

MA (Creative Writing) Mini-thesis

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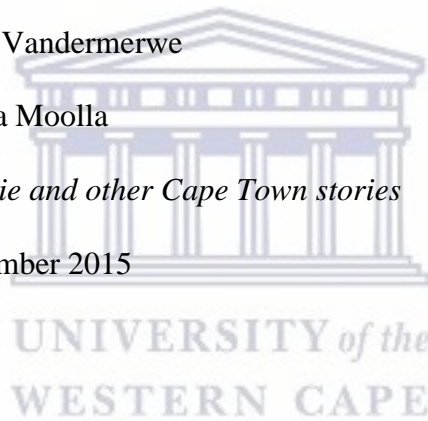
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Abstract

Visklippie and other Cape Town stories is a collection of short stories, inspired by my experiences having grown up in the 1960s and 1970s in Cape Town. This is a fictional work that, however, uses memory and oral history as the main sources for the stories told. I have conceived my project in the context of South African short stories from the mid-twentieth century, a very significant part of our literary history, since it encapsulates the volatile years of Apartheid. Unlike most of the writing of this period, my stories will try to highlight individual experiences, especially female subjectivity. My fictional engagement is also narrowed down by region since I will focus more on the short stories which emerge out of and represent Cape Town. This collection will aim to reflect the diverse voices of the people who have lived in divided communities in Cape Town. The stories will cover the period from the 1960s to contemporary times. They will be stories told from the perspective of children and women, but a few will be focalised through marginal male characters. The collection will be grounded in local community experience and centre on family relationships where there is triumph over political and personal adversity. The voices that emanate from these stories are seldom represented despite the great diversity in South African literature. These voices will sometimes emanate from the perspective of individuals condemned and ostracised by the same people dispossessed by Apartheid. The stories will aim for individual perspectives, complex interior explorations, ironies and paradoxes that will reveal fleeting connections and triumphs despite adversity.

Keywords: short stories, South Africa, Cape Town, black writing, female subjectivity, family relationships, gender relations, racism, motherhood, fatherhood.

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Declaration

I declare that *Visklippie and other Cape Town stories* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete citations.

Hilda Andrews

November 2015

Signed:.....



Visklippie

I popped out of my mother's womb on a Tuesday, in the middle of lunchtime. The sun shone on my brother's nappies, white with a red striped border, where she hung them out to dry that morning. Her brow was covered in perspiration. Her curly brown hair flecked with grey clung to the back of her neck. The back door creaked where the breeze lulled it rhythmically. She reached to lift my brother, who cried and clung to her varicose veined legs, when she felt a tightening of her belly and the pull like iron bars separating in her back. As the stabbing pain pushed a gust of breath out of her, she caught hold of the door frame still sticky from the layer of green oil-based paint my father had applied the day before.

'Stop your crying Bennie. Carrie ... get out of that tree!'

As always, mom's eyes and ears were everywhere. She tried to concentrate on the radio playing softly on the kitchen dresser. Connie Francis crooned, "Looking for love". Mom usually sang along but today her jaw clenched over the words of the song. She switched off the iron and left it to cool on the kitchen draining board. All thoughts of the things she had to do before leaving home were dispelled by a barrage of pain in her abdomen. She paced herself to the tune, moving against the onslaught of pain. In between contractions, mom grabbed Carrie with her left hand. My four year old sister was too swift and slipped out the door, back into the overgrown garden.

The backyard was filled with fruit trees – fig, loquat, guavas and apples. The mulberry bush crept up towards the window of the bedroom that my parents shared with the three children. I would soon make it four. They lodged with Mr Taylor, an elderly widow in his semi-detached house. Mom did his laundry and kept the house polished. Dad's friend Uncle Terence challenged him about the state of the garden, on a Friday night when they shared a half jack of brandy.

'Hack the bloody weeds Bob, they're growing wild.'

My father loved sitting in the garden with the newspaper on the weekend but he never took heed of Terence's remarks. He lit up another Gold Dollar cigarette and rebuked his friend.

'Terence, pour us another drink and shut up about the garden.'

When the pains started, mom pinned her wrist watch onto the lapel of her faded white blouse with a safety pin. Despite the heat she was buttoned to the chin, too scared to wear anything more revealing lest it provoke an argument with my father. The blouse had little cap sleeves with lace trim. She flicked the watch so that she could time the contractions. Her father, Tom, had given her the watch when she turned twenty one, ten years before. He made a speech

about looking after herself when he handed her the wrapped gift box. It brought tears to her eyes now. Her hands flew across the kitchen table to make another milk bottle for Bennie who still cried around her knees. He had just turned a year and already I was usurping his place. Mom clutched the kitchen table, an oval teak that belonged to Mr Taylor. She counted the duration of the spasms and decided it was time.

‘Mrs Brown ... Mrs Brown, Coo-ee.’

Mrs Brown’s plump arms rolled over the wood iron fence thick with green and purple morning glory. Mom was leaning onto the back of the chair where it stood tucked under the table in the narrow kitchen. Mrs Brown spotted the swelling surrounding mom’s ankles and the damp curls clinging to her forehead.

‘I’ll call the ambulance Anne. Hang on my girl.’

Mom sat down with Bennie then and rocked him to sleep with a dummy in his mouth and one hand rubbing her lower back. He twirled his golden locks and hummed himself to sleep. Mom called to my eldest brother.

‘Tom, look out for the ambulance.’

Tom closed the “Tell me why” book that he had gotten as a merit award at school and dashed down the pathway to wait at the gate. He climbed up onto the pillar from where he could also see my mother who sucked deep breaths and bowed her head every now and then.

Mom was glad that the pains arrived during the day, before my father got home. Even though it was Tuesday, he came home drunk any day of the week now that it was close to Christmas. When most factories closed down for two or three weeks, everyone had some extra money, their holiday pay.

She laid Bennie in his cot and picked up her overnight bag, placing it near the door. In it were her lemon nightie, matching bed jacket, tooth brush, face cloth and some things of Bennie’s for me to wear. Her purse with the few coins in it was closeted at the bottom of the tightly belted bag. Edith her sister had lent her the bag the year before, when Bennie was due. She hadn’t given it back yet. She went to switch the primus stove off but left the pots of green beans *bredie* and rice on the table for my father to dish their supper.

‘Mrs Brown I put him in his cot, will you please watch when he wakes?’

‘Yes my girlie, you just get yourself to the hospital. We don’t want that baby arriving before you get there.’

Mom hoped her mother, after whom I was to be named, would come to help. It wasn’t easy for my grandmother now that she and my grandfather lived on the “white” side of Woodstock with Edith and her Portuguese lover.

The siren grew louder when the ambulance neared the bottom of Ottery Road. Tom ran down the pavement, to wave to the driver and dashed back to help mom to the gate. Mrs Brown held onto Carrie as she clambered up onto the wall calling to Tom to come and fetch her. Mom felt a strong urge to bear down as she climbed into the back of the ambulance. She kissed Tom on his up turned cheek and he swiftly wiped his palm across it before turning to catch hold of Carrie wriggling free of Mrs Brown's arms.

In the back of the ambulance mom ground her teeth and prayed. She didn't have time to notice the tree lined road taking her towards Devils Peak, the brush stroke clouds in the sky or the dull interior of Woodstock Hospital. She was convinced the baby was near and told the nurse this as she handed over her clinic card to be booked into the maternity ward. The nurse, in a starched white dress and box like cap, walked briskly alongside the porter who wheeled mom into the delivery ward. Nurse Cummings gave mom's abdomen a cursory pummel to see how low the baby had dropped.

'Wait here please mommy.'

'Nurse, the baby is coming.'

The pitch of mom's voice had risen. She clutched the bars of the hospital bed as another contraction gripped her and she felt the urge to push, all thoughts of an earlier birth forgotten. All thoughts of her second son, whose foot dangled from her in the ambulance just single years before and who only lived long enough to be named, gone.

'Just lie down mommy. *Daai baba is nog ver weg.*'

She lay down and called again to the distracted nurse as she did.

'Nurse! Nurse!'

Mom gave one guttural cry as I slid out of her warm body in a gush of mucus and blood.

The nurse came running from the corridor where she assembled medication at a dispensary.

She heard my sudden cry from the pool between my mother's legs.

'Whoaaa.'

The nurse dropped the cup of tablets and rushed to the bed where mom lay regaining her breath.

'*Visklippie.*'

My mother named me in relief at my smooth delivery. She had barely arrived at the hospital when I was born, her fifth child, as smooth as a rock fish darting around a shallow pool. Her mind instantly shifted to the little ones at home and the nappies still on the washing line as the nurse latched me onto her breast.

'Nurse, can you phone my mother please?'

'Shouldn't I call your husband Mrs Copperfield?'

When my mother was not arguing with my father, she talked of all the events in her life. The story of my birth was told many times over. Mom would be wearing that same outfit and a striped apron, her house clothes for when she got home from work at the clothing factory. Mom would smile and joke even when she was weary from washing windows, polishing floors and leaning over the bath to wash our clothes. My mother had a time in the day for everything. Early evening was when she cut onions to brown for cabbage *bredie* or mixed vinegar into Rajah Spices for an English baked bean curry and I could peel the potatoes. On a Saturday afternoon when she relaxed after all her chores were done, she would exchange stories with her neighbour Rita.

By the time I started school five years later, I heard the story of my birth and how my sister nearly drowned at the public swimming pool when she was nine years old. Mom still wore that blouse, handed down from Edith, when she sat telling Aunty Rita what happened the weekend before. She wore the blouse tucked over a grey pleated skirt. The pleats were the width of my index finger. It had a huge safety pin plucked into the folds just above the hemline. The watch was gone from her lapel, long pawned for a few shillings to buy food. She and Aunty Rita were smoking on the balcony of her ground floor flat where they usually talked and sometimes showed each other signs or whispered in Afrikaans. I sat on the floor with my head against her knee rolling my fingers in and out of the pleats. I could see mom's skew teeth and the stoop of her shoulders as she spoke.

My mother raised her eyebrows and shook her head as she told Aunty Rita of the incident. Mom and Ryan's mom Aunty Pearl were like sisters. Ryan was the same age as Benni and often slept over on weekends even though my father never approved. He was five when he shoved Carrie who dangled her feet over the rim of the deep end. Around her, flailing arms stroked back and forth and teenage boys jack-knifed splintering the glistening surface of the water. Ryan ran along the perimeter from the shallow end and suddenly shoved Carrie into the water. She didn't have a chance to grab hold of the walk-in railing where she sat watching Tom, who floated with his friends in the centre of the swimming pool. She didn't have a chance to suck air into her lungs or pinch her nose to ward off the water as she submerged beneath the ripples of the pool. She certainly didn't have a chance to scream. Her breathing collided in the back of her throat as she was launched by the vehemence of his little hands on her brown shoulders.

Carrie had a sleek black ponytail, hair like my father's, tied on the top of her head. It spread like an octopus as she sank, her body gulping frantically. Aunty Pearl yanked her by the

bunch of hair as she swallowed mouthful after mouthful of chlorine and piss-filled water. She shoved her towards the gutter of the pool where Carrie choked and screamed while a crowd gathered. Tom leapt out of the pool to lift Carrie onto his back. Aunty Pearl pleaded with mom not to tell my father what had happened. Ryan never got a hiding that day. Mom lit another Peter Stuyvesant when she finished telling Aunty Rita the story.

Aunty Rita's hair was set in rollers. Mom smoked and talked before going back upstairs when the sun set, to iron my father's shirts and our school clothes for the week. Aunty Rita had no children.

