Gehennasburg

A Novel

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A year ago, my father was murdered.

And each day, numbed by

endless grating symbols, I

dwell, wile, rest—repeat.

ACT 1

1968—1985

1

For my part, if anything, I'm done with people.

1988

On the day Abraham Strijdom died, he woke up surprisingly refreshed considering his chronic apnea, a condition fueled by his liberal consumption of brandy and Coke. A man of excess and a stranger to the word "no," he had spent most of his life negotiating the bits he least liked about himself and odd fragments of an idealized version of what he could possibly be, with the stark truth that he also represented the sum total of all the generations who preceded him. Like many white South Africans witnessing the dying spasms of the Apartheid era, he was left in a perpetual state of worry tempered by a constant feeling of guilt but, unfortunately, also morally neutered. Because for white men like Abraham Strijdom, Africa had always been a buffet of sorts. An open invitation to become financially distended on the backs of others thanks to constant conspicuous consumption with little in the way of control and even less demand for equitable redistribution of wealth. A pigs-at-the-trough situation that, as the 80s drew to a close, was foundational to the atmosphere of paranoia that descended as the well-heeled mink and manure set started to question how long South Africas much-maligned and marginalised Black population would be satisfied sit on the sidelines, excluded and exploited.

And so, ease his mind and allay his fears, Abraham, borderline alcoholic and possibly hell-bound —just like everyone else—drank. So much so that brandy and Coke, his favored tipple, not for nothing become known colloquially as *baklei wyn*—fight wine—a dubious term of endearment earned by the fact the every Christmas lunch where *baklei wyn* flowed with almost orgiastic fervor, would lead to drunk uncles slurring and screaming about politics and Jesus, ending up with someone

getting shot. These virtuoso dick-swinging performances guaranteed feuds that would last a year, to be resolved just in time for the next Christmas when the entire process would be repeated. Like it had been for years.

Brandy and Coke happened to also be the drink of choice among a demographically narrow profile beholden to a more nativist—conservative—political persuasion. Excessive, sometimes seemingly-festive consumption of *baklei wyn* frequently revealed an altogether darker side of society. It would occasionally fuel a flavor of random, breathtakingly cruel, racially inspired actions that overnight would be emblazoned across hostile international tabloid news outlets that were increasingly desperate for ever more awful stories from an already-beleaguered bad-news country, that, for our part, would rather have made global headlines with the odd Miss World win, an Oscar, or for inventing useful things like it did, "in the old days," a loaded shorthand term trotted out whenever, accompanied by wistful sighs, the speaker would otherwise—in sympathetic company of course—have let rip with some prime racist discharges. The kinds of things South Africans would have preferred on mastheads were inventions like the CAT scan, developed in 1972 by Capetonian physicist Allan Cormack and his associate Godfrey Hounsfield, resulting in a Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine. Or the ATM, which although randomly claimed to be a South African invention, was in fact invented either by John Shepherd-Barron, a Scotsman whose device used cheques impregnated with mildly radioactive carbon 14, or that of fellow-Scot, James Goodfellow whose plastic card and PIN system we still use today. In the South Africa of the 80s, racially loaded urban legends spread like wildfire that the ATM was a local invention, obviously so, because, you know, crime. And Blacks. Indeed, scratch the surface of any South African subject pretty much at any point of the countries history, and a racist motivation and/or reason emerges pretty much immediately.

This penchant for booze and fantasy acted as a highly reactionary hot-button to bellicose prejudice and unbridled rancor, as opposed to benign "lapses in judgment," as some would spin.

Like the day, Angel Fourie, one of Abraham's distant backwoods cousins—still in his teens—played a "prank" on a young Black farmhand, tying his hands behind his back before confining him to a casket made from the kind of wood used to crate tomatoes, nailing it shut over the screaming man and lowering the coffin into a freshly dug shallow grave. Finally, after the screaming subsided and, exhausted, the man had lost consciousness, an unrepentant Angel popped the lid, cut the rope, and walked away uncontaminated. He did so with a nonchalance that would, one day, be the death of him, too.

But none of this kept Abraham awake, although it should have. Or, for that matter, made him drink less. What worried Abraham Strijdom was a metastasizing suspicion that his wife, Maureen, was gallivanting in a most blasé fashion, a conclusion arrived at over several months. First were the small—barely detectable—signs. Her sudden obsession with power-walking around the mall before it opened at 9 AM. Her new food-combining diet. The expanding collection of separate-and-lift underwear bestowing her figure with noticeable jeunesse. Her hair, once teased and lacquered into a bouffant, now upgraded to something Abraham could only interpret as casually wanton and "freshly fucked."

He grew more suspicious over time, especially as she constantly seemed to imply that he was one being unfaithful and making—even by her standards—unkind comments about women that worked with him at the brushware manufacturing behemoth he was at the helm of. Maureen seemed particularly triggered by his new assistant Cassie, whom he retained after engineering a take-over of an erstwhile rival brush factory. Indeed, Maureen was constantly bitching about the state of their marriage and the lack of connection she was feeling, as if she was rationalizing her way out of what he considered a flawed but workable arrangement. Then again, when she wasn't snipping at him for this, that, or the other, she suddenly acted like the life she had made with him was the best thing

ever, but then again, he thought, she still didn't ever seem appreciative per se, and consequently he doubted that her new-found enthusiasm was real.

Either way, it was clear that she had stopped talking to him about much. It was no secret that her somewhat conservative leanings were never all that compatible with the baby steps he threatened to take toward becoming a renaissance man, but their lack of daily communication underlined what felt like a widening schism to Abraham. Then, embarrassingly, there was her lack of filter and her tendency to disrespect him leading to scenes that could have been avoided such as the night of his fortieth birthday, when she, drunk and demonstrative, started telling lewd jokes about men and their small dicks, repeatedly referring to him, and, when the merriment overtook levels of social acceptability, encouraging ever more risqué gaiety, Maureen howled that "I'm having so much fun I swear to God I'm going to make a tinkle if I'm not careful" which, of course, she did. And so, on his birthday, in front of his guests and his inebriated wife, Abraham Strijdom mopped the floor, cleaning her party tinkle.

Less outrageous, but no less vexing, was the deafening silence—if you don't count the static or what sounded suspiciously like mildly asthmatic breathing, perhaps that of a smoker—on the phone line whenever Abraham picked up. What made it so weird was that it only happened to him, and occasionally one of the kids, but every single time Maureen answered there would be a voice on the other end. And it wasn't his imagination either since he was far too grounded to look suspiciously at humdrum daily occurrences, scouring them for nefarious implications. The fact was that, taken holistically, Maureen's behaviors and habits had slowly but surely changed over time.

But most of all, Maureen had grown distant. More distant. Where previously she would lash out, complaining about minutiae while pointing out the myriad ways in which she felt taken for granted by her family, but now, for the last few months—since she started working, in fact—she was uncharacteristically coy. Content even.

If Abraham paid attention, however, he would have noticed that his wife had scheduled more appointments than feasible and that, in turn, she was regularly encouraging him to take business trips to Cape Town and Durban "to inspect the factory, sweetheart," a stunning turnaround from a mere few years prior, when his arriving merely an our late from work would provoke a third degree that easily spilled into Maureen's entering a days-long depression state. He would have seen that she attended conferences and product demonstrations at a higher pace than the calendar suggested. Had be been more alert, he would have noted that Maureen's meetings were always in Johannesburg—Berea to be exact—and had he followed her, he would have seen her sparkling-beige BMW parked outside Duchess Court, the apartment building he owned but was managed by Angel Fourie—the man who had come to worship the ground Maureen walked on, and who responded in the affirmative, without hesitation, when she casually floated the idea that a man like Angel would be able to peel back the skull of a man like Abraham, with one well-aimed strike of a Cold Steel 97LPMS panga machete, the most popular panga on the continent.

2

Of course, he lied.

1986

Occasionally, Maureen would find herself staring at her kitchen's blue celeste walls, ruminating that she, too, was like the sky—alluring, deep, and full of what she imagined was promise. She would stare, transfixed, at her by-now somewhat yellowing wallpaper and recall being a young cheerleader—much of it a blur, of course, due to the dervish-like nature of the sport and, well, her age—but the halcyon memories of crisp blue skies and cheering crowds would nonetheless beguile her. And for a short while at least, she'd feel like her old self again. Whoever that was.

1968

Young Maureen Trichardt stormed her way into cheerleading by means of a short stint as drum majorette. Given her propensity for propulsion—and boundless love of attention—she never quite got the point of an anonymous phalanx of hormonal, white-gloved pom-pom wielding girls in fuzzy busbys, tailored micro dresses, double-row gold-buttoned heavily braided jackets, and knee-high white leather boots. She enjoyed inter-school competition days though, when she would point and laugh at Black girls from less affluent—separated *and* segregated—areas, who had to make do with one-size-fits-all sequined tunics, poorboy caps, and plain Sally Sunshines with white knee-high socks in place of boots. "Why do they even bother? It's *so* outré, sweetheart," Maureen would retch, staring at the "breadline drummies in their chintzy outfits," etched against her personal, blue Highveld sky, proudly deploying the new word she had learnt from then fresh-out-of-college

Madame Spottiswoode, who, a few years later, would also teach Louis—and me—*les joies de la langue*, a double entendre Madame Spottiswoode secretly relished due to her still-suppressed sexual orientation.

Always the trouper, Maureen singlehandedly pioneered the cheer group routine in Germiston. Despite her formidable height, she fancied herself a flyer—and skilled choreographer—who quickly, though not entirely free from self-interest, organized the squad to undertake simple ground-up liberty stunts, the staples of the discipline complete with impressive raises, followed by glorious high V endings with an obligatory jaunty dismount. From there it was a hop and tumble to more complex routines like The Scorpion, which saw red-faced, sweaty team members hold a rather zaftig Maureen aloft by one downward pointing leg, while she would simultaneously grab the other —flailing—foot upwards and over, until her toes touched the back of her head.

But the one constant thing in Maureen's life, the thing that seemed to link one episode to the next as she reflected on her youth when she considered how much she gave up—and how much was taken—was the punctuating presence of an azure sky, the one she stared into at her gran's gravesite. It was the same blue she got lost in, daydreaming about getting out of dumpy old Germiston. It was there when she waited for the bus, walked to the park, or sat in the backseat of her father's clunky Chrysler Valiant with the cat-eye shaped rear lights. And it featured in her vision of "future Maureen," who would sun herself daily on a colorful lilo, floating in a sparkly cool, blue infinity pool.

It was also the sky that calmed her, mitigated her extreme discomfort, distracting her, when, on a hot January afternoon behind the bicycle shed, her secret crush, Abraham Strijdom, the handsome Cricket team captain kissed her, teased her, put a flower behind her ear and told her she was beautiful, joked around, grabbed her ass, pushed himself against her, playfully pulled her hair, ripped off her panties, teased her with his eager fingers, and then rammed himself into her; all the while staring at the big blue. A calming shade, she realized, as she succumbed. And it wasn't just any

blue. It was moodier than usual with waxen dabs of grayish white and hints of pewter. The blue of old bruises, she thought.

Then, after he came, he joked again and told her she was pretty. He said she was a trooper.

"Shot!" He said.

And so, eventually, the summer of '68, with its stinging sun, and late-afternoon thunderstorms gave way, first to a languorous autumn with cosmos flowers lining country roads like garlands; and then to a colder-than-usual winter complete with one day of snow—the first in a decade—before making short shrift of spring, an afterthought of a season in warm climates as for the most part it's practically indeterminable from summer anyway. But spring of the following year was notable for it saw Maureen dropping out of high school—just weeks shy of matric finals—on account of her up-to-then-well-concealed condition and the unfortunate timing of a lamentable but unavoidable event.

The birth of Irma the Dead.

3

Irma the Dead.

Struggling to get out of the car on a sunny day in January 1973, Maureen Strijdom, née Trichardt, could not help but feel underwhelmed at the house on Sandilands Road that her husband had bought—sight unseen by her—but Abraham promised it was a good deal. He assured her it would only be for a few years and that she could do with it what she wanted. "A blank canvas," he called it, "but the first act in our new roles as husband and wife, milady," he claimed in an affected am-dram tone, which only served to further annoy her shitless as she staggered up the driveway, balancing their two-year-old on her hip while burdensomely pregnant with Louis, their second child.

Over the next few months, to take her mind off the humidity, her hormones, and the humiliation of settling for blue-collar Germiston, she spent every waking moment planning a front garden rockery, and drawing up detailed plans for the conversion of the garage into a main house extension. Maureen agonized over the exact layout of the back patio, where the pool would go, what it would look like, and, of course, where to install an outdoor grilling area away from view because Abraham was a messy cook, and she was less than interested in cleaning up the mess, the grill, or frankly seeing too much of him once he started waving his sausage and tongs around.

"I mean, how hard can it be, Braam?"

She called him Braam for the first four years of their marriage.

But then she also didn't quite know what to make of what she thought of him to begin with. Falling in love with your sexual assailant was the thing of *hausfrau* romance novels, the heroine ravished against her will by a dark broody and mysterious stranger who just happens to turns out to

be a prince or unspeakably wealthy at the very least. Abraham was none of that. And it wasn't as if she fell in love with him after the fact, since, as everyone knew, she was deeply in love with him long before, leading her to navel-gaze for years afterwards wreaked with guilt over what she possibly could have done to encourage him. After all, she reasoned, suppose a victim gets up the morning after, cooking the assailant a full English, does the act of hospitality—or of sheer niceness—negate or change the meaning of the act of aggression from the night before? Does it perhaps green-light future acts of a non-consensual nature? And at other times she worried that he may feel bad for forcing himself on her and that possibly, she needed to find ways to show him that it was ok, that perhaps there was a way for her to give retroactive consent—normalizing what had happened. Although, truthfully, she knew that it could never do that. And that normal would probably never be a word that may be applied to their her confusing obsession with the guy with the silver tongue and cheeky grin.

But, what had over time become abundantly clear to Maureen was that she would have to reframe the experience, albeit after the fact, so as to regain a degree of composure. So, instead of dwelling on it, she decided to work as hard as she could on the relationship, and she was certain that he would make up for his behavior once he saw what a great mother she was to the child that that was born out of violence. That he would admire her Christlike capacity for forgiveness and taht her willingness to move on would be a redemptive opportunity, also for him. She thought that she could weather and withstand what life would throw at her.

To make good on her resolution, Maureen threw herself into the landscaping and pool design project. If there was a perfect time to be in the garden in Africa, it was during mid-summer on the Highveld, which, although highly fragmented due to urban sprawl, still boasted the largest swathe of grassland in southern Africa. She would drive forty minutes southeast daily to the ancestral Trichardt farm in Heidelberg to collect saplings, shrubs, and a collection of bulbs from a garden that was started by her great grandmother who, in turn, collected exotic trees and plants from around the

sub-continent, discovering by trial and error which plants thrived during long, wet summers while also able to survive dry frosty winters. "I do what I can with what little I find," she would explain and set about planting more trees, aloes, and a few palms before splitting hundreds of agapanthus to be planted out. It was a continuous project, and for Maureen, it would be a living historical document of her feisty settler ancestry preserved—sprouting and evolving—for generations to come.

The pool—the pièce de résistance—would have to be sunk, constructed of gunite since fiberglass was way too middle-class, and Maureen grew obsessed with a Greek theme having spent many afternoons imbibing Ouzo lemonade cocktails on her friend Penny Pappas' most beguiling Ionian-style dining patio, something Maureen was confident she could easily pull off. And yet, she was never fully convinced that a pool was a good idea to begin with, but then she would shrug and think about something else.

On the day Irma Strijdom died, Abraham woke up with an intense heavy-heartedness. He wondered where it came from, how long it had been there, and why he had not noticed it before. It was a Saturday in early May, surprisingly warm considering the season and by 3 PM, her two youngest in tow, newly pregnant Maureen left for the grocer to get basics since she invited a few friends over for the last outdoor event of the season. Braam would *braai* lamb chops and sausage over perfectly dried Kameeldoring, his wood of choice for the task at hand, harvested—taking great care—from Camel-thorn trees on the Trichardt farm. Large and umbrella-shaped with ferocious-looking three-inch white thorns and feathery foliage, Kameeldoring trees make perfect browsing for elephant and giraffe, and are considered the "Tree of Life" by local Bushmen, and, according to those who know, are de rigueur for any self-respecting *braai* aficionado. Maureen would provide *biltong*, *droëwors*, and chips with a dip to start. To accompany Abraham's mixed grill, she would ask him to *braai* some chicken too, since it was considered a salad anyway—vegetarian even, by some

braai purists—and she would make potato salad, as well as her legendary cheese and monkeygland chutney *braaibroodjies* on fresh farm bread, wrapped in foil and grilled over an open flame. Of course, it would not be a true *boerekos* feast if Maureen did not make a pot of *mieliepap*, a maize porridge, in a traditional three-legged cast-iron pot, served with a stewed tomato *smoortjie* on the side. And she would show off her new—hitherto unused—pool.

As soon as Maureen left, Abraham set about packing the outdoor grill, lacing the wood with just enough fire-starter briquets, all but guaranteeing impressive incineration for their guests, expected at 6 PM. Since it was a slow process, he poured himself a brandy—his usual—partly for inspiration and partly because it was just what people did. He added a splash of Coke, primarily for hue. The sliding doors were open as the house needed airing. Irma was behind him—she always was, he always checked—following him blindly wherever he went. Content, motivated, and mildly inebriated, he turned his back on his house—and set about building a fire.

Abraham's technique for creating a perfect carefully constructed inferno was quasi-scientific, his reputation sterling, requiring undivided attention—not an easy task with three kids and a demanding wife—but zoning out while checking wind speed and working out his grill timings afforded him a brief suspension from the trappings of domesticity, allowing him to temporarily forget about his three kids—and the newest one, on the way—as well as the fact that the feared himself to be woefully ill-equipped to raise any of them, let alone being a doting husband to a wife who, if he was honest with himself, was somewhat of a ballbreaker.

Engrossed, focused, consumed by his stacking the wood for his much-ballyhooed fire, he almost forgot that he was overdue for a brandy top-up when he noticed an awkward tranquility had settled over the backyard—as if the world had been put on mute. In that moment, he knew he would carry joylessness with him for the rest of his life. He instinctively understood that on the day your child dies, you feel it, even before you see the evidence on the bottom of the pool, and when he reached the edge of the water, he felt a dizziness come over him and an overwhelming slow-motion feeling

of just intensely wanting a do-over—like there was a button to push or a paper to tear up and render the outcome null and void.

Irma's was hardly the only death that day. A part within each of us died, even those not yet born. Maureen died when she saw her drowned firstborn splayed at the bottom of the deep side, surrounded by a halo of flame-red hair, and she died again when she saw her inebriated husband. She instantly recognized his negligence. Her worst fears about him had been realized. He had done them in—in the worst possible way—this time. She also knew that after she bore Abraham Strijdom their last child—if it were the last thing she did, even if it took a lifetime—she would make him pay. My mother would, as it turned out, make us all—the whole fucking toxic bunch of us—pay.

From that day forward, whenever Irma was mentioned—Irma-the-Good, Irma-the-Brave, Irma-the-Dead—the most vivid retellings would be of Irma's flaming red hair and alabaster skin, etched against the cerulean blue of Maureen's gunite pool and the opaqueness of undulating water ripples that lent the image of the dead girl in the water its unearthly—probably taboo—beauty. And whenever Maureen had a toot too many—or sometimes one too few—she would look at Abraham and think about ways in which she could make him pay for destroying her life, as she saw it. First, for the fact that he knocked her up at seventeen, robbing her of a real education and a shot at a substantial life, instead, rendering her beholden to a drunk husband, needy children, and a sometimes-benevolent checkbook. And, secondly, for turning his back, letting her firstborn die.

Martha was born a few months after Irma's death with the cumbrous task to heal the hole in Maureen's heart. She was the surrogate—a replacement—the understudy to the role of Perfect Child, which would perpetually be played in absentia.

"Jesus cries when you do that," Maureen would snap at anyone who did anything wrong before tearing up, the thought and memory visibly too much to handle and the pain too overwhelming to

bear, leaving her little choice but to find solace and silence at the bottom of a chilled martini glass, decorated with a twist of lemon, glistening with rimming sugar, "and Irma too, she's with Jesus now, you know."

And so, Irma was beatified. Irma who would never do anything wrong because dead kids are angels, their memory frozen in time, leaving mortals with much to live up to. Obedient Irma. Dutiful Irma. Immaculate Irma. The child we could never be and whose obvious potential we could never live up to nor remember, for that matter, except for flashes of red-flaming Irma, dead in the cool, blue water.

4

It's not an affective disorder, it's a perception problem.

In the years following Irma's drowning, Maureen lost herself one bit at a time, day by day. Her own death, twenty years in the making as it would turn out, started out as episodes disguised as health issues, some small—a migraine, for example—and others more elaborate.

We knew from her very first bout of descending sadness that something wasn't right, and that it would never be.

We would tentatively ask Abraham, "Is she ok?" And we would get equally tentative—vague—answers.

"Ma's not well," he would say. "She has a headache. She's lying down a little. Don't make too much noise." Or, "Ma's had too much milk yesterday. She not feeling great." Or, "Ma's worried—she thinks she has a lump in her breast."

The progression of her "sick" states were gradual and incremental, set off by the slightest less-than-perfect news, but never going full-blown or symptomatic—unless ripening under a duvet is considered a symptom—and every time the results were predictably similar: Lumps were revealed as benign, coughs was just coughs and more than once she was assured of not dying, and yet, she was not living either. But over time her imagined litany of maladies wore us out.

Maureen turned my father into a liar. She turned us all into liars. Some things were dealt with best through cautious negotiation, playing dodgem with reality and so we all fibbed with aplomb—and cunning—carefully coordinating omissions and deletions.

She would ask each of us the same set of weirdly disconnected questions that, I her head at least, probably sounded like genuine interest and as a result, possibly even felt to her as if she cared. "What did you do today? How was school sweetheart?"

"Ummm… fine," each of us—me, Louis, and Martha—would say.

How could any of us tell her that we were all worried about our academic standing—her face alone would be enough—and past experience had made it abundantly clear that every single thing any of us did or did *not* do at school, was excuse and reason enough for Maureen's next four-day stint in bed, hidden under a duvet. She made sure that, while absent and under self-imposed banishment, she would still manage to fill the air with a toxic mix guilt-tripping and blame. Because since Irma the Genius died, Maureen was fundamentally unable to handle even the most facile things, or, failin that, gather the gumption to just move on—her inability to do either of those things thereby setting a tragic course for what was fast becoming a family of self-taught master-manipulators—strangers to verity—and more than just somewhat skittish around facts. And so for all of us it was business as usual until, a decade later, my then-boyfriend Barefoot Bill one day told me with an earnest look and a deeply compassionate tone how it seemed to him that "you find it easier to lie than tell the truth."

Over time, Maureen's presence precipitated an atmosphere of apprehension as default setting for the house, a constant foreboding jellying the air, making it hard to breathe or function naively like kids do for fear of episodic repercussions. Since she simply did not appear for days on end, the house itself became an alienating organism—an extension of her gloom. In response, we acted increasingly feral, taking to the streets, wilding at the kind of sketchy locales Germiston threw up with regularity on booze and *dagga* bummed off the petrol attendants at the Shell service station up the road, dulling the pain of the hole left when we lost our mother. We'd end the night in the poolroom with its view on the offending body of water that caused all the trouble.

A positive aspect of Maureen's newfound love affair with lamentation and near-catatonia was in how we learnt to fend for ourselves, making perfectly delightful hamburger-helper bolognaise, for example, and—seeing as fresh milk was also a sometimes thing—discovering that Rice Krispies were kinda fun with orange juice. It was possibly during this time that Abraham discovered that having brandy over his cereal was a revelation too, of sorts—a "hair of the dog" take on breakfast, if you will. We learnt to operate the washer and dryer, though, henceforth wore pinkish or bluish white school uniform shirts, causing "child services may have to be consulted" glances from pussy-bowed schoolmistresses.

But Maureen was unaware and we, in turn, were walking on eggs. Although never actually tired or able to sleep, come to think of it, she just lay there—a lumpen heap buried under blankets in the near-darkness with the door ajar, ensuring that her brooding presence would pervade all others who had the misfortune to dwell in the house, intimidating all as they sneaked around like cartoon bandits. Because silence was not only want Maureen demanded—it was a deterrent and, more importantly—a cudgel, brandished around with reckless passive-aggression as she snubbed us. The non-Irma. The ones whose most basic questions were left unanswered, and whose random snippets of news were met with eye-rolls and sighs, and whose attempts at amusing the morose monster that used to be our mother, were met with vacant stares before diving back into her lair.

I'm unsure when my patience ran out. I don't think there was even a line in the sand. Maybe there were many. But *if* there was one that stood out, it may have been when, instead of empathy and understanding, Maureen elicited laughter and inspired disdain for her eternal saturninity. When she became a villain—our own Witch of Endor—whom we could rely on to do awful things that, if we pointed out how easy it was to trigger her and how rehearsed her performance was, would amuse our friends instead of scaring them away. We were poking the bear. And laughing at it.

We knew—Maureen did too—that living with someone else's unresolved issues caused each of us to retreat and stew. It was a bitter pill to swallow. We, too, wanted to be a happy family of jolly

kids who poured over richly illustrated storybooks and grannies, zaftig with marshmallows cheeks reeking of talc and 4711. Homes where father sat contently by a crackling fireplace, tamping tobacco into an Oom-Paul tall bowl pipe, and a beaming mother whose life was given meaning through their baking perfectly crimped apple pies. And then we'd drift off to sleep.

Naturally the terminally depressed and hopelessly melancholic have no interest in gardening. It therefore came as no surprise to all in the neighborhood that following the death of Irma, all maintenance on the elaborate rockery and extensive plantings of shrubs and trees, not to mention the carefully curated restio garden in the back yard, ceased. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy the damage caused by this dereliction of gardening duties went largely unnoticed as the plantings were mercifully water-wise, an aspect of far less importance to begin with since the long summer rain season was predictably abundant and the following winter, reasonably mild with temperatures seldom dropping below zero.

"It's all your fault," she would start at Abraham late at night—drunk and desperate. "You fucked me. You forced me. And then you let the child die."

"Give it a rest. Don't start with me." He would respond and leave the room mumbling, "stupid fucking bitch," under his breath but loud enough for her to hear, knowing it would set her off. And she would uncross her legs which were usually folded under her and roll off the sofa and stumble after him.

"Where the fuck do you think you are going? I heard that," she would shout after him. "I tried to move on. I was going to be the best mother I could be to that child that you force-fucked into me."

"You didn't act like I forced you. You wanted it as much as I did. And you told your friends you wanted it too, so you just quit telling me I forced you."

"You did Abraham—you know it. But I forgave you and then you had to fuck it all up." She would take a breath and look around the room. "There's going to be some changes around here."

On the fifth anniversary of Irma's death, Maureen observed her daughter's passing, by tending to her much-prized rockery. In fairness it was overdue, to say the least. To begin with she carefully removed every single invasive weed which had all reached impressive proportions after years of being left well alone in a near-perfect habitat. Then she started to aggressively prune back at least some of the abundant overgrowth, clearing and shaping the abundant shrubs and bushes, occasionally perhaps leaving some a little on the bare side, but no onlooker could doubt that a deft hand was at work. But, in her eyes and much to our bewilderment, it was not quite enough. Since her initial planting were essentially left to their own devices and given that the carefully curated collection of plantings were indigenous and therefore extremely adaptable, they proliferated, showing vigorous growth over many years. The garden however, even in the absence of any care or nurturing, was still a testament to Maureen's creativity and planning, and at no point did the rockery or any of the beds appear overtly unkempt or neglected, instead taking on a wild, naturalistic country garden aesthetic which seemed to oblivious to the lack of human intervention and instead seemed to have embraced the softness of undulating restio, the structured spikiness of the assemblage of cacti and succulents, lush foliage, and of course, jaunty bursts of seasonal color, courtesy of well-planned bulbs.

But, not satisfied with a minor trim or a gingerly-executed prune, on a warm Monday morning a few weeks later, Maureen removed a large cactus. It took a few hours of hacking at bleeding leaves and the thick trunk and then another few hours hacking out every root. Satisfied, she set about methodically removing a second cactus and a third and, after a a few days—and after having learned a few tricks—she made short shrift of breaking apart one cactus after another. The process turned into a task that would comprise two weeks of near-maniacal hacking, and hours of stuffing to the

brim quite a few rolls of large, green, extra-thick gardening refuse bags. Maureen was, it would appear, determined to hack the garden into oblivion and with each sharp fall of her panga machete, bring an austere emptiness to her once-flourishing garden. Although she couldn't quite put her finger on it, she felt better—more alive—after the removal of each cactus. Inspired, she set her sights on the sea of succulents, and, over the next few weeks, she removed each and every one, dropping mutilated plant pieces in a green refuse bag before raking over the freshly loosened soil. With each removal of every plant, she felt as if she was just a little lighter, relieved at the thought that now she would not be burdened by having to look at the garden she planted during the last few months of Irma's short life—before the nightmare—when she was happy, the kind of young mother to whom a rockery and a lush garden was the stuff of dreams. To her, the raw soil and exposed rock reflected whom she had become. Over the next few weeks Maureen carried on vigorously tackling each shrub and every tree in the garden, first hacking off branches and then sawing the amputated sections into manageable, disposable chunks, before digging around in the soil, not stopping until she had removed every last root. Mercifully, she paused at the peach trees, mostly because they were too big and secondly because Maureen loved sucking the juice out of a ripe nectarine more than she needed to be surrounded by a brown, barren expanse where once a wild garden managed to arrange itself into a memorial of sorts to a dead girl and a grieving mother.

5

I'm a child of Africa—of anxiety and shame.

Incurably insecure, growing up a chubby kid whom even his nanny dubbed *amafutha*—fat in isiXhosa,—my father's daily grooming ritual started with adjusting his thick salt and pepper mane into a neat if somewhat poofy style while he stared vacantly out of the window. He would catch himself, having just spent several minutes checking out from reality and wonder if everyone does the same thing, or whether has brain fog—a neurological disorder—of some sort. But most of all he would be irritated with himself for being absent from the world for even just a few minutes given how short life is. As if he knew. He would return to the task at hand with renewed vigor, mindfully managing the process: a pull, some rough shaping while pasting Brylcreem as far as he goes while feeling for errant strands and, finally, a deft maneuver back-combing specific sections into his pronounced helmet bouffant, a result of a fine-tuned technique developed over a lifetime waiting for shared bathrooms to empty out and eventually just giving up. He learnt to shave in the same disconnected way, with a small wooden bowl of lukewarm water, a badger-hair brush, and his trusty closed-comb double-edged chrome and water buffalo horn safety razor, designed to give a solid and sturdy hand-feel while the blade-gap in the closed-comb head was engineered to be supremely non-aggressive, giving Abraham a close, comfortable shave, feeling his way around.

Over time Abraham's lack of use for mirrors—indeed his downright aversion—developed into a kind of phobia and even reflective storefronts were rigorously avoided through complex procedures. Even he did not quite get why, or what it was that so offended his eye. Truth is, my father never like himself very much, and was seldom prepared for who he saw or how he looked and as a result, he

would scan any reflective surface with lighting speed, evaluating it for a possible sneak view of himself that he was not sufficiently steeled for. Eyes diverted, he started low, gauging the quality of his appearance by his shoes and jeans and then slowly working his way up, he would wonder how others got it right to not look quite so shit. It was, he thought, as if he always looked hot. Unbeknownst to him however, his perpetually downcast eyes and hang-dog expression imbued him with a certain loucheness—that of a moody older guy, albeit with a good head of hair and always expertly groomed, yet always seeming to glare surreptitiously at feet and crotches. Of course, some were turned on by the very same look. Maureen, for example, who was never opposed to being objectified just a little. "What's good for the goose, sweetheart," she would simply respond—reprimand—when others reacted disapprovingly at Abraham's leer.

But Abraham's lounge lizard deportment hardly even hinted at the depth of his self-doubt, nor did it accurately reflect his desperately low self-esteem—which he suffered from, terminally so—because for a 6' 2" man, handsome, enviably slender, and reasonably well endowed, his amorous activities were far from ardent, frequently falling in the plain inability category. He had been aware of—and embarrassed by—his romantic cack-handedness since his teenage years and it had become something that, after marrying his childhood sweetheart, he lived in constant fear of. The possibility—the certainty—of leaving her dissatisfied drove him to distraction. And certain that he did exactly that—he did, by the way—Abraham sought validation from other women. Sometimes sponsored for by Dominion Brushware's generous travel allowances, without fail, every flaccid tryst was mercifully augmented by his bravura displays of cunnilingus, eventually even lead him to mild BDSM excursions, the power-switch dynamics of it feeding into a darker need that he didn't quite understand, but liked nonetheless. Not for nothing, Abraham knew that he'd better learn to eat pussy with the gusto of a snorting wild boar, burrowing for truffles. It was a valiant attempt at distraction, a "look at the birdy—not the camera" of sorts, and when he was done, he would find peace and quiet from self-doubt and resentment at the bottom of a brandy snifter.

Over time, however, Abraham started to question his role as husband, and he even looked at the minor trysts he entered into with suspicion and doubt, resentful that so much of the interaction between him and his sexual partner hinged on his ability to rise to their expectation of him. He resented how Maureen seemed to grow impatient with him, and how she expressed her disappointment on terms that he couldn't quite reconcile, the way that she conflated getting pounded with intimacy and then, in the absence of either, how she then viewed it as some emotional loss. But, he reasoned, she was right about a few things. Never-mind his issues, their sexual life—an interpretative exercise consisting of misread signals if ever there was one—had been misfiring from day one, with Abraham always feeling his wife to be in some distress over his inability, but always stopping short of confrontation or, at the very least, fighting against the inevitability of it all. This all lead to a stand-off of sorts—a silence—where it felt clear to him that Maureen's solution to the problem, at least as far as it concerned him, was to suppress and ignore any and all sexual need, instead pivoting to a strategy that hinged on basic marital maintenance consisting of no sex, with him, at least.

For his part, Abraham considered if his inability to sustain a normal relationship with his wife was a total no-go, a disability, or perhaps, if it was a sporadic thing which seemed to be the case as he did father a total of four of us. Maureen would later claim that her husband was largely absent for most of their marriage—not just emotionally as most suspected was the case considering the shock of Irma's death—but, indeed, that he was neglectful of her and the children and that he grew increasingly cold after the birth of each child, as if her was deliberately trying to extract himself from his family. "I just don't know," she would say to her friend Penny, "he picks at me non-stop, and he is locking himself in his study like he is running away from me, and you know, it feels like he is far way making this relationship cold." It never occurred to Abraham that the emotional vacuum he was creating far outweighed the sexual one he attached so much more value to, and that to

Maureen, concepts like belonging and loving, worshipping and obeying—it was the seventies and eighties after all— were important than fucking. Indeed, caught in limbo, Maureen was quite prepared to shut up and put up, since, for her part, what she craved most of all was the safe harbor that family was supposed to represent at least until Irma died, which shocked her, as up to that point Maureen had not considered how much family, or its loss, could wound.

There was also the issue of just not being on the same page and failure to notice. Maureen was convinced that, as a couple, they were trying to get through this difficult patch by creating alternative and non-sexual intimacy. In her mind, Abraham's was not a problem of affection or lack of it, but rather a type of disease—a syndrome perhaps—that had set its target on what could have been a happy marriage and, as part of collateral damage, was infecting her and making her less effective as part-companion, part-caregiver to her suffering husband. They had grown out of sync primarily because they had stopped talking, or rather, they had never really talked. Had one of them initiated the conversation, had she taken the bull by the horn, so to speak, perhaps the talk could have reduced the feeling of hopelessness in both of them. Perhaps it could have helped shift a few obstacles out of the way for him and alleviated some of her sense of guilt. Talking could maybe have encouraged Abraham to seek professional treatment, medicinal perhaps, psychotherapy, or sex-therapy with focus on cognitive-behavioral change and communication reform. But they never did.

And so, as a result, to compensate for what he perceived as his Achilles heel, Abraham became vain and prone to preening, as if a bespoke suit and a rose-gold Rolex could make up for what, as time went by, had reliably become a limp offering. He would fret over having blocked arteries, high cholesterol and even higher blood pressure perhaps being the cause. Then, for a while, he was convinced it was an early sign of Parkinson's and, a few months later after a few speculative conversations with equally ill-informed but well-meaning male friends who had recently faced the same hurdle, he was certain it might be multiple sclerosis. It wasn't. He would agonize over obesity, obsessively scanning his body for tell-tale signs of metabolic syndrome. And any potential fat. The

merest hint of a belly, outlined in a certain shirt, or any added girth in unwanted places, he would anguish over while subjecting himself to ever more stricter eating plans—taking care, however, to not to pit a damper on his drinking.

Indeed, Abraham did everything he possibly could to avoid having to confront—or cut down on—his drinking, especially in context of possible health issues, bargaining instead that an increase in good behavior would negate the bad. He started training five days a week before breakfast, when the traffic wasn't so bad and he could to the gym in eight minutes, roughly the time it would take to smoke his third cigarette for the day. But, try as he may, he could never get beyond just getting toned and his burgeoning bigorexia would increasingly drive him to distraction, and not to finding a solution to the problem that was driving a wedge between him and his wife. There was no escaping Strijdom stubbornness, something I too, am all too familiar with.

Simply put, there was no way Abraham could carry on ignoring the fact that a large part of what was wrong with him, was her. And that it had always been. In moments of clarity, when he was honest with himself, he would recognize that he didn't find her attractive anymore—and that, frankly, he never really did—but she was his first. So there was that. Over time, he would yield more and more to the realization that Maureen had a predatory aura about her—right from the get-go—even when she seduced him on the banks of the pretty creek that runs behind the school's cricket pitch and then she got pregnant, a thing Abraham's mother was deeply suspicious of, going as far as accusing young Maureen Trichardt of trapping her son and being a gold digger. And he hated her Maureen for that. He felt aggrieved that she stole his youth, as he saw it anyway, trapping him in a less-than-loving marriage and, try as he may, with as many women as he could, the specter of his needy wife would always be there, robbing him of his virility. If ony they had a pill for this, he would think, and give up trying.

ACT 2

1986

6

Episodes of wounding.

For her job interview with Dominion Brushware, a formality if ever there was one thanks to nepotism and her non-stop nagging at the company's president whom she was married to, Maureen chose earrings that were large and dangly—possibly vintage—yet somewhat too "evening formal" considering the time of day. Her hair betrayed a teased rigidity making her appear matronly, if not downright menacing—a thing Abraham noticed for the first time in his twenty-year marriage to her, and something that would continue to bother him for the rest of his, as it would turn out, short life.

But nothing could distract from her glib answers to the slew of low-ball questions posed, and her adeptness at speaking in soundbites that appeared to be far more profound than they actually were.

On how others would describe her. "I think everyone admires my winning personality. Let me give you an example. Just last week I told Cassie, Abraham's new assistant who used to work right here in the Troyeville division, even before the takeover, that, for a girl with such over-plucked eyebrows, she seems to know her stuff."

And, on her biggest weakness. "Honestly, ask my husband, I simply care too much. The feelings of others, to me, always come first."

And so it plodded along. From cliched platitude to banal shibboleth. A masterclass in bullshit.

On the surface, Maureen's responses seemed considered. She made appropriate little pauses, appearing to weigh her words before speaking. She came across as refined, if a little rehearsed, her pussy bow speaking to the brand of modesty she aimed to project, both in taste and character. But, if anything, Maureen Strijdom succeeded in presenting an infantilized version of herself—a daddy's

girl—a thing of delight to horny management men, and of bewilderment to HR who thought they had seen it all when, once, a candidate fell asleep in the fetal position under a desk when left alone for thirty minutes under instructions to complete a psychometric test.

Perfectly groomed, Maureen's flushed complexion and expressive eyebrows animated her anecdotes, her eyes constantly darting sideways as she pretended to grapple with another "revealing truth," hastily cobbling together quixoticisms, and random mentions of her daily triumphs over adversity, memorized—and recited—to within an inch of spontaneity.

Where she saw herself in five years? "I just want to be happy," which was perhaps the most honest thing Maureen had said in years. And, "we're…supposed to…to fit in…to express ourselves as if we're comfortable all the time… as if our, um… as if everything in our personal lives is hunky-dory, but I think the truth is that all of us…you know…are filled with turbulent emotions."

It was an interesting word choice, turbulent. Hailing as she did from a suburbia defined by chainlink fences, scraggly foliage, and bleaching sunlight, her demeanor appeared chagrined and her borderline-saccharine words contrasted sharply with the heavily paneled setting of Johannesburg's—nay, South Africa's—finest brushware company, now well on its way to African domination since Abraham had engineered the hostile takeover of their biggest competitor in Troyeville, a thorny neighborhood in the eastern side of Johannesburg.

A relatively small suburb, Troyeville was home to anti-Apartheid firebrands such as David Webster who, on May 1, 1989, would be gunned down for his fight against Apartheid outside his Eleanor Street home, by a government assassin. The neighborhood was also once home to Mahatma Gandhi who lived in a Victorian-style double-story home with eight bedrooms and a sprawling verandah, at 11 Albemarle Street, between 1904 and 1906, the exact period when young Gandhi allegedly indulged in steamy extramarital activities. An exhaustive archive of letters and photos, eventually purchased by the Indian government in 2012 in an attempt to curate and control the

steamy revelations contained therein, the love of Gandhi's life was German-Jewish bodybuilder, Hermann Kallenbach.[1] "Your portrait (the only one) stands on my mantelpiece in my bedroom," Gandhi expressed in one note to his muscle Mary before continuing that the "mantelpiece is opposite to the bed."

Kallenbach met Gandhi in 1904, just as the Gandhi family was safely ensconced in the Troyeville manse. The two men quickly got into endless discussions around issues of faith and equality leaving Kallenbach so affected by Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha* and equality, that he designed and built them a home, Satyagraha House, a mere five miles away in upscale Orchards, where they would end up living together, supposedly in chastity and mediation. Sure. "How completely you have taken possession of my body," Gandhi's wrote to Kallenbach: "This is slavery with a vengeance."

It was no coincidence, however, that now, suddenly, Maureen was so desperate to get her husband out of the house, becoming so occupied with Troyeville and its aggressive takeover. She had recently been taken possession of as well, willingly ensnaring herself, becoming deeper involved, and falling harder in love with a scraggly guy who made her feel all fluffy inside. Getting the brush gig was therefore the perfect cover, distracting Abraham while giving her ample excuses to stay out late "servicing" clients.

And so, during her riveting performance on that cold day in 1986, Maureen Strijdom led the interviewers down aleatory pathways of allusions and assumptions, leaving all on the interview panel —including her husband—with a one baffling question. What secrets were hidden under the veneer of virtue? Maureen, with the diffident gaze. So clearly—so utterly—lacking in joy.

7

Louis & the Canderel Queens.

In the absence of freedom to come and go in this city we loved to hate—unable to congregate freely with dissident voices in crowded rooms, invading verboten personal spaces in cramped places —small gestures, making a pot of hot tea had become a code, a signal, that despite a certain isolation we ~~may~~ must still share in small rituals that centre us, like making tea. In a place where nerves are frayed and the daily deluge of bad news is in large measure responsible for the fraying as it stokes fires of distrust obscuring basic tenets of humanity, the simple act of gathering becomes a source of strength.

At midnight, June 12th, a decree was issued that covered the entire country giving the nationalist regime sweeping authority and indemnity from prosecution, as well as the right to arrest with no charge and search with no warrant. It was a derogation of civil rights unlike any that preceded it—God knows, that is saying someting—giving the increasingly desperate white government carte blanche to use force. And what a farce it turned out to be allowing any member of the police, the defense force, or railway police, to use any level of any kind of force as they saw fit to force those disobeying orders into submission. Curfews were suddenly on the cards, while promoting strikes or protests was deemed unlawful as was indeed even *thinking* about doing any of that to begin with. Any media coverage of "any public disturbance, disorder, riot, public violence, strike or boycott," was strictly verboten. The police state had landed—with a thud.

In addition, the nationalist government moved at breakneck speed, detaining several members of the End Conscription Campaign, a white activist group that opposed compulsory military service for all white South African men. Boys, really. This news hit home hard as Louis was actively

considering every available option to keep him out being conscripted and ending up a hapless decoy destined for death in the battle for the white nation's survival in some shit hole on the Angolan border waging a made-up, yet lethal, war. In a television broadcast, Prime Minister P.W. Botha bombastically suggested his government knew that their decree would speed international demands for stricter, more punitive sanctions but, he said, the decree represented "the choice between war and a dishonorable, fearful peace." Typical Afrikaner shrug-like move that.

He added that "South Africans will not allow themselves to be humiliated in order to prevent sanctions," before continuing, "we are not a nation of weaklings. We do not desire it and we do not seek it, but if we are forced to go it alone, then so be it." And so we did.

By the time the previous decree of emergency was issued a year ago, months of protests and violence-tinged flare-ups had seen north of five hundred people dead, and that figure rose dramatically over the seven months while the State of Emergency was in force. The killing continued—unabated—reflecting, increasingly, how battles in the deeply sectarian segregated Black townships between government-supported vigilantes and radical freedom fighters were destabilizing the country on a profound and spiritual level. We were, in effect, braced for impact.

There was a knock at my door. To minimize the stress, Louis brought an envelope with two Palais des Thés Rooibos teabags—with strong notes of vanilla and almond— which would require each of us to sit, mug in hand, at the same time, listening to whatever music he had chosen for us to listen to. The true vestiges of the commonwealth reside in the theatre of Afternoon Tea, and the taking of it elevates even the lowliest. In the absence of a caste or even a proper class system—not to be confused with a system of classification which was foisted on the country long before Apartheid got its name—the how and the what of the tea ritual made—and still makes—everyone feel a little superior, and while Apartheid was still fucking the bejeezus out of our beloved country

we braced ourselves, biting the pillow and thanking England. It would take years to learn the habits left by imperial British implicit racim, and understand its nefarious machinations.

Louis, however, free from any political thought or yucky things like social justice, had emerged as a budding socialite—by Germiston standards anyway. On Mondays he had a standing arrangement with a few friends—all gay—and they talked about deep stuff such as Sartre, the meaninglessness of empty capitalism, and the vagaries of being raised to become homophobic homosexuals in a predominantly Calvinist patriarchy. They bitched about gaining weight, whose dick they have to suck to get their hands on a pair of Levis, a currency of sorts at the time since certain fashion brands—considered everyday by American standards—were well nigh impossible to obtain under ever-stricter sanctions imposed with alacrity by super powers who, it has be said, had their own dismal records of segregation and subjugation but still had the nerve to point a self-righteous finger at naughty countries, without any sense of paradox.

Indeed, for the USA, in a mere five years, the chickens will return to roost. It will have to confront its own institutionalized racial and economic inequality following the acquittal of four Los Angeles policemen of the merciless beating of a Black man, Rodney King. Caught on camera, graphic video of the attack will be broadcast into homes worldwide, but the ocular proof will be deemed inefficient to convict the cops, and fury over the acquittal—stoked by a over a century of racial and economic inequality—will flood the streets, and result in five days of rioting in Los Angeles. And it won't be the last time, however, for now, fingering places like South Africa was a fine diversion.

But politics, racial inequality, and the odd fashion faux pas aside, resentment ran deep on a Monday because Louis was willowy—composed—smoking in his mother's lounge. Maureen did not care a jot and, in fact, frequently bummed ciggies from her kids when she ran out. Louis came across carefree but what his friends didn't realize that his was the calmness of a duck furiously paddling beneath the carefully composed surface while straining to stay the course. Little did they suspect that

the young, gay, seemingly vacuous veneer, obscured the fact that he was a young man whom you underestimated at your peril. Nevertheless, Louis knew the art of holding court. "The teeth though. She's *beaulah* alright, but she does look like she can eat an apple through a tennis racquet." He instinctively knew that part of the entrance exam to the pretty-young-things club, meant being nasty about girls whom they adore but dismiss in equal measure. To further drive home the bond that was formed between the gay "othered" at the time, Louis and his friends incorporated Gayle, an interpolated vocabulary—not unlike British Polari—which obscured meaning and context while adding nudge-nudge wink-wink female names as nouns, verbs, or adjectives to otherwise unremarkable conversations, leading to sentences that were declamatory statements for effect rather than invitations as cause for any discussion.

"Ag, pour me a Dora please, Louis." (*Please pour me a drink, please Louis.)*

"What you wearing to Polly's Polka Palace tonight? Not that Reeva shirt again I hope." (*What you wearing to the nightclub tonight? Not that ugly shirt again I hope.)*

"Nothing *opgezoosh* in case the Betty Bangles come to do a raid again." (*Nothing dressed up in case the police comes to do a raid again.)*

"Just smile and mind the Bettiquette. Don't go look for Trudie. They're probably after the Natalies anyway. Wendies are fine, you know." (*Just smile and mind your etiquette around the police. Don't go and look for trouble. They're probably after Black men anyway. Whites are fine, you know.)*

"Think I can bum a Cilla off the Queen of Scotch? Is she here? Is she Debra again?" (*Think I can borrow a cigarette from your mother who is always drunk? Is she here? Is she depressed again?)*

"She doesn't know if it's Christmas or Brazil today. I'm ashes for her." (*She's a little confused today. I don't care for her.)*

"Probably because you're a moffie." (*Probably because you're gay.)*

"Don't talk Sheila. Someday I'll Maureen that bitch." (*Don't talk shit. Someday I'll murder that bitch.)*

Questionable cult-like language aside, my brother had grown into a handsome young man; orthodontically corrected, perpetually working out—a fact his many male admirers appreciate immensely. His natural smile—the obvious ease with which he signaled honesty—coupled with his general openness hinted at his having confronted and overcome his own imperfections and therefore renders him forgiving of someones else's imperfections. *L'egalité à coup sûr.*

The aroma of the freshly poured tea blended with the slight nip in the air, its herbaceous woodsiness immediate and its calming effect, instant. Despite developing into a somewhat of a tea snob—my taste pausing heavily on French Earl Grey with Mallow or Safflower in the blend—we grew up on rough-and-ready Rooibos which we loved especially for its sweetness and soothing earthiness. All South Africans do. It's always been one of those weirdly uniting things—the best brand of course being Laager, not just because of the red and rustic cover art featuring ox wagons pulling in a laager formation—reminiscent of Blood River, but that's another story—but because especially the Laager looseleaf Rooibos, had a wider range of botanical notes, and its slogan, "Strength is our Tradition," had a certain ring to it of you chose to focus on the tea being brewed strong as opposed to a certain inferred nationalism when reading the slogan against the ox wagons. But, I digress.

Special occasions would call for Honeybush tea, harvested and ordered directly from farms in the Overberg region of the Western Cape, but best of all would be a best kept secret. Transvaal Sugarbush *Suikerbos* Protea stems and stalks from the hills on the Suikerbosrand farm, cleaned and dried, would make our most prized tea, not least of all because it was non-commercial, non-regulated, rare-as-hen's-teeth beverage with myriad medicinal benefits but without the antiseptic taste which brings me to its best quality. Sugarbush carries herbaceous undertones of wood and raw sugar and so abundantly fragrant that it may simply be left steeping away on the stove and soon its glorious candied sugar-scent will fill the room, the taste being all of that but with added hot apricot and hint of marshmallow, for good measure.

But beyond flavor and wafting aroma, tea was about more than that with Louis. It's what grounded him. The "strength in tradition" that our tea rituals represented and the memory that even the flavor contained for him. As an infant, Louis wasn't breastfed—Maureen was mid-depression, and admittedly, had contracted a case of tuberculosis—leaving the infant well outside his mother's care. It was a situation that got worse instead of better after Maureen's recovery, leaving Louis somewhat submissive for the rest of his life, craving validation and avoiding confrontation at any cost. As a result of Maureen's emotional absence for most of his formative years, it took him longer than normal to start talking, and so, a lot of what Louis said always seemed carefully curated—rehearsed—in his head, weighed up for possible reactions and preloaded with further quips that would see him accepted and supported.

"*Prépare-toi à te tordre, sœurette*," he shrieked, temporarily forgetting himself. Louis was proud of his extensive knowledge of music—and his insatiable musical appetite—but he was even prouder of his command of French which, given the neighborhood and the quality of a South African whitewashed education, might actually have proven a social liability given the disdain for any elitist ramblings that even resembled anything akin to the *rooi gevaar* that was communism. But never one to hold back, Louis absorbed every lesson at the feet of Madame Spottiswoode, the local French teacher who gained notoriety when she emerged every inch the rampant lesbian and now lives on in infamy and local folklore after driving her girlfriend to a nearby mine dump one afternoon, shooting and killing her before turning the gun on herself. According to the police the couple had just bought a new television, freshly unpacked and in the process of being tuned in, when Madame Spottiswoode snapped.

Louis was always a little swishy after seeing the boys. He threw back his head, resting the back of his hand on his forehead as if nursing a headache—or more appropriately for our afternoon—in the

exact pose of a consumptive heroine in repose after a cabaletta while still two acts away from her final tragic expiration.

"You're homo-honey, you know." I wasn't joking. He was. "I'm not sure about the other boys, though."

"What do you mean? They're sweet."

"No, Louis. You're sweet honey bear. They, however, are much like the Canderel you use instead of sugar in your tea. Sweetish—a little artificial, and with a definite aftertaste."

"I want to play your something amazing," he gesticulated grandly, brushing off my criticism of his friends.

Nothing scared me more than someone armed with a pack of LPs—just the thought of having to sit still and feign interest in diva fantasies would drive me to a desperate edge.

Homo-honey continued unaware of my disinterest, possibly—problably—ignoring it. "I know. It's not French. You would expect Berlioz or Debussy from me—it's not. *Quelle surprise!"*

"I really am not expecting anything. But you do realize you're a becoming an opera queen."

"Anyway," he rolled his eyes, "it's German. Probably the most beautiful piece of music I have *ever* heard—this version though. It's perfect."

I sometimes got a sense of distance from Louis. I tried to break the ice. "The thing about classical is that there's just so music of it. I find it daunting and I don't know where to begin. And it's not as if once is enough. It takes repeated listens."

"It helps if it reminds you of something. If you, you know, recognize a version of the tune, or it makes you think of something."

"OK, like 'Midnight Blue' by Sophie Tucker."

"What the fuck is that? *Who* the fuck is that?

"She had one hit, I think, anyway, it was the early 80s. It had a tinny synthesizer, a two-step beat, and her voice sounded to my white trash ears like she was an opera singer. I mean, not like Jennifer

Rush, but still. And when someone once played the *Moonlight Sonata*, I recognized 'Midnight Blue' and it was amazing. I felt like I knew the one in the piano—although some vocals would have been nice."

"Beethoven just cried in his grave, you philistine."

8

Afterwards we chatted.

My relationship with Barefoot Bill was iffy from day one. He was married. Unhappy. Trapped. Him and everyone else, right? He called me baby after speaking to me for only an hour. I liked it. I called him baby back. We met on a Sunday, the night before my birthday at Café Kranzler on Kotzé Street in Hillbrow, and having made eye contact across a generously stocked cake display counter—filled with Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte, marble cakes, and half-price stollen—he spent the evening sitting next to me on a cream velour banquette, insisting that he order us a slice of cashew cream and white chocolate cake that we shared for three hours until midnight. He kissed me and asked if what was happening was real and told me that he has never met anyone quite like me.

But Bill was married and although unhappy he kept going back like a miserable cat trained to respond to the sound of a can opener. He obsessively checked his watch to calculate how long it would take him to get home and spend hours triangulating the best possible route for getting there—a route that would avoid traffic jams and possible accidents, because there was no lying your way out of a sticky situation in Germiston. He told me he loved me within a week. I told him that I love him back, but I lied. The sex was good and he brought me gifts. One night it was a case of fine wine. On my birthday he brought three grocery bags of fine Italian pastries and a frozen lasagna.

"I'd love to cut your hair."

"What was that?"

"I'd cut your hair. If you let me."

"Are you serious? What do you know about cutting hair?"

"I was a stylist when I was younger. It's how I met my wife. She was a model."

"Why did you stop?"

"The business went belly-up. It's a long story. My brother wanted in and we ended up opening two more salons, running up so much debt that I had to declare bankruptcy and took the first job I could find. But l love cutting hair and, besides, it's sensual."

"And now, you sell motorbikes."

"Harleys."

"Same fucken diffs."

Over time our tenuous tryst grew. Bill's maniacal time-checking ceased until, one day, he told me that he'd left his wife. According to him, he was walking down Rockey Street, Yeoville's terminally bohemian yet pointedly trendy main thoroughfare and a short minute drive from midtown Johannesburg when—having spent weeks weighing his options, searching high and low—he saw a sign.

DON'T CRY.

CALL DOCTOR GUY.

There it was.

Doctor Guy was a talented traditional herbalist and *sangoma* not to mention a crafty wordsmith having the wherewithal to rhyme the English pronunciation of his very Congolese first name. After a little snort of stuff, he insisted that, for a relatively small fee, he would throw bones and summon the ancestors. He would invoke the gods by shaking various rattle-like things while chanting and singing while also dancing around the Nguni skin which served as both comfy rug and consultation space. Doctor Guy was at the apex of his craft. He knew the value of performance art as a means to

increasing the calorie content of a reading, because clairvoyance alone barely pays the rent and why not—whites pay good money for the full "*sangoma* experience" and spend even more to cure love, remedy flaccidity, and induce miscarriages. Some white ladies who hated their husbands even solicited spells and mechanisms to cause an unforeseen, and tragic, death.

But today the bones were clear and his client gullible. The tall man with the worried eyes would require neither long consult, nor multiple bone throwings in anticipation of one special pattern that would trigger a meaning and inspire a grand action. Doctor Guy would only need to throw a quick —halfhearted even—random pattern, because the man had brought with him such an intensity that that there was little denying the outcome of the divination.

"The ancestors can see Mister Bill is troubled. He must put the past to one side. What is done does not need to rest so heavily on the future. It can end in the now. The ancestors say: Pursue your delectation." Doctor Guy got the last bit from a fortune cookie, the night before.

And so Bill pursued his delectation. He went home, left his wife, and drove to Germiston. It was the most important triangulation of his life, he would say. For me, less so.

Bill did all this unbeknownst to me. I was relieved when his custard-yellow Toyota pulled into the driveway as the time had come to part ways. It was clear that, aside from marital issues, he suffered from severe bouts of depression which were bookended by extreme highs—the time we met being a prime example of his all-consuming energy during a high.

"We need to talk."

"I agree."

"It…I've been thinking."

"Me too."

"I don't think we can carry on like this. It seems like we are doomed to just repeat the same cycle every day. And I wonder if that is the best use of our time? I mean, this thing is kind of getting on a bit."

"I agree. I've been thinking the same thing. It's been pre-occupying me for weeks, to be honest. Especially since the very fact of my being here is an act of aggression against the woman I married."

"Well, you see. There's that. Really? That's a lot though, Bill. Your therapist is really working out for you. But anyway. My brother asked me what I thought I was going to do and I told him I had no idea, but, that I was sure we cannot carry on, and that we need to talk. It's awkward though. I worry that you think I'm too impulsive about this. I really value your input in my life—but I…I suspect that you… since you seem to be a little…stuck…at the moment…I don't even know what to call it…this connection of ours that came out of nowhere and has been mostly good for us, now seems a little…constipated."

"Gimme a sec."

I let him take a drag of his Gauloise.

"It's not an easy decision, Bill. It's a big thing. And I have been thinking about the best way to deal with it. And there's the dog you gave me. It's not just you, Bill. It's me too—this is an *us* thing."

"It's incredible that you mention that. I thought exactly the same thing. This is such a coincidence. I was talking to Doctor Guy on Rockey Street and he said that things run their course without us pushing it. That the future does not have to be the same as the past. I think 'dwell' was the word he used."

"That's what I'm talking about. Wait. What? Who is Doctor Guy?"

"He's the *sangoma* near the place that does the calamari pitas you like so much. You know, with the baklava."

"OK, yes, well, that's kind of my point."

"They do make great pita, right?"

"Bill—I feel that we might be missing out on stuff. You know…life. There is more to me than calamari pitas and baklava. I have hopes. Ambitions. I want to move to Cape Town—maybe go and work in the theater there, or open a cake shop, or learn to become a winemaker. The point is. We are more than this."

"Will you move in with me? I left my wife this morning."

I paused for a moment.