for the protagonist to move forward, a choice had to be made in spite of the ethical and moral dilemmas. The compounding effects of personal choices and acts of violence - physical abuse, femicide - are tackled in “Auntie” and “Johnny, Lee and Love”. The effects are devastating for family and friends.

A few of my stories – particularly, *Falling from the Watchtower* - mirror the themes of longing for home, the life choices made, the building of resilience My to counter loss and loneliness, as part of the quest for freedom, imagined or real. The book, *South African Literature after The Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* notes that there are complex interconnections between the body, memory and social space, and in so doing creating a perception of a stable basis for identity and a sense of community.

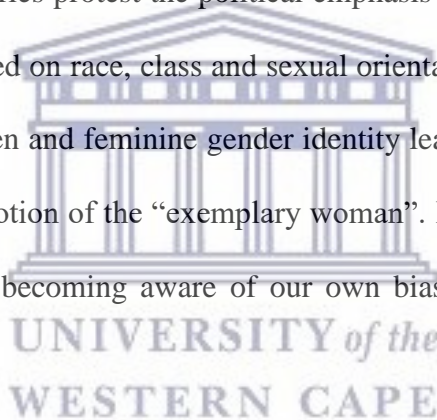
My collection challenges myopic notions of race and insular cultural depictions by embracing individual differences as part of an organic whole. The primary language of the narrative is English, but will draw on the colourful multi-lingual palette of South Africa, especially through the use of my second language, Afrikaans.

In order to survive or not, the characters of my stories reach beyond the immediacy of their challenges and look outward to their communities, their religious institutions, finding their salvation in the struggle, as comrades and revolutionaries, if only as the armchair variety, but anti-establishment nonetheless. I will employ reverse chronology in some of the stories, as a means of looking back to the past, which Paulina Grzeda describes in “Trauma and Testimony: Negotiating the Past” as a way that traumatic memory can be translated into narrative memory through the

testimony of traumatized characters referring to their flashbacks, nightmares, disassociation and psychosomatic symptoms.

Thando Njovane comments in the article, “South Africa, Post Trauma” that expressions of pain do not come about because of victimhood but is an attempt to make sense of the past; whilst noting that the personal is political and in order to recover, ‘... it is necessary to speak about what we have lost. And sometimes to cry, and sometimes to yell.’”

Thus, the issue of trauma in my collection serves a number of purposes including motive, background and context as a framework for the narrative to unfold. In contrast, Janet Wesselius argues that recent feminist theories protest the political emphasis on sameness as opposed to the differences among women, based on race, class and sexual orientation. She cautions that it could lead to unitary notions of women and feminine gender identity leading to the potential exclusion of those who do not meet the notion of the “exemplary woman”. Instead, she notes that we must learn to listen to others while becoming aware of our own biases, prejudices, and ignorance. (Wesselius, JC, 1-6)



4. **Methods used in short story writing**

Brenda Ueland notes that it is listening and not talking that opens the imagination and teaches a writer how to become more effective. In my approach to the collection, I have mostly focused on freewriting exercises; the jotting down of observations and conversations of moments that have captured my imagination or have triggered flashbacks. I have been keeping an intermittent diary. I have found that the focus of working on the collection has pointed me back to listening to music that I have ignored over the decades; and this part of learning to write has been an intensely pleasurable personal experience, enabling me to revisit joyful moments as opposed to those flashbacks that have been painful. The art of the short story is beautifully captured in the lyrics of

such great musicians such as Janis Joplin, Neil Young, Joan Baez, Robbie Jansen, Abdulla Ibrahim and Bill Withers – all of whom have fought, lost or overcome their own challenges in producing their prolific works. I am reminded that, like the characters of my stories, these great artists have dealt with drug abuse, suicide, physical and mental challenges, social acceptance and marginalization.

I practiced rewrites of various drafts of a story as a way of enriching not only my memory but the quality of the content. Initially, this approach was uncomfortable because it raised questions of the authenticity and chronology of events; but I was reminded that ultimately the collection is a body of creative work rather than a documentary of significant events that have touched my life. The writing of the collection was both an educational process for the writer (myself) and one that, hopefully, enabled the characters to find their own voices through which the tales of a whole community will be represented. I adopted a multi-disciplinary approach to this project – research of different fields such as history, politics and literature.

I was inspired by the Jolyn Phillips' book, *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries*. It is an excellent example of how a writer can bring the colours and the heartbeat of a little known community to life by using short stories. She does this unpretentiously through bilingual dialogues and short but lively descriptions of her settings and characters. As painful as the topics are, the reader is left with insight and a sense of hope rather than desolation. The latter is important to me in my own collection because it relates to a history of a people and community which have largely been represented by others rather than representing themselves.

As a novice, I heeded Brenda Uelands' advice that a writer should work with all her intelligence and love, writing freely as if talking to a friend that loves her. I have been challenged with being able to narrate the central story from a different point of view and focusing on that

central story which should be the core without distractions and unnecessary themes. Consequently, in my research on how to approach and develop a short story, I have focused on the following techniques:

- Streams of consciousness to help me capture and enrich the monologues of my characters;
- Footnotes that may help me develop a secondary voice as well as me with memories and flashbacks;
- Reverse chronology to capture my memories as I am writing subjectively from the present;
- Dialogues and monologues to allow my characters to speak in their own voices;
- Vignette which will allow me to provide a more impressionistic approach without necessarily providing a complete opening and closing of the story; and
- Slice of life which allows for a more journalistic, open-ended and documentary approach in specific settings.

Ultimately, it has been freewriting which has allowed me to sketch my thoughts and to make the connections in the different drafts; allowing me to overcome the self-doubts on whether I have a story to tell and whether I have the ability to put that story onto paper.

As a distance learner, the advice and guidance from my supervisor, Dr Meg Vandermerwe, has been essential to the revision and editing of my final drafts; as well as the learning process of creating a story rather than a journalistic account of events. She emphasized the need to keep the narrative honest and unfiltered; which was far more complex than merely putting my accounts on paper. The most important element I learnt was the need to connect to the 'real' story, to remove the 'lie' and to avoid the reliance on clichés, and unnecessary information.

The process has been one of learning to write, discovery of the creative process and my potential to craft fiction. It has also been a process of unlearning habits of writing formed over many years, mostly in my professional capacity, where formal, administrative outcomes were required, as opposed to presenting information in a way that represents the subtlety of texture and tonality. I was seriously challenged to bring warmth, depth and layering, while remaining “true” to the story. The task of telling and showing in appropriate proportions was difficult, in the face of allowing characters to develop their own voices and narrative; as was finding the balance between truth and fiction, all within the short story format. I came close to ‘giving up’ and admitting defeat since learning the skill and craft of writing, I realized, is very exacting. However, it has been rewarding in its own way, if only to afford me the opportunity to revisit the past, with its unfinished business, and to allow me fresh insight into the themes I have attempted to tackle.

5. Conclusion

The art of writing is one that will have to be a continuous learning path for me, and this will be equally inspiring, fascinating and daunting. The writing of this anthology has slowly reconnected me to memories and other art forms such as music and film.

The process of writing this dissertation has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my views related to politics, ideology, spirituality and the daily routines of life. I valued the role of music, in particular, because I was unable to write for long periods, given the challenges I experienced related to my eyesight. The ability to listen to music connected me to the themes and rhythms that underlie my anthology, that of a basic humanity that binds us all.

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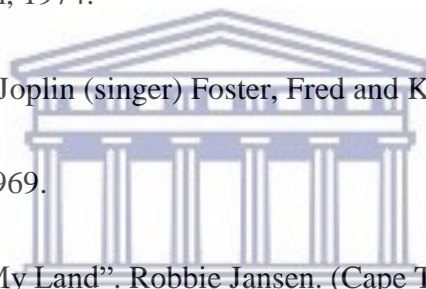
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