'Ja Rita, *kinders...*'

Mom lit another cigarette then. I tugged on her and when she didn't respond, I blew my nose on her apron.

'How-dare-you?'

Aunty Rita had a slow way of walking and talking but her eyebrows sprung together in her narrow face. She wagged a long red varnished nail in my direction.

'Go home!'

She pointed across the balcony and I scampered over struggling to lift myself without touching the delicious monster in the corner. I knew that I had to get out of there fast.

'*Jou kleine shit, wag as ek daar bo kom.*'

My mother always kept her promise and I knew what was coming next. I pleaded.

'I'm sorry mommy. I'm sorry.'

Later that night, I cuddled behind mom's back in the sagging double bed we shared, my arm tucked around her middle. My father snored from his bed across the room. The tops of the poplar trees rustled outside the window and the moon hovered above the factory where mom worked just next door to our block of flats. I whispered in the darkened bedroom.

'Mommy, why is my name Francis? I thought you said to Aunty Rita that I was supposed to get my Ma's name?'

'Shhh, go to sleep now.'

'Now Carrie can swim like a rock fish hey mommy.'

If my mother spoke once, she wouldn't speak again. There was no reply. That night I dreamt of the tiny fish I saw swimming between the rocks at Kalkbay, after Christmas, when we took the train there with our Goodwill luxury hamper and blankets to shade from the sun. On weekday mornings, my mother dashed around the flat to prepare our lunch before she left for work. Mom was always late for work. By then there was no garden with fruit trees and honeysuckle shrubs for my father to trim.



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Tonsillitis

I am standing at the railway line with my father, waiting for the train to pull into Wynberg station. It is 1972. I am eight years old. I am wearing my patent leather Sunday shoes, with bobby socks that have a lace on the edge. I can see my face in the toes of my shoes. We stand near the ticket office, where red fire buckets hang in a row of three, filled with white, beach sand. The emergency buckets are placed in between the benches on the station. Some people sit there to wait for the train to pull into the platform. There are brown stones lying along the tracks. I am scared to stand too near. What if I fall in, how will I get out? Could I run along the tracks to where the platform ends in time before the train comes? There are also red buckets inside the ticket office. The office has oregon pine floors and door frames, painted over with dull grey paint. There are grubby finger marks near the door handle. I have to wash my hands when I get back home.

We are going to Red Cross Children's hospital. I have tonsillitis again and cannot swallow. We must take the train to Mowbray, six stations away. My father has a weekly train ticket. He buys a 'half' ticket for me. When I get older, I must pay full price. He travels this way every day when he goes to work night shift at the bakery in Salt River. The suburbs we will travel through have many trees, large houses with *stoeps* and gardens. We will pass factories, buses and people walking through the streets. We will travel past some of my favourite places like Claremont Gardens, where Aunty Cheryl took her niece Michelle and me. Aunty Cheryl dyed her hair blond, flashed her green eyes, gold bangles and spike heels and took us to Newlands Swimming Pool. We never know if we will be let into the places that are for "whites only". We had to be quiet while Aunty Cheryl said 'threee tickets pleese' and 'how many ront do I owe you?' My mother says 'rand' when she pays for something.

The glands in my neck stand out so that my face looks like a lollipop, the kind sold at the mardigras in summer. My whole face is hidden by candy stripes and the front ends of my hair become sticky when I eat it. Last night my mother brought raspberry jelly and vanilla ice-cream to where I lay, to sooth my sore throat. My favourite pudding, it just sat on the pedestal next to mom's ashtray and stared at me. I couldn't swallow. When it melted I cried and she took it away. She told me to '*trek in daai sloffie lip*'. All six of us sleep in one bedroom, girls in one corner, mom in the other, boys next to the window and my father in the centre. He tells us children to 'be quiet' and 'don't read that rubbish' when we swop Archie and Veronica comics with our friends. He clipped me across the cheek when I said, 'I want to.' He used to backhand me or my sister in the dark lobby, with the paisley carpet, between the kitchen and

the bedroom, where my brother and I played marbles on rainy days. We got the carpet from old Mrs Norris when she bought a new one for Christmas. As I got older, I learnt to look through the side of my eyes in case his backhand moved. I became more careful how I answered him and made tea with two teabags before he asked for it, even though mom would scream when she got home from work, *‘Wie het al die tee sakkies opgebruik?’* When they argued mom screamed, *‘Jy vat net aan my dan gooi ek vir jou met die pot kook water.’* I would watch her then in case she came near to my father with the boiling water. He summoned me to where he sat on the corner of his bed, listening to the radio, when my mother was out at work or avoiding him, over cigarettes and a cup of tea with her friend Rita downstairs.

‘Fetch me one of your mother’s cigarettes *toe?*’ My father would ask, when he was sure Mom went out the back door.

Mom and Rita sat in her kitchen where my mother kept an eye on our back door, craning her neck each time she heard the hook clang against the door frame.

Today is the second time that I go anywhere alone with my father. The first was when I was five and he took me to start school. I was too young but he got me in when the term had already started. Before I started school, I hung onto my father when he put the only latch key we had into the front door. I stepped onto his shining shoes as he hung up his fedora hat and jacket. He would call me *‘hoopla, poopla’* as he strained to lift me up. When he worked at Attwells Bakery, I got a square pink and white birthday cake made especially for me. I ate and ate the marzipan icing till there was none left. I didn’t like the fruit cake underneath.

When the train pulls into the station, we move towards the end of the nine carriages and wait for it to stop. We climb into the carriage marked “nie-blankes”. The rest of the carriages are reserved with “whites only” written on blue boards above the first and last windows of the carriage. The conductor watches us take our seats then leans against the pole between the doors after they swish shut and the train grinds along the tracks. My father holds our tickets in his hand for it to be clipped. The train slithers past backyard fences that fold into hedges of cannalilies and patches of nasturtiums. There are no school uniforms or book cases to be seen in the carriage. A lady tucks her shopping trolley on wheels into the space between the seats and pulls out her knitting. At the first stop a man saunters towards the opening doors then sidles past when he spots the conductor, peering under the brim of his hat, about to disembark. The conductor calls, *‘alle stasies Kaapstad’* and the train drags again towards Cape Town station. There is a cloying smell of metal and stone as the train winds its way down the tracks. It is unlike the damp smell of stone in the school playground where earthworms jiggle or the

saltiness of Simonstown Beach where we search for treasures when mom, Mrs Norris and Aunty Pearl take us children, during the school holiday.

The train stops at each station. I watch my father each time it stops but he does not move so I sit back again. The conductor steps onto the platform shouting ‘all stations Cape Town’ then he blows his whistle and the doors slide towards each other before the driver propels the train further. I sit by the window and read all the words I can see from my seat. The letters stand upright unlike my letters. I cried when Mr Adams asked me to rewrite my sentences last week because I had missed school and my letters slanted to the left. I stood in front of the class at the chalk board and the tears dripped out of nowhere. He put his arm across my shoulders.

‘There is no need to cry. Go back to your seat and practice some more.’

I sat in a long bench next to Delicia, she wrote with thin upstrokes and thick down strokes working her pencil into a fine point. I didn’t tell my father about that day.

The outside of the train is a dusty maroon brown, like my school dress. The seats inside are navy blue leather. There are empty overhead racks. My father is silent, smoking as we travel. His slick black hair falls over his forehead, where the wind from the open window catches it. I have hair like my father but the colour is lighter. He trims my and my sister’s long plaits when they grow uneven at the ends. He tells me to stand still and face the window. He takes comb and scissors and snips the ends across my back. I watch the factory where my mother works and the mulberry trees at the Dodgen’s house next door, where we steal berries, careful to avoid the caterpillars on the broad leaves. We will get a hiding if we come home covered in purple stains.

We reach our station after the train stops and starts several times. I scramble to get through the doors before the train moves again. It is a short train ride and a long walk towards the Blackriver Parkway to get to the hospital entrance for “non-whites”. My father walks fast in his polished black leather shoes with the folded cardboard shoved inside where the soles have worn through. He is light on his feet and I struggle to keep up, the sides of my legs burn as I follow. The entrance is like Castletown Post Office across Ottery Road, near where we live. I go buy postal orders for my father or fetch parcels from England for Mr Norris who lives on the ground floor. There are thirty two flats in our block, three levels of ten each and a fourth level of two. Every second flat has a family with children. Others are school teachers like Mr Manuel, with the bald head and booming voice, who allows the kids to come inside and then the girls wash his dishes. Mr Voigt with spectacles, plays the piano. We are not allowed inside his flat and Miss Anders doesn’t reply when we shout, ‘Good morning Miss Anders!’ Miss

Briesie's eyes disappear when she smiles and she brings us biltong and copper bangles from Okiep in the Northern Cape. I wonder where Okiep is.

The hospital is a big, building like our flat. When we race down the banisters or the stairs from the fourth floor of our flat, I can see the train over the top of the poplar trees. In the courtyard from where we can see Devil's Peak behind Kirstenbosch Gardens, we play on-on by hopping onto the drain tops. A crowd of people come out of the subway every evening just before my mother gets home from work then I knew it was time to go home. I wash hands before peeling potatoes for my mother who switches on the stove when she walks in then takes off her work clothes and puts on her house clothes.

The post office is a small house with two stair cases. Inside it is divided by a wooden partition like the one in our school hall. We may not enter the door that is for "whites only". We may only enter where it says "non-whites". I can see through a section of the partition and there are usually no customers on the "whites only" side. I wonder why we have to queue so long and wait to be served, when there is no one on the other side. There are no white people living in our streets. We live below the railway line. Everyone knows that there are no white people living there, except my friend's daddy who cannot marry her mother. They always whisper and stay indoors when Mr Beverley comes to inspect the flats. My mother waits for Mr Beverley so that she can show him that the toilet doesn't flush or the hole in the ceiling and where it leaks but says nothing when she knows my father is late paying the rent.

The neighbourhood children call me "whitey" when they see me. This makes me angry because my mother's "white" sisters walked past her in the street. Why would anyone want to be "white" if you have to ignore your own sister? Each time we go to Simonstown, I sit in the sun until I look like a tomato. My body is sore for days until my skin itches and peels. My sister says my nails are dirty and my legs look *skrif*. After winter I look exactly the same again.

Next to the post office in Bexhill Road, is our library, Castletown library. We are not allowed to use the library over the railway line at Maynardville, where we sneak into the "whites only" park and get lost playing in the open spaces. We can see our library from the top floor of our block of flats. The windows above the shops are the section where the books are kept for older children. I love reading Beatrix Potter, Dr Seuss and story time. We sit in a semi-circle on the mat, in the children's section. The librarian sits on a low chair in the front and all the children look up at her as she tilts the book for us to see the pictures. Story time is only once a week after school. We are shushed all the while we are in the library. Our hands are inspected before we may handle the books. We have to show the librarian how to turn the pages, before she stamps the books and we can borrow them for two weeks.

I like going to the shops below the library, especially Silverspoon. They sell *lekker* things. I seldom have money to buy ice-creams or samosas or *jellabee*. I don't really like *jellabee* but its orange shiny crispiness looks juicy and I eat it. We cannot waste food. If it is on your plate, you eat it. After Friday night and we children have been given our pocket money, I dash off on a Saturday morning, to buy all the treats I can. My brother a year older buys a small Nestle milky bar and saves his money to go to bioscope at the Luxurama. I am not allowed to go with the older children.

Inside the Red Cross Children's Hospital, there are lots of corridors. I stay close to my father. We wait on big wooden benches until we are told to follow the blue line at the top of the wall to get to the ENT specialist. Eventually it is our turn to go in to see the doctor. I have to climb up onto a high bed covered with white sheets so crisp I run my hand over it. The bed that I share with my sister has a hole in the middle. I sag towards her each night then she shoves me back onto my side. It has a faded broken green blanket covering the mattress that we sleep on. I try to read the charts on the wall but cannot see all the letters.

'We have a referral letter here, Doctor.'

My father hands the letter to the Doctor who does not look up when he is spoken to. Only my father goes to our house doctor, to get his psoriasis checked. He scratches his body and scalp until we wish he would go to the doctor. He goes to Groote Schuur hospital to collect his ointments that smell like melted plastic. Sometimes he rubs some of it onto the white spots on my face. My mother goes to a union doctor because she has worked in the clothing factory from the age of thirteen.

Dr Seegers and his wife, Janet, live in the same block of flats as us. We play in their lounge or on the balcony. Dr Seegers never refuses us even when we can't pay him. Sometimes there are scuffles between us children and then the mothers fall out with each other over washing line space. My mother mumbles to herself, 'Janet is home all day, why must she do her washing on a Saturday when I must hang up?'

At the hospital, the doctor sits at his desk in the corner of the room and writes. The desk has files and little boxes with pens and things in it. The bed has white curtains bunched on the side of it. He folds open the letter and reads while my father explains why we are there. He looks over the rim of his glasses, past my father and instructs the nurse to bring a urine sample. The nurse wears a long white dress that has scissors and a pen in the top pocket. She tells me to follow her. I watch her feet as we walk. She gives me a little beaker and motions me into the cubicle where I pee into the toilet. The nurse holds out her hand when I come out. I give her the empty beaker. She frowns at me and walks away. I do not understand this and feel bad. She

gives me a plastic tub of water to drink. I try a second time but nothing happens. It is no use. I go back into the doctor. His wrinkled face peers into my eyes and ears with a light. Then he tells me to open my mouth wide and places a stick that looks like an ice-cream scoop on top of my tongue. I gag and he turns away from me to sit at his desk where he writes on the folder. My father stares at me without saying a word. I wonder what I did wrong. The doctor gives me some medication, tells my father the tonsils will have to be removed if it persists and sends us away.

We walk a while again through the veld with long grass to get back to the train station. When we reach Mowbray Station, we look to the right for the train to arrive. My father checks the timetable printed in fine letters, on the board above the benches. We wait for the train to pull into the station. I count the red fire buckets hanging along the wall. We see the train as it snakes into the station, crossing over tracks to fold itself against the platform. I look out of the window as the train *catookcatook's* from Mowbray to Rosebank, Rondebosch, Newlands, Claremont, Harfield, Kenilworth until finally we reach Wynberg Station again and my front hair is all knotted from the wind.

We walk across the sunny platform then through the subway where water lies in the gutters and it is hard to see the steps. I hold my breath as we go down into the tunnel and race up the stairs to Bexhill Road. The hawkers shout 'ran-a-bag' as they swing, knot and stack the plastic bags filled with washed potatoes and guavas onto upturned cardboard boxes. My father doesn't stop like my mother does to turn the bags over and over before buying naartjies and apples for school. I wait in the lane for him when he stops to buy ten Gold Dollar cigarettes. On a Friday, when he gets paid, he sends me to buy twenty Peter Stuyversant. I follow him down the lane when he turns from the counter.

We go into the fish and chip shop opposite the taxi rank where all the Valiant cars kick up loose gravel when they turn onto the square to park. The drivers sit around in their white coats jangling coins in pockets, waiting for passengers. Inside the shop there are little blue fish with yellow fins painted onto the wall tiles. I walk along the wall and hear my father order some fish. I peep through the glass of the counter to watch the Portuguese man flip the fish into a basin of batter then into the hot oil. There are big stainless steel bins behind the counter filled with steam and bubbling oil. I can see our block of flats when we come out of the fish shop. We walk home with a parcel of fried *snoek* wrapped in newspaper, past the jeweller, the shoemaker and the skollies sitting on the pavement next to the street sign. There is no one outside playing ball or hanging washing on the line with the pulley. We walk up the front stairs that seem to take longer than the back stairs. Inside my father hangs up his jacket and puts on

his slippers. He tells me to wash my hands and butter some white bread as he switches on the kettle. I make him a cup of strong black tea. He rolls up his pink shirt sleeves, pushes his chair back from the table and stretches his legs. I sit on my side of the table, next to the small fridge that has a brick covered in a *lappie* to hold it closed. We pray then eat in silence. I don't tell him that I can't swallow. I eat the food in my plate. He smokes a cigarette and rubs his scalp from left to right while he reads the race horse section of the newspaper. My father sets his alarm clock then goes to sleep before his night shift at the bakery. I wash the dishes in cold water to save the hot water for his bath. I take my medicine and lie down on my sister's side of the bed. I pick up my Janet and John reader and read softly to myself. I hear the turtle doves calling to each other and my father's snores. I lay the book next to me on the bed and watch the hands of the clock move. I feel like my body is floating and I cannot grab hold.



Waiting

Nombulelo sits up on her mattress as she sees the candle burn itself out, finished. She must get dressed. Her bones are sore. She cringes, rubs her rough hands along her shins and moves her limbs so as to lift herself off the floor. Her green and yellow *doek* is tied over one ear and behind another. She tries to straighten it but her eyes fail to reach the mirror ahead of her. Her shoulders are slumped and she wrinkles her nose as she rises, out of breath by the time she stands upright. It is Friday. Mr Pieterse and Ma will come today. Yes, they will come. She feels certain, nodding her head spontaneously. It has been two months since they brought her Ellis Brown, 2 kg of Tastic Rice and some Joko tea. Ma knows what she likes. Nombulelo feels she doesn't have a lot of time. Her body is aching. Her head is sore. The pain seems to be growing with every passing day. She reaches one hand to her back and one to her head, leaning her shoulder against the cupboard. Her body is soaked in perspiration.

She could not eat. She went many times to see Dr Khota in New Crossroads. She had to pay each time. Sometimes her brother helped her with the money.

'Mama, it is bronchitis. Just take this medicine for the cough.'

The doctor said the same thing each time. She walked for a long time like that, taking the medicine but it didn't get better. She just felt the pain in her chops. The medicine didn't help. Mr Pieterse gave her *Borstel* to drink. *Aarg* that stuff is bitter. She shakes her head as her face scrunches up with the memory. She went back to the doctor again and again, each time tying her skirt tighter around her waist. She clicks her tongue against the back of the roof of her mouth. She didn't have money to go every time and when she did, the doctor just sent her away again, with the same advice.

'Don't do the washing and the ironing on the same day, Mama.'

For fifteen years she took the train from Ntubeni Road, to Cape Town to Wynberg and then the taxi to Grassy Park. This year she was sweating and tired by the time she got to work. She couldn't eat. She just had black tea and later, maybe some bread. The train was always crowded and she stood the whole journey. In the early years, Nolukholo, Phuti and her, they travelled together to Grassy Park, where the "coloureds" lived. They would meet at Cape Town Station in the morning and then walk down together from the bus stop, across Klip Road and through the *veld*. When they saw the police vans, they knew to split up quickly and run through the back lane between the houses. But that was before '94, before Mandela. '*Jere*' how they used to run fearing the police would be searching for the *dompas*.

She will borrow chairs from Noni today so they don't have to sit on the crates. Noni her neighbour made the porridge. Nombulelo knows she must try to get some down today. She is so tired. Siphonathi brought her some black tea before he left for school. *Haai*, he left his bedding still in the kitchen she sees as she peers through the open door way from where she stands in the tiny dark shack. I must roll it up before Mr Pieterse comes. Fifteen years I worked for him, what will he think if he finds my house so untidy? I don't have much time. She hears Buti's voice the time she told him that the first born, aged two, took the matches. She was polishing the window catches with brasso; the madam liked them to shine. *Hoo* the flames jumped quickly. The bottom of the bed was burnt. Madam came from the bath just in time.

There was a big argument when Mr Pieterse came home.

'Because you are always sitting with your head in a book!' he shouted that time.

Nombulelo went to iron the shirts and sheets in the back room until the shouting stopped. That one was a naughty one. Now he is in high school, brown belt karate. She washed his *gi* each week to keep it nice and white. Sometimes he would forget where he left the belt.

'Eunice?'

He would shout from the bed.

'Where's my belt?'

She smiles and shakes her head. Her brother gave her a tongue lashing that time.

'How can you leave matches around? Where are your eyes my sister?'

Now she struggles. Come on, Nombulelo, lift your bones, this day will not wait for you. She moves slowly around the bedroom.

After the trouble with the police, Madam left. That was the time when the high school children ran across the *veld* into Capricorn Road. Mr Pieterse was planting marigolds that day. He ran into the street when he heard the shouting. He showed with his hands for them to run to him and to keep quiet. The boys and girls still in their navy blue and grey uniforms hid in the back room. Nombulelo's heart beat quickens as she recalls how the police stormed through the gate. The *boere* demanded to see her pass. It was 1985.

'Yes master.'

Even Mr Pieterse said 'yes master' and smiled at them. They rushed off towards the high school in the next road, looking for the children. When they left, she saw the children had hidden some UDF pamphlets in the bread tin, for the rally about the police holding some of their leaders under 'Section 29'. Mr Pieterse told them to be careful, to stay off the streets.

The new girlfriend was young, very young. When the girlfriend came to visit in the afternoon, Nombulelo used to stand behind the kitchen door watching them down the passage, before going back to her ironing.

‘Eunice?’

Mr Pieterse would call her. Doesn’t she work, Nombulelo wondered?

‘Make some tea, nice tea hey Eunice.’

As if she didn’t know how to make a cup of tea. She took it inside on the tray.

‘Where’s the saucers Eunice?’

How was she to know that when visitors come you put saucers when he drank his tea straight from the cup the whole year that Madam was gone!

She reaches for her dress and jersey. It takes all her effort to stand upright. Her head spins. By the time she is dressed, she has to lie down again. The pain does not stop. She wakes with a start to the sound of dogs barking. She is in the zone where she lives. They will come today she is certain. I must get up. Two thousand rand they gave her last year.

‘Finish your house in Eastern Cape Eunice.’

Mr Pieterse was on early retirement.

‘We can’t afford to keep you on any more Eunice.’

She was so tired from that journey every day. Their last born was three. She loved to be carried on the back that one. Nombulelo did the washing and the ironing like that with the little one on her back.

What were her children doing during that time? She is too tired to think now. Her brother Buti was a father to them when her husband died. She didn’t have much time to care for them. Only December when the family gathered in Eastern Cape, everyone came home for Christmas. Then they would slaughter a goat and have lots of meat. It would be cooked over the fire in the big black pots. The smell of Tembi’s baked bread would bring the neighbours knocking. They would celebrate her birthday and the birth of Tembi her first born as well as Simphiwe, who is no more. They were all on the same day. They celebrated with praise songs, danced and drank *umqomboti*. There was *amasi* and *rhabe* and plenty of *umngqusho*. Her mouth and eyes water and she feels bilious. The bucket is nearby. It has been like this since she stopped working six months ago.

They will come today. It has been too long. She is tired. Her bones are sore. Her legs feel weak as she shuffles about the tiny kitchen. She rolls up Siphó's bedding, *haai* that boy. He is a good boy.

'Bye Gogo.'

He called to her as he pulled the door closed this morning. He loves numbers and painting and will reach grade four soon. His mother left him with her. Tembi thinks the schools in the Eastern Cape are not as good.

'Ma you can watch him that side.'

She knew that he would be a help to her mother too since Simphiwe's sudden passing. Nombulelo was so pleased when Simphiwe found a job with Bosmans. The long drives out of town taking things up the N2 were good for him. It kept him away from those bad boys standing on the corner at Stock Road. The truck accident was just God's will. How could they know he would be taken so soon? The tire burst and the driver lost control. Simphiwe was standing at the back. It was a bad time for them. *Nkosi* you knew best, she prays silently.

It is night. Siphó plays marbles in the sand outside the door with Kwezi. Nombulelo sits on her mattress in the kitchen surrounded by the Methodist Women's group. The sun has gone down. She is tired her body numb with pain. Her heart is heavy. She is shrouded in the praise and worship of the women. She shivers and pulls the blue check blanket tighter around her shoulders, it is so cold. There is a cup of hot black tea in her hands. She slips back onto the pillows propped between her and the cardboard lining of the shack wall. Maybe they will come tomorrow. They will come, she sighs. As the day has crept by, Nombulelo has sunk deeper into her pillows convening with the lingering pain. She is soothed by the praises and the voices rise higher. She just needs to close her eyes for a few minutes. *Nkosi* you are my shepherd – why did they not come? She joins the women in prayer *Uthixo guThixo Wam*. Overcome with pain, she slips into unconsciousness.

The Ladder

The ladder folds out with spider movements into three steps. It reaches up as high as I need it. I need it to. I don't have a languid man about the house to paint musty ceilings or replace errant light bulbs. The ladder gives me legs. We never had one when I was growing up. We borrowed from Mr Victor next door. We lived in a one roomed flat, all six of us on the "coloured" side of the railway line. I extend the ladder now in my sun room and sit on it sometimes to day dream about shades of green to paint. My cat likes to perch on it. He watches me lean into my dinner while I ignore him, absorbed in my notebook. The ladder is aluminium with black rubberised steps that reflect in the shadows of the house. I bought it at the moving-on sale last year. The old lady up on Fish Hoek's mountain packed up her home. I felt sad for her. It reminded me of the time I packed up my mother's possessions, after she had passed on.

The silver haired lady sat ensconced in one of the arm chairs with a price tag on it, taking in the foraging of eager buyers around her. There were old and young couples, even families who came to the sale, all looking for a bargain or antiques or things to set up their homes with. When I saw her, I saw my mother as she sat reading many evenings, in the single comfortable armchair next to her bed, given to her by Bibi, her neighbour, when Bibi's father passed on. I forgot my own sorrows after meeting the old lady. She had a few tales to tell.

Immigrants, collectors of rare items and middle aged people like me frequent these sales where homes and belongings are price tagged devoid of memory or history. I imagine countless dinners were eaten at table with long forgotten wines stored on oak racks. I walk around the house when I go and try to imagine what went on there, who sat around the dinner table? When it is clear that only one part of the couple remains, I wonder how the old man (or woman) copes living on their own after many years. You could tell that the home held a long story within its limbs. It was usually a sale of someone's items that told period stories. Most of the stuff was old, sometimes battered or antique. The crockery was stoneware or china that isn't easily found in the shops anymore. The cutlery was still silver or solid when I held up pieces to feel how I would use it to cut or serve in my kitchen. On the day I met the old lady, everyone milled around oblivious of her presence. She sat in a low box like arm chair dwarfed by the cushions and the Falsebay painted in the bay window behind her. I have a photograph of my mother resembling the lady's pose that day. Though my mother's was taken indoors in shadow, the sadness in her eyes is unmistakable, her round back more sunken. I only understood the depth of her loss over my brother's sudden death a year before her passing, when I looked at that picture again.

The old lady had tiny silver hairclips clinging to wisps of hair, and her back was round with age. My mother's back was too, from years of running seams through the industrial sewing-machine making button holes and over locking seams for garments to be displayed in Woolworths and Truworths at prices she could never afford. I've never made friends with a "white" old lady before but this time, I saw a woman, like my mother.

She sat on the patio, a cosy sunny spot from where the whales in season would be billowing in her midst. The yachts would drift there with the gusts of the South Easter wind and race across to Gordon's Bay. A wrinkled hand covered in liver spots clutched a black leather handbag in her sunken lap. I wondered what work the gnarled fingers bent out of shape, had done. My mother's hands were like sand paper to the touch and her thumb print on her right hand was completely wiped off. 'They can't find my thumb print' she would say after trying to renew her state pension each year. The old lady's sea blue eyes shone with tears as I greeted her.

'You shouldn't experience this.'

The packing up bustle around her was making me feel teary. Everyone traipsed through the house like ants marching along the garden path. I too foraged amongst the Norwegian cutlery and crystal glasses lined up on the ledge of the bay window.

'Forty one years.'

Her words whispered over my ears.

I sat down on the window seat in silent empathy. My mother had lived forty one years in her top floor flat, continuing to rent even after we children had moved on, even after a hip replacement where she had to learn to climb the flights of stairs again like a toddler. I sat a while in an adjoining chair, watching the chaos of buyers move in all directions of the terraced property.

'Where will you go next?'

As I got older, I was fast picking up my mother's habit of striking up conversation with strangers.

'I'm going to St James, can't manage the stairs now anymore.'

She pointed towards her knees.

'You must have great memories of living here?'

'Yes ... and some sad ones.'

She stared out to sea. The zealous buyers continued to swoop close and buzz around us.

'What are you buying?'

She eyed the stainless steel dish I held in my hand.

‘I used to make sago pudding in that dish.’

‘Mine always flops. Will you share your recipe with me?’

A throng of people stood outside clutching a little disk hoping to be called to catch the deal that was advertised on the internet when the sale was announced. More and more fervent shoppers trooped into the house when the organisers eventually called out a number that gave them entry. A bulky bearded man with fat, hairy calves showing beneath his beach shorts peered towards the arm chair straining to see if the price tag was still intact. I had abandoned my shopping now and sat, still holding onto the price tag for the ladder. I had secured it and would pay on the way out. The old lady stood up stiffly and walked with tiny footsteps out to the garden to sit on the cement bench, in the shadow of the honeysuckle shrubbery.

I browsed through the rest of the house and an earthy smell filled my nostrils. The white walls were discoloured and a Persian carpet still covered the oak floors. Outlines were etched along the wall, where paintings once hung. The many voices and footsteps echoed with each movement through contiguous corners of the house, ricocheting with my memory of mom’s threadbare flat after her death. I shared everything with her caring neighbours, save for the meat platter, trifle bowls, silver spoon and laundry basket. I held onto these aged items just so I can speak her name when I bring them into use. When I use that platter, I see my mother in her tiny kitchen as she directed ‘*kom sny die bout*’. My job was to carve the leg of lamb at Christmas. I packed up mom’s clothes for charity and every time I fold laundry, I sort underwear into little rectangles like I found hers that day.

My mother’s bedroom window looked out onto the factories and into the overgrown courtyard of the block of flats next door. Where I stood that day, there were numerous rooms overlooking the sea or the mountain or the *fynbos* garden below. In the back garden the fragrance of oleander wafted to greet us and mingled with the salt that lifted off the ocean. The starlings chirped and *kwiketed* in the tiny rock pools in the garden. I dawdled longer than intended. The bargains were gone but I found something I didn’t expect that day. Eventually I spotted the owner as the clatter quieted down.

‘Thank you. I wish you all the best. Can I come and look you up for that recipe?’

I hoped to see her again on my Saturday morning jaunt to Kalkbay where browsers linger in and out of shops and galleries or stop for leisurely breakfast at Sartori’s. We exchanged names.

‘I’m Judy Dench.’

She chuckled when she saw my look of surprise.

‘Harold and I used to go to Sun Valley every Saturday evening, until they shut down the cinema. Harold loved the James Bond movies.’

I was pleased to see her smile. My mother studied the weekly newspaper supplement to see if any good movies were scheduled on TV 2 or 3. She would tell of all the love stories she watched even though she fell asleep, waking in tune to her snores and just in time to catch the ending.

Ronald the organiser of the moving-on sale and his colleagues bellowed across the shoppers heads.

‘Has this been paid for already?’

Only then would he allow shoppers, who stomped through the garden, out the gate heaving lounge furniture, garden tools and kitchenware. Even the broom and breadbox were moved onto the crowded road below, where neighbours swivelled their necks as they drove into the cul-de-sac. In the calamity, Judy disappeared. I ascended to the front gate, ladder tucked under my left arm, car keys dangling from my right. I stood for a moment transfixed by the view. Like the tide, the crowd subsided and most of the items were sold. I put my ladder down so that I could breathe gulps of sea air and feel the final rays of the day on my face. I trundled the folded ladder into my car and set off towards the moon rising on the Falsebay horizon. Once home, Ginger sniffed around the crevices of the ladder where it limbered in the sun room.

Three months after buying the ladder, I drove out to St James for a paddle in the salty tidal pool. I was planning a dinner for my children who would visit, Shaun who doesn't eat fish and Nina who prefers roasted Moroccan lamb. Before heading home, I watched the women at the Kalk Bay Harbour standing side by side at the outdoor scrub areas on the quay, as they expertly scaled, gutted and scored the Cape salmon, their gold ringed fingers flying expertly across the fish. Growing up, we bought fish at the fish shop and beware if my mother quibbled over the quality. My children laugh at the memory of Ma, when I share those stories. She admonished everyone who stepped out of line.

Walking back to my car with the filleted fish, I see Judy strolling along the foot path above the tidal pool. She remembered me and the sago pudding dish. I had to rush off and on impulse arranged to meet her for tea the following Saturday at The Gallery, a meander from her new home.

In the next days, the encounters with Judy made me reflect on my mom's life even more. Mom visited her “white” family in the shadows so the neighbours couldn't see her darker skin. Judy reminded me so much of my mother who would randomly talk to anyone at the bus stop or in the Pick n Pay queue, much to my embarrassment as a child. Their lives were so different yet I looked forward to meeting Judy again. It prompted me to sit with pen and paper and draw up

my list, of things-to-do-without-prejudice-as-a-South-African, before I die. Ginger watched *miaowing* occasionally from the top of the folded ladder. I mulled. My pen filled the page with notes that looked like barren vines.

I walked along Muizenberg's Surfers Corner to meet Judy. The rolling tide had strewn the pathway with shells, sand and plastic bottles. Fishermen sat below the railway tracks casting their lines across the footpath, the wind whipping them from the south. I had just read in *The Argus* about conservationists who argued that chumming draws out the sharks. I didn't know what to make of this since the sea is the natural domain of sea mammals, including wild life. The warning flag was displayed along the beach, where sharks are often spotted in the curve of the bay. St James was crowded with families, aunties covered from head to toe, children running in their bathing costumes and groups of young adults smothered in sun block, picnicking for the day. I laid out my towel on a vacant patch between numerous deck chairs, beach rugby, gazebos and trudged across the loose sand to the tidal pool. The water shimmered silvery streaks in the heat of the day. When I returned from my dip, I saw Judy battling to fold up her beach chair.

'I'm so tired now. The sun has been too much.'

We resolved to have tea in her flat in the retirement home instead.

The traffic stream buzzed over our conversation as we walked to her home. Judy does not swim anymore. The sounds drowned out some of what she said. By the time we got to Judy's sunny apartment she was short of breath. Again I thought of my mother who smoked for sixty years and battled her failing lungs in the end. I made the tea.

'I miss Harold so much.'

He had suffered a stroke four years before. Judy directed me around her kitchenette smiling from the depths of her armchair, where she sat propped up with orange and yellow print cushions. We drank a blend of Earl Grey and Joko out of yellow and gold cups.

She talked of Harold and the work he did in the Navy, occasionally dabbing at the corners of her eyes. I tried to think of pleasant things to share and described the surfers out at Muizenberg and the perfect ways the long boarders and kite surfers mastered the sea. We talked about my children and she confirmed that she never had any.

'My work at Mowbray library kept me busy and later I volunteered at Masiphumelele teaching study skills to matriculants.'

I knew the community Judy referred to, an impoverished informal settlement. I admired her volunteering and told her about my mother who went to work in a clothing factory at thirteen,

and had a hip replacement after she retired. She battled the stairs for more than a decade after that. Mom was *Ma* to everyone in the block of flats.

Judy and I talked about books and the captivating poetry of Graham Mort, quickly forgetting the time. I decided to invite Judy to a book launch.

‘Will you join me at the book launch of Mbu Maloni in Kalkbay next Wednesday evening?’

Maloni was of that same impoverished community. Judy was keen and it was arranged.

The audience were enthralled by Mbu, a slender eighteen-year old and the simple telling of his story. The neglect and rejection by his parents were overshadowed by the humility in his speech. Judy and I sat amongst the other white haired patrons of the bookshop and a few invigorated students from the nearby Masiphumelele community. As Mbu read extracts, we swallowed the lumps in our throats and clutched firmly onto copies of the slender volume that he later autographed. Judy and I arranged to meet again the following Saturday, this time at The Gallery where Lolly was exhibiting her landscapes of Devil’s Peak and other scenes of Cape Town. I drove home not quite believing the connection that I felt towards Judy.

We sipped our brewed tea at The Gallery’s restaurant. Judy was curious about me and how I spend my time, my interests.

‘My late husband drank excessively until he died of a heart attack at fifty.’

I didn’t see the point of telling her a long story. Instead, I shared with her my list of things-to-do-without-prejudice-as-a-South-African before I die, in memory of my mother’s life. And now that I had met her, I will add volunteering. Swimming in the Falsebay along with eating fresh fish on the beaches of Senegal are already on my list.

‘Harold travelled frequently and always brought back wines and ports from the countries he visited with his crew. When he visited West Africa, he brought me a beautiful arrangement of beads. I will show you one day.’

‘It must have been lonely with him away from home?’

My own home was always filled with noisy children and their friends, and now I battle with the quiet corridors of empty nest.

‘I spent many hours on the beach. That is where I met Joy. Sheila, there are always blessings where one looks for them.’

Looking into the kind eyes of my new friend, I had to agree.

The sun was beginning to go down and the shadows of Kalk Bay Mountain tucked in around us. Judy talked on animatedly about Joy and how close they became over the years. She had never married and lived in Recreation Street retirement home. Joy drove when Harold travelled away from home and Judy was no longer able to.

‘Joy swam every day and sometimes I would too.’

‘That is my fear, Judy. I’m scared to swim in the open sea even though my mother brought us to Kalk Bay tunnels, on the train in summer, to swim in the harbour.’

The Apartheid signs flashed through my mind – “whites only”. They were posted up on Muizenberg Beach in the 1970’s and 80’s. We had to ride past the pristine beaches to swim in the oily harbour shallows. I remembered my commitment to overcoming my prejudices and shoved those thoughts out of my mind. The evening air grew cooler and the sky turned orange as the sun slid behind the Mountain.

‘I will look out for you at St James next Saturday Judy.’

‘Yes, I’m looking forward to sitting in the middle of the beach, to watch the little ones splash and shriek. I feel safer at the tidal pool, especially after ... it’s almost ten years now.’

At her silence, I realise it was time to leave. My mother always said, ‘don’t overstay your welcome’.

Our meetings at Judy’s new home became routine as the days grew colder. I took her some Turkish Delight Chocolates and we drank tea while she shared recipes gesturing with gusto and passing on tips. I gave her my mother’s milk tart recipe, passed on to her by her neighbour Mrs Chitter who lived to the age of ninety one but had never learnt to read or write. It’s what Judy makes for us on the next visit.

‘Mm, this is just like my mother used to make.’

Judy nods and fusses, pouring some more tea.

‘Who is in the pictures Judy?’

I hadn’t noticed them before. I am reminded of my mother’s photo albums I discarded along with all her invitations, Christmas and birthday cards she treasured. I had no space to store them after her parting and, I had no idea of who was who in some of those black and white photographs.

Judy pointed out the various members of her family and friends, some of whom had passed on.

‘Joy looks very familiar.’

I tried to recall where I may have met her before, perhaps just a familiar face from my years of commuting by train from Wynberg to Cape Town and later Observatory, where I worked as a book keeper.

‘She would be. Her picture was in all the news ten years ago. I remember it like it was yesterday.’

I drifted over to the photographs as she spoke. There was so much crime reported that the only thing that jarred me anymore, was like the news that morning of a security guard and a nurse delivering a baby in a hospital. What was happening in our well-resourced state?

‘That fateful day, I couldn’t join Joy for our regular swim. Harold had to give a speech at a ceremony for the new Cadets in Simons Town. Harold always had a good sense of humour and so he was often asked to do things like that in his retirement. We were heading home, just after the celebratory lunch when there was a detour. The road was unexpectedly closed and we had to drive all the way around Red Hill to get back to Kommetjie Road.’

Judy spoke in her soft raspy voice, the vitality I had come to know suddenly absent.

‘We tuned into the SAfm afternoon news when we got home. There had been a fatal shark attack just 20m from the footpath between the railway line and Fish Hoek Beach. The lookout, who sat with binoculars directly above the beach, couldn’t stop the catastrophe despite the sea being clear that day. A great white shark was spotted. It was about 6m long they said.’ My windpipe closed and I swallowed vigorously, growing hot and cold simultaneously.

‘Joy was out to swim at the time, her daily swim.’
At last my worst fears were realised.

‘It was Joy?’

My voice sounded hoarse the way it gets when I talk too much.

‘That’s why I don’t venture into the water anymore, Sheila.’

Judy’s words flattened my ears and made my whole body break out in a sweat. What anguish? Suddenly my own gripes about the past were displaced by the tragedy Judy had experienced.

I felt blessed as I drove home to pamper my cat and pull the paint tins out of storage, to redecorate the lounge that I had long been meaning to do, all possible now with my skinny extendable ladder. I had to move around, do something with my hands, to shake away the feeling of helplessness. But first, I had to revise my list of things-to-do-without-prejudice as a South African, before I die.

Delft

Nothemba stares at the cell phone on the upturned cold drink crate, covered with a red and white check cloth, next to her bed. It is time to get up, 5.00am. The minute hand moves closer and will signal the alarm any minute now. Nothemba has been awake since 4.00am, listening in the dark room that houses her single bed and a dilapidated chest of drawers. The chest, was a hand-me-down from an old lady in Wynberg that Nothemba never met before she died. The daughter, where Nothemba charred on Saturdays gave it to her. Nothemba paid Cyril two hundred rand that time, to fetch the bed, cupboard and broken chest of drawers.

Patience's boyfriend came home drunk again. Weekends are always the worst. She has seen Patience many times with bruises on her arms and around her eyes. I had a fall, she would say, when Nothemba's eye fell on the scars as they chatted over the fence. Patience always denied he abused her. Nothemba shakes her head in the dim morning light. Her stomach is knotted as she lies sleepless, with the memory of Gideon's fist when it struck her in the face all those years ago. She knows how it goes, pretending to the friends that all is well and that you do not get a beating every now and then when your man comes home drunk, or when you ask where he has been. That back hand reaches your head before you even realise it is coming. Now she lives alone with Xolani. Her son at eighteen has just become a man. Nothemba took him to the bush last December. If it hadn't been for her brother Odwa, she didn't know how she would manage. His father didn't come nearby even when she sent messages to let him know they were beginning the proceedings. She waited for months and when Gideon didn't come to meet with her family, Odwa insisted they go on without him.

She circles her face with her hands and switches off the snooze button before the alarm sounds, time to get up. Nothemba sits at the end of the bed, where the mattress sags beneath her thighs, and sighs deeply. She pinches the pink scarf where it has crept up towards the crown of her head, tugging it back down over her hair. She slides onto her knees and prays, thank you Father for the night of rest. Please protect Patience. You have brought me through that darkness I pray that you can guide her too and Zukiswa Lord, in the Eastern Cape. You know my Father, she needs healing. Gracious God, Amen.

Nothemba quickly steps two or three strides from bed to bathroom to kitchen preparing for work. She heats the porridge cooked the night before and makes a pot of rooibos tea with a piece of fresh mint, Xolani's favourite. He sleeps with headphones on, something she hasn't seen before. Xolani too needed to drown out the night sounds from next door. His eyes are already open. She addresses him gently over her shoulder.

‘Come *Boeti*. Your porridge is ready. I’m leaving now. *Molo*.’

She squints into the broken piece of mirror kept in her handbag, pokes the wide tooth comb through her hair and shuts the door. It is 6am, she will be late. Nothemba walks briskly through the street already bustling with people. She feels the sun on her back as she moves towards Silversands Road, to catch the bus to Mowbray. She checks for her weekly clip card in the top pocket of her white denim jacket, greeting the familiar faces as she passes the identical row of houses on her left. Some have added a wire fence or a little vegetable garden others are just overgrown with loose sand, plastic bags and empty chip packets lying in front of it. They all moved into the RDP houses in 2004. There was such jubilation in the street then, Nothemba smiles. Squatting in Langa in her brother’s back yard was hard and the wait for a government house had been endless.

Buti Khumalo’s corner fruit and vegetable stall has a display cascading like spectators on the stadium at a Kaizer Chiefs and Ajax Cape Town soccer match. She will pick up a large butternut for eight rands on her way home, to add to the samp and beans she left soaking just now. It will make a tasty stew. Meaty bones cost twenty rands nowadays. Meat is just too expensive.

Perspiration trickles down her back as Nothemba reaches the bus stop. Her shoes are covered with dust. She takes out the rolled up wet newspaper she carries with her and dusts it off quickly. She straightens her floral skirt and white blouse while she waits her turn to board. Nothemba grows anxious her supervisor will notice that she is late when she goes into the office to clock in. She shuffles her feet nudging the person ahead of her in the queue. Her mind buzzes with images of Xolani’s father. He liked to lift his elbow on weekends and the fists spoke when he got home. *Aai*, forget those thoughts, pull yourself together my girl, her mother always used to say – don’t let the world know your troubles. The traffic is backed up and the bus moves slowly on the highway. Nothemba is glad to get a seat and prays quietly during the journey.

She walks briskly up Rhodes Avenue through the giant shadow of trees. Tembi is already at work and waves shouting *haai* to her across the street. Nothemba shrugs into her overall as she steps into the building. It is 7.10am, not too late. She races through the corridors emptying dirt bins, dusting over the piles of paper on the desks, vacuuming and polishing around the ten offices finishing just as the secretaries trickle in. Now she can get to the kitchen and the bathrooms. The Board Room also needs to be cleaned before the managers arrive and the milk fetched.

3.00pm. Nothemba is summoned to the Supervisor's office. She walks a kilometre down the road, in the hot sun. She enters a house, next door to the Irma Stern Museum, where the Super Cleaning Company has a cubicle office. The Supervisor sits spread-eagled in a tattered office chair. Mavis is okay but Nothemba is worried that she has done something wrong and waits quietly for her to speak. She notices how Mavis fills the seat with her broad hips as her feet dangle above the wheels of the chair. Her blonde weave ends at the nape of her neck accentuating the roll of fat there and her eyebrows are pencilled in with broad lines of black kohl. On the desk next to the work schedule is an open packet of Nik-Naks, maize chips. She sits talking animatedly on her cell phone flicking her wrist into the air.

Nothemba stands in the arch of the doorway waiting. Mavis ends the call and launches into the list of tasks. No time for small talk or pleasantries Nothemba *tsks* quietly beneath her breath.

'Nothemba, tomorrow you must also clean at Woodbine Road.'

Mavis does not look at Nothemba as she sucks her palette and points to the schedule pasted up on the wall.

'Adelaide is going for treatment and she will be off for two days.'

Nothemba looks at the polished floor, sighing inwardly. She walks away with shoulders slumped, barely noticing the ravines on the mountain or the cloudless sky. *Yoh, yoh, yoh*, my building, making tea for all the meetings, shopping for milk and now there will be another nine offices to clean. How big are my shoulders, *tsk*? She shakes her head as she picks up her pace, to get back in time to clean the board room after the last meeting. How will she manage? She hopes that Adelaide will get better soon after that mastectomy.

Nothemba takes the 4.30pm bus back to Delft, calculating another two hours before supper as the hunger pangs deepen. Xolani didn't eat the plate of sheep's stomach and vegetables she dished for him last night, said he wasn't hungry. How could he not be? She sees it sitting in the fridge where she left it, expecting him to eat it after school. Where does he get such deep pockets to buy *braai*ed chicken and *vetkoek* from the Main Road?

She drops her handbag onto the bed, puts on her overall again, peels the vegetables for supper and then does some washing by hand, to save electricity. She sprinkles the bucket of soapy water on the crate with tomatoes and green pepper plants creeping up along the burglar bars outside her kitchen window. She peers over the fence towards Patience's kitchen window but the house squats in darkness. The food is cooked and a silence enters the room. Nothemba

settles into the broken armchair with her bible. The women's group will meet on Wednesday at the church hall. She will lead the singing and the opening prayers.

9.00pm. Xolani is not yet home. Where can he be this time on a school night, without money in his pocket? His school bag is lined up next to his bed. He is usually sitting in front of the TV when she gets back from work. As her thoughts tumble over each other, the exhaustion of the day takes over. She wakes with a start, the bible still open on her lap. It is after 11.00pm. She prepares for bed slipping into the DA t-shirt that she sleeps in. The shoulders hang in the middle of her upper arm and the emblem of the political party covers her torso. She peers from the darkened room out into the dimly lit street where children are still playing and someone's music is blaring. When she is about to doze off she hears Xolani's key in the door.

'Molo Ma.'

He whispers and tiptoes to his room. The smell of wood smoke fills her nostrils. Nothemba doesn't respond to his greeting.

The following morning she finds the same plate of uneaten food and a package of meat in the fridge. *Hmmm*. Where could it have come from? Her morning routine overlaps her thoughts and she rushes to the bus stop. She cannot afford to be late today, there is too much to do. By the time Nothemba gets to Japura Street, there is a cluster of people gathered outside the Sitole's gate. She doesn't see anyone lying in the street or blood on the ground. The prattle of conversation suggests a burglary has taken place. Nothemba hastens towards the bus stop.

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On the way home Tembi has news of the street scuffle Nothemba saw that morning.

'Somebody broke into the Sitole's backyard, through the side gate. The dogs didn't even bark!'

'The thieves must be known to the street?'

Nothemba's response is automatic. She looks out of the window of the moving bus.

'The padlocks of the two chest freezers where they keep their stock was snapped. All the meat was gone, thousands of rands, phew!'

Tembi swipes her fingers across her whistling lips then leans forward in her seat and claps her hands together.

'Haaibo!'

Nothemba turns back to face the window for the rest of the journey. The knot in her stomach tightens and she doesn't hear the rest of Tembi's comments. Nothemba's chest is tight and she is bristling by the time she reaches her street. Her fatigue of the day is forgotten. A frown is

deeply etched into her forehead. Xolani is again not home when she unlocks the house. She paces from the bedroom to the silent television. She calls her brother.

‘There are urgent matters here Odwa must come right away.’

He must come and deal with this. Nothemba addresses Nontobeko, her sister-in-law.

‘He has taken a funeral party to Queenstown *Sisi*. He will be back next week.’

Nontobeko draws out the ‘neeexxt’.

Xolani is surprised to see Nothemba sitting in the darkened room waiting.

‘Ma?’

‘*Molo* Xolani, where have you been?’

‘Out Ma.’

‘Have you heard about the burglary at the Sitole’s?’

He turns to the bathroom.

‘Xolani, I am talking to you!’

‘What Ma?’

‘You know what happened. Were you in school today?’

‘Yes Ma. Here’s my bag. You can check my notes.’

‘I don’t want to check your notes Xolani. Show me your hands.’

‘Ma?’

She jumps up from the plastic stool where she sits.

‘I said, show me your hands!’

Nothemba moves to stand in front of him. She sees his hands are covered in red welts and two large blisters form in the centre of his left palm.

‘I was helping my teacher move boxes Ma.’

‘You are a man now. Don’t lie to me.’

She shrills and shoves his hands aside.

‘Do you know Mr Sitole has a security camera at his bedroom window?’

The hysteria in her voice rises. Xolani looks up from the floor squarely into her eyes. She sees the fear dance across his handsome features. Then they hear the unmistakable roar of the crowd drawing closer. Nothemba stands behind the door praying quietly, until she feels the reverberation of the crowd. She turns the handle. Xolani is panicked and makes to dash off. She grabs hold of him and whips his slender frame so that he hops on one foot to steady himself and tugs on her forearm. She plants herself just outside the doorway.

The crowd drag two of Xolani’s friends along with them chanting.

‘Punish them! Punish them!’

Sidwell and Jacob hang their heads blubbering and covering for the blows that are unleashed on them from time to time.

‘Thief!’

They scream and point towards Xolani. Nothemba sees that he is stunned by the ferocity of the crowd. He stands trembling next to her. She casts her gaze above the crowd to pray silently then burst’s out.

‘Please let the police deal with the matter.’

She begs Mr Sitole as he draws abreast of her. Within minutes the flashing blue light of the police van creeps into the road. Nothemba pleads louder as the crowd swells and the angry faces with fists clenched around *sjamboks* surround them. Mr Sitole dressed in blue overalls stands with his left hand clenched into a fist and a *knobkierrie* in his right. Nothemba knows he is not a violent man. They attend the same church. He remonstrates towards the young men.

‘*Isela, sela ndizaku fundisa hagu ndini!*’

Nothemba pleads with Mr Sitole.

‘Please *tata*, my son is not a thief and a swine, please clear the crowd? Let the police do their work. Please *tata?*’

Beads of perspiration sit on his upper lip and forehead. He swipes at it with his sleeve.

She is relieved when he steps back with outstretched arms to sweep the crowd back from her door. The police force their way through, batons raised to grab hold of the three accused shoving them into the back of the police van. Nothemba speaks to Mr Sitole’s back thanking him, as he hastens to his *bakkie* parked on the opposite side of the street, to lay a charge at the Police Station in Main Road. The irate crowd trot after the retreating police van. Nothemba shuts her front door on the noise and sinks to the floor where her body trembles uncontrollably.

She thanks God for the appearance of the police out of the shadows of the street. Just last week she and her women’s group stood around the mother of the son whose bloody body lay sprawled in the mealie plants in her front garden. Mandla was beaten to death by the crowd from Leiden, who had chased him to his door. He had been accused of raping a three year old girl, smothering her and then concealing her body under a bed in a neighbour’s house. There was no stopping the blind anger of the mob.

Today, she is thankful that the women in her church group drew nearer to her and Xolani as the crowd ascended on them, pleading for the crowd to let the police handle the matter.

‘We cannot keep having blood on our hands!’

‘Let God be the judge! These boys grew up before us, we know them.’

‘Is it not us who must ask forgiveness if our children do wrong?’

Siphokazi, Nomzamo, Gladys, all joined in, beseeching the crowd.

‘These boys are children of this community, we have failed them!’

‘Have we not taught them at our knees?’

‘Where are the fathers?’

Nothemba noticed that even Mr Sitole looked at his feet that time.

Now she stifles her rasping sobs as the fear of the crowd’s retribution overwhelms her. What has become of her son? She cries into the sleeve of her denim jacket. I have failed him Father. Please guide Xolani. I never taught him to steal. What will become of him? Her moans spill into a ball of bunched up toilet paper, as the voices outside subside.



Anthony's albatross

He looks in the mirror pasted onto the bathroom wall. A hand flies up to pat down the front tuft of his receding hairline. Anthony's beard needs trimming. He gasps as his calf muscles go into spasm like an elevator on a conveyor belt. His movements are slow and he feels fatigued. He looks away from the mirror when feelings of guilt wash over him. If only, he sighs. But God in your mercy you forgive all. He draws in a sharp breath, realising that he had stopped breathing. Anthony forces himself to walk a few paces to the bedroom to prepare for the day. The neighbourhood dogs have been barking all night. He noticed a shadow move beneath a dirty grey blanket outside the gate when he peeped from behind the curtain. There are dark circles beneath his eyes but he knows that is not the cause of his lack of sleep. He slips his lean hairy forearms into a pink shirt, discarding the matching tie, preparing for work. He has appointments with two final year high school students this morning. Both are applying for sports scholarships to study in the USA and as a counsellor he will guide them through the process. He is relieved that the website he set up, *HEITA* Higher Education International Trips Abroad, is working, even if business is slow. He no longer has the rented office and so he will meet two clients, Demi and Robert at the City Library. The cramps ascend towards his groin. He makes to grab a handful of salt but resists. He prays silently for release from the discomfort. He moves to the kitchen to fill a bottle half with cranberry juice and half water, 250ml, his quota for the day.

These are familiar symptoms, he knows. He has been through it before, only last time Patti was there. It helped when she prepared some steamed broccoli for him and massaged his rigid calves or when they took long walks down Voortrekker Road. One time they walked as far as the Casino and went inside for coffee at the House of Coffees. Her favourite treat was always Lemon Meringue. He delighted in watching her, even after all those years of being married. He was mesmerised by her dainty lips and the way they sparkled as her ice-pink lipstick slowly disappeared with each bite. He would lean forward for a kiss just then. The cramps persist and Anthony battles to concentrate on the morning ahead. He packs his bag with the files he will need and a slim laptop computer along with his medication for the day. It has been five years and now his body is rejecting. He has already had his arteries and veins joined but now the saline flushing is no longer effective. He feels as though life has stepped on him with the heel of a boot.

Pull yourself together Anthony he admonishes, time to get done. He pops the pill case marked Tuesday and grimaces as he swallows the dosage, clips his pager onto a loop on his

khaki trousers and makes for the door. He pauses just outside the door inhaling the smell of lavender and glances at the beads of dew on the frangipani tree in the centre of the garden. Living in his sister Sheila's garden flat is not so bad after all. The space is cramped and Lisa refuses to visit him. He feels a weight lift off him when he walks along the slate path towards the gate. The sparrows chirp across the honey suckle and the wild dagga, dipping into the tiny pond. His shoulders straighten by the time he reaches the gate. He has eight minutes to catch the train at Tygerberg Station, just two minutes away. The crowded platform is strewn with discarded banana skins, chip packets and airtime vouchers. He whistles 'How-great-is-thy-faithfulness' and steps gingerly over the debris.

At nineteen, Lisa is a blossoming dancer. He goes to watch her at the Centre for Performing Arts each quarter when they stage a production of *Grease* or *Chicago* or *Jazz Fusion*. She refuses to talk to him about his illness and he doesn't know how much Patti told her of their divorce or the reason for it. She makes clear agendas when they have their monthly dinner in the city. "Dad I have your ticket for next month's performance, don't be late." She sent him a text message.

'I need new ballet shoes.'

She placed her demands on the table at the start of their meal last month.

'I'm going to work on the HMS cruise ship when I finish in November.'

She announced the month before. She plans to do this when she completes her dance diploma. She eats no meat and insists on dinner at the Hari-Krishna restaurant each time they meet. Tofu and lentils have never been his favourite. He feels such guilt over the pain caused and doesn't know how to refuse her anything. He gives into her will each time. He prays she never brings up the reasons he and Patti are divorced.

'You should eat healthier dad.'

It is the only indication that she is aware of his condition.

He sits with the students at the reading tables in the reference section, the sunlight streams through the overhead windows to rest on the spines of the books.

'I like what they offer at New Hampshire Community College.'

Demi pointing on the map is more decided. Robert, more reticent, takes a while before conceding.

'I need more time to think about Kentucky or Missouri University Mr Thomas. My dad says Kentucky is best. I will let you know next week.'

He talks through the admissions tests they will need to write and the forms to complete. They pay him for the consultation. He checks his watch. It is only 10.30. He drifts through the atrium remembering the poetry circle he joined spontaneously the previous Saturday. Patricia Schonstein read some of her work and Anthony felt his mind drift freely that day in a way that has evaded him for a long time. The cramping subsides and he settles at one of the tables on the deserted third level. He hums Great-is-thy-faithfulness softly, as he emails the high schools in the northern district, inviting them to apply with glossy descriptions of scholarships for study abroad. He checks his bank balance and estimates that he will manage for a couple more months. If he hadn't been so weak, he would still be the Director of the sport development programme at the technical university. He continues humming and suppresses the memory of the dismissal. If it weren't for Sheila and her husband Bill, he'd be on the street.

Anthony is strolling past the City Hall towards Cape Town Station when his beeper goes off suddenly. He feels the vibration over the din of traffic as taxi mini-buses hoot each other onto the shoulder of the busy streets. He gushes with energy and boards the train on the northern line, to head out of the city. Anthony is oblivious to the graffiti strewn interior. He doesn't try to draw the broken window shutters only reaching involuntarily to smooth his hair where the wind casts it in all directions. He calls Sheila. His hands shake while he selects her number on his mobile phone.

'I'm going in! I'm going in!'

Anthony shouts into the phone. An old man sitting across from him looks up alarmed. He relaxes visibly, satisfied that it is not another train robbery just an excited caller sitting on the opposite side of the carriage.

'Oh praise the Lord. I will meet you at the hospital.'

Sheila will bring his overnight bag. It is packed and waiting at the door.

'Let Lisa know please.'

Anthony feels his shoulders go lame as the adrenalin rush subsides. He begins to pace the train, barely able to contain himself during the thirty minute journey to Tygerberg Hospital. He shuts his eyes, his hands dangle limply in his lap and his lips move silently, thanking God.

Anthony was nauseous all morning and hasn't eaten since breakfast. At the transplant unit, his vitals are checked by a team of young nurses each performing a different test, blood, heart rate, temperature and more until finally he is wheeled into theatre by the porter dressed in a uniform

of grey trousers and pullover jersey. Anthony's nephew Joseph has been spared. He is relieved that he did not have to accept Joseph as a donor. Joseph had pleaded with him.

'Uncle please! Let me help you.'

Anthony knew it would prove to be too much risk. At twenty Joseph has his whole life ahead of him. Anthony could not put him through an ordeal he himself knows too well. He prays now for the family of the donor as he is wheeled into theatre. He sees his sister arrive just as he is wheeled through the theatre doors. Sheila's eyes are red and she dabs at her face with a square of tissue.

'Thank-God Anthony.'

It is some days before Anthony is fully aware of his surroundings, the colour of the sky or the news on the television. He smiles behind the mask as he sees Sheila, Lisa and Patti standing at the foot of his bed. The curtain is partly drawn so that the movement across the open door way is concealed. The trio are dressed in blue surgical gowns, masks, gloves submerged behind this shield with only their eyes visible. He slips in and out of consciousness for the next week while his body slowly responds to the new life pumping in him. Anthony is euphoric when Doctor Magan confirms that he can be discharged. His primary thought is to meet the family of the donor, to thank them, to acknowledge their pain of losing a young son. The Organ Donor Agency advises against it.

'Give the family time to heal.'

He spends the next weeks resting, reading in his sister's scented garden, and gradually taking short walks around the Ajax soccer field, climbing the stairs at the stadium each day. Lisa tells him that he has emails when she brings him some leek and potato soup she made. He decides it is a good time to go back to work. He feels blessed. Good health and now work too. He sets up appointments at the Bellville Library for the following week. He feels good, so good. He has at least three students to see each day now that the September Matric exams have been written. Anthony looks into their excited faces and takes in their tall lean bodies. He struggles to focus. He is here to help them find a scholarship. He works at a steady pace sending enquiries to the American institutions on behalf of the students, then feeds back the application processes they should follow. There are three swimmers from Stellenberg High School and Jared the tennis player from Paarl Gymnasium. Anthony's eyes linger on the girls' lip movements, breasts tucked into push-up bras and firm thighs encased in mini-skirts that resemble secret socks, just concealing their buttocks. He feels a stirring, takes short sharp sucked breathes through his teeth as perspiration forms on his upper lip, trickles from his arm

pits and along his groin. He pushes down surreptitiously onto his erection. Anthony hugs Jared across his broad shoulders.

‘You needn’t fear Jared. With your swimming record, you will succeed in your application. You have such a great record of wins: *Boland*, Western Cape and the National tournament.’

Jared squirms to put distance between them.

Anthony contacts the donor family.

‘I will be very grateful to have an opportunity to express my appreciation to you personally.’

It has taken some persuasion before they agree to meet at the cafeteria, in the foyer of the hospital, the place where they took leave of their young son. It has been eight months. Anthony walks with his toes pointed inward yet barely touching the ground. His face glows. The sclera of his eyes is clear. He arrives early and orders a strawberry milkshake. While the milky drink cools his throat, he feels a sudden chill at the back of his neck. Anthony turns gently in his seat and notices Mr Damons’ tall frame easing into a seat behind him. He feels his bowels want to give way. He makes to leave but Mr Damons white head looks up just then and their eyes lock. The cool milkshake of a minute before shoots a sharp pain along his temples.

‘You!’

Mr Damons spews across the tables between them pointing his index finger. Anthony fumbles for some change in his pockets, drops R30 onto the table with shaking hands and stumbles over the leg of his chair towards the exit. He crashes into a middle aged couple walking in his direction and drops his panama hat when the electronic doors swish open before him.

‘Excuse me.’

He breaks into a jog not daring to look back.

‘Anthony?’

The mother of his young donor calls after him but he flashes down the empty corridor. He waves his hand in dismissal and runs even faster. He runs across the emergency lanes without checking for oncoming traffic. Anthony is hyperventilating and forces himself to breathe deeply as he nears Voortrekker Road.

He hangs his head as he walks back to his apartment, eyes fixed on his brown hiking boots. Will I never be forgiven? He speaks softly in an anguished voice. What curse have I brought upon myself? All I meant was to be kind and gentle, he pleads. I couldn’t stop myself. Have I not paid for my sins? His mobile phone has been ringing since he left the hospital. When

he reaches the house Sheila's neighbour Michael motions to him and gestures with his thumb and pinkie to his ear.

'It's telesales.'

He flips his wrist at Michael without looking up and turns in at the gate, like a flutter of an olive branch to slip out of Michael's range.

Four weeks later, Anthony's body begins to reject the new kidney. He feels ill. He is put back onto the dialysis machine three times a week. The sleepless nights and continuous leg cramps are commonplace once again. Anthony resolves to re-join the support group that he has avoided for the past two years, since Patti left him, the reason why Patti left him. It is Thursday evening. The group meet at St Margaret's Church in Parow. His face is grey as he joins the circle of familiar and new faces. There are nine men of diverse ages and backgrounds sitting together with the group facilitator, the sponsor. Anthony speaks in soft lilting notes as his large square framed eyes fill with tears.

'My name is Anthony and I am an addict.'

'Hi Anthony.'

The members chant in unison.

'My addiction is girls and boys. I like to touch them. I stopped a long time ago. I lost my home. I lost my family and I lost my job. Now, I am losing my health.'

'Thank you for the share Anthony.'

Anthony's down turned face remains so during his speech. The group members break spontaneously into prayer, "Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference".

When the weeks lead into winter, the south-easterly rain storms pelt down on the Cape, Anthony's vital organs begin to fail and he is admitted to Tygerberg Hospital again. It is a month after his 57th birthday. His sister can only stand by the window of the high care unit when she visits him this time. He has developed septicaemia. Anthony's life is threaded into multiple machines that monitor and attempt to flush his body. Lisa's tear streaked face peers at him through the glass partition. Patti holds onto her tightly as she recognises the inevitable. We love you Anthony she signs to him with her pinkie, thumb and index finger extended but he can no longer see the communication and her words are struck through by the thunderstorm overhead.

The Carpenter

Leroy packs his tool bag before turning in for the night. The bag is a hiker's backpack with padding inside and numerous mesh pockets, salvaged from a site where he worked in 2011. He has a job to do in the morning. Just in time ...his funds are running low. He has been scouting but nothing has come up in the last six months. He has no option now but to work for himself. Leroy stands in the doorway to watch the sun go down behind Steenberg, his bad eye turned in towards the house. From his door he can see over the rooftops of the surrounding shacks, where rocks and discarded tyres hold sheets of corrugated iron into place. He bends toward the sunflowers that he planted along the length of his shack and gently strokes the petals already folded in sleep. Fayrous left her washing on the line again. It stretches between their two shacks. The limbs of the shirts and kids' jeans are all tangled. From the adjacent dunes, he scoops sand using a 1 l yogurt carton, to quell the flames of the tiny galley he has going just outside his door. Not too near, just last month twelve shacks were set alight. No one knows what caused the fire. Fayrous managed to shove her three kids through the window. No one could find the house key as the flames took hold. Now she is his neighbour here on the Rondevlei side of Village 3. He grows angry at the wait for a council flat. The municipality just keeps putting other people in before him. His name has been on the list for five years now. Each time he goes back they just tell him to come back again in six months. The last time, he waited for three hours before it was his turn. The man he spoke to didn't even look up from the computer when Leroy sat in the narrow chair before his desk cluttered with forms and files.

Janice couldn't take living without a toilet and indoor water. Last Saturday they had a *hellse* fight. When she got there the afternoon, he had made her favourite, beef curry with rooti he bought at Pick-n-Pay. The sun streamed in through the little window where they ate at the fold-up camping table. It was a clear sky day and the neighbourhood children played hide-and-seek around the shacks. After lunch they took a walk to Muizenberg, strolling hand in hand. They sat on the red benches watching the kite surfers whizz by. She kissed him in the neck the way he likes. The black shark flag flapped in the wind warning surfers that the water was murky. He put his hand on the inside of her thigh as he turned towards her.

'Come we go to Gaslight. I *smaak 'n dop.*'

'Hey, don't start your drinking nonsense with me.'

He shoved her knee away from him as he admonished her. She knows he doesn't like her to drink. She jumped up then, grabbed her silver pumps from his hand and stomped off. They walked back in silence as the traffic raced past them. Her face was as dark as the shadows

caused by the setting sun. He tried to keep pace with her and take her hand again but instead, she walked ahead and sulked all the way back to the shack. She plonked herself onto the upturned paint bucket outside the door and sat with her elbows on her knees, dangling her slender hands between her legs as she smoked. He put on the kettle, set two coffee cups and kicked off his shoes.

‘Come and lie next to me Janice, please *bokkie?*’

She ignored his calls.

‘I’m going home now. You know I don’t check this bucket toilet story.’

He was so tired of her tantrums.

‘Why don’t you just fuck off then?’

And she did. Now that she is back with her parents again he is not allowed to visit there. He doesn’t like all the questions her father asks anyway. He’s not a *laaitie*. He can’t make miracles he *tsks*. *Jusus* that woman makes him so mad. His little Jack Russell pavement special looks up at him and he realises he spoke aloud.

‘Not you Zabo.’

Leroy tickles her chin. He shakes his head as he locks the door, peering out of the tiny window. He looks around his room with pride, the double bed neatly made up, two door pine cupboard and a couch makes it warm and cosy inside. On the opposite side of the wood iron frame is a small table with a gas stove, some pots, dairy crates stacked with tins of fish, corn and beans with fresh carrots and potatoes underneath, two chairs and 20l bucket of clean water. On the floor a green and beige carpet brightens up the interior.

Everything is quiet around the shacks in his zone, save for the barrelling sounds from his neighbour. Billy loves his drink. Leroy can’t imagine wasting his hard earned money on drink. Of all his friends he is the only one who doesn’t drink or smoke. He is proud of this. Leroy finds his pleasure in the world of books but with the fire risk, reading at night is limited. He hopes to get his electricity connection by the end of the month. He will have saved enough by then to pay the municipality. He doesn’t believe in the illegal connections. He has seen too many people get killed like that.

It has been a battle since he lost the sight of his left eye. During the Working-for-water Project in Zeekoevlei in 2010 a fly laid eggs in the corner of his eye without him being aware. The infection that followed cost him his eye. All he got as a result was the SASSA grant. R1400 is just not enough to live on. Janice keeps nagging him to get a flat but he told her, he can’t afford the rents of Coniston Park, where her parents live, or Sea Winds. He has to wait for a

flat in Lavender Hill or Cafda or wherever the municipality will give him a place that he can afford.

With his tools packed, Leroy settles into bed. He misses Janice but she will be here the weekend, he hopes. He sends her a sms filled with kisses, telling her again that he loves her and how sorry he is. She doesn't reply. Sometimes she just plays hard to get. She was like that at school too but eventually agreed to go out with him. She used to pin her dress up above the knee and then let it down again before going home. When she sat in the desk opposite him and she knew he was looking at her, she would cross and uncross her legs showing the top of her thighs and looking beneath her fringe at him. Even when he smiled at her, she tossed her ponytail and looked at Rashieda sitting next to her and they would giggle behind their hands. He thought they were laughing at the holes in his school shoes but he didn't mind. When he read out loud in Afrikaans for Mr Fraser, the whole class went quiet.

He brought her a new cell phone last month, well sort of new. He thought that would make her happy. If she was interested, he would get her a laptop too. But she doesn't like anything to do with reading. He dropped out of Sibelius High School after standard 7 but he still loves reading. Retreat Library, on Consort Boulevard is where he immersed himself in the mysteries written by Wilbur Smith, John Grisham and Kathy Reichs. Especially when his mother died suddenly, he found himself at the library every afternoon. He never knew his father. It was always clean and warm inside the library. Living with his mother's sister in the flats, across the road from the library, wasn't easy. There were always lots of men coming in and out. His mother had a rasping cough that she couldn't shake off but they didn't realise how sick she was until she collapsed on her way to work that morning.

Leroy made his own way as soon as he turned 16 and got his first South African ID. He could just walk in and get it free of charge. That's when he got his first job with RAECO. He worked for them for ten years before things went wrong for him. He paid the price and hasn't been able to turn back since then. Leroy and Taliep decided to raid the house they worked in after the job was done, in 2006. They were certain the owners were overseas but they didn't know that the old man next door slept there at night. They planned to sell the oak furniture and silver cutlery. Leroy knew from the books on design and décor that he loved to read so much, how valuable the items were. He turned state's witness and got off with six months in Pollsmoor Prison. Taliep got two years. They both lost their jobs but luckily he knew how to work with carpentry tools by then. That's when he lost his house in Sea Winds too.

In his backpack Leroy carries a power drill, handsaw, nail set, level, screw drivers, claw hammer, utility knife, chisel and on his belt, a tape measure. Ever since prison, he has had to

do odd jobs to survive. It's been hard. Fortunately the tools along with the bolt cutters stand him in good stead. He has to eat like everybody else *mos*. What must he do? The good thing is that he met up with Janice again at a braai, at Gavin's place, when he got out. They have been together ever since. Janice works at the nail and beauty parlour in Blue Route Mall. She likes nice things, that woman. He can never please her but he likes the lacy underwear she wears and the smell and feel of her skin on his. She thinks he does private work. He hasn't been able to tell her what he actually does most of the time, when work is scarce.

Leroy tosses and turns his mind fills with images of Janice and the last time she lay naked next to him. He can't breathe. Zabo gives a low growl and he looks in time to see a shadow pass by his window. He is thankful for the street light near his shack. He sits up in the dark, his heart racing.

'It's nothing.'

He whispers to the dog to go back to sleep. Everything is quiet tonight, no shooting. The peace brokers must have settled things after the meeting on Sunday, between gang leaders, clergy of the mosque and the churches in the area, some of them reformed gangsters. Leroy avoided the meeting but he read about it in the *Argus* and the *Southern Mail*, when he sat in the library on Tuesday evening. This is the only time there is no shooting in Lavender Hill. Zille wanted to bring in the army. She's crazy. It won't stop the gangs from doing their drug trade or the turf wars. He read what Pravin Gordhan said about the amount of taxes the government loses out on, due to the illegal trade. Leroy thinks it is a much bigger deal than a few gang members shooting across the square. He smiles, you see Leroy, there's bigger fish to fry. His smile quickly somersaults into a frown. He worries about the kids that are caught in the crossfire.

He wakes suddenly, his body is tense, his heart palpitating. He feels beneath the blankets and looks at his hand; it is perspiration. Thank God. His head slips back onto the pillow as his breathing deepens. Eventually he sits up. For a moment, he thought he had been shot.

'It was just a dream, Zabo.'

He smiles as the dog lifts her head, paws still deeply tucked beneath her body. The vivid images of his dreams fade. He takes in the sounds of gargling, water being tossed towards the dune and the smell of *pap* cooking.

Dawn is breaking behind the sand dunes. Leroy stands outside his shack, watching the sun come up, with a mug of sweet, black coffee in his hand. He boiled the water on the gas stove, one of his salvages. He is not proud of what he does but says repeatedly to himself, a man's got to eat. Today, Wednesday, he plans to work the avenues. It is dirt collection day and

there will be lots of people pulling shopping trolleys down the streets, digging into the wheelie bins standing on the side of the road, as they scavenge for recyclables'. With the bins out all day, Leroy's work will be mapped for him. He won't chat with the trolley people but will check out the movements in the streets with the neat rows of houses before he makes his choice. His mother always said, 'Leroy, *moenie vir jou laat ken nie*'. Familiarity breeds contempt, yes, he remembers Mr Kirkland the English teacher drumming that into them too.

Mr Kirkland was tall, blond and wore the same black suit to school every day with a starched white shirt and thin black tie. When he spoke, his hands poised before him like he was about to play the piano.

'Does anyone have an extra sandwich?'

He asked the class this question when the 10 o'clock siren rang each day. Leroy often didn't have anything to eat. He would go back into the classroom after everyone left for the break and there'd be a parcel of sandwiches, with french polony or sometimes a slice of peanut butter bread or *smoored* bully beef. Leroy devoured what was there, never knowing when he would eat again. Sometimes he took some back to his auntie's house, to share with the other kids. Come on Leroy get your head in the game man.

The morning sun is reflecting off the Steenberg Mountains now as Leroy walks through the quiet avenues. Most of the wheelie bins are empty and some are being dragged back inside to be secured behind a locked gate. Grey haired, wrinkled men stand in their garages with the tip up door half suspended and women wearing overalls and headscarves potter about the front garden, hose pipe extended. Leroy greets those who look his way. No one is about in Perth Road as he saunters by, tool bag on his back with the spirit level sticking out the top. He wears his blue overall jacket and clean denim jeans with a pair of black industrial work boots on his feet. Leroy always wears a woollen cap on his head, a beanie. He likes his curly black hair to be tucked in. It also helps if he quickly needs to disguise his appearance. He has in the past pulled the cap off, unzipped the jacket and tossed it into the overgrown field along the road. He wears a black t-shirt underneath today.

Leroy angles confidently towards the corner house. He has passed it three times this morning already. It is 10.30 now and he must act fast. He slips in at the unlocked gate. The dog barks and runs the length of the back yard unceasingly. Fortunately the wall is extended and the pitbull cannot get out. Leroy notices all the windows are closed. He knocks anyway, to offer his carpentry services. When there is no reply, he goes to work. Leroy stealthily skips up onto the lower vibracrete wall on the boundary, like a pole vaulter. He swings up onto the parapet wall, unhooks his backpack. As his feet make contact with the roof, he sags to his

knees. Poly-carb sheeting – should be easy to access. His right hand finds the hammer and swings to work until the blows loosen a line of sheeting. No alarm sounds. Good. He positions his boot encased feet and gives a vigorous stomp watching over his right shoulder to see if anyone passes or notices his actions then tumbles swiftly into a sun room. The street is deserted, punctuated only by the dog clambering, growling and barking. He smiles quickly ducking through the inter-leading doors. His first instinct is to check his getaway. No keys. He finds the garage remote hanging on the panel next to the fridge and tucks it into the top pocket of his jacket. His experienced eye spotted it through the kitchen window just now. He nimbly scans the house and picks up his reflection in the mirror hanging in the passageway. The sheen of perspiration on his face and discoloured left eye catch his attention for a second before he forces himself to move through the rest of the house. Laptop, camera, men's clothing, ladies jewellery and another laptop cable in the third bedroom fit effortlessly into the backpack, easily ditched if necessary. He tries but fails to open the garage door. He shoves at it now forcing it and leaves the door tilted unevenly. He rolls out through the opening, in and out within five minutes. He wipes his face on the sleeve of his jacket. His body is soaked in perspiration. He slips a water bottle out of the side of the backpack and sips.

Leroy walks arms, and legs swinging down Klip Road, with the backpack strapped onto his back, where he catches an empty mini-bus taxi to Ottery. He doesn't notice the driver watching him in the rear view mirror as he picks up speed. Leroy digs into his top pocket for the taxi fare and the remote lies in his hand as he pays the *gaatjie*. His best option today is Cash Convertors. He will get a good price there for the gold jewellery he picked up except for the chain with the dainty wishbone on it, that's for Janice. He should make enough earnings for the day from the rest. Not too bad Leroy my man. He hums the love song of Fairground Attraction playing in the taxi, it's-got-to-be-yeah-perfect, it's-got-to-be-yeah-worth-it.

'Waar het jy gewerk vandag?'

Leroy's mouth hangs open, shaken out of his reverie. The taxi driver has pulled to the curb and turns to stare at him.

'Maak oop 'aai sak.'

The *gaatjie* tugs on his backpack and the driver makes a u turn towards the Grassy Park Police Station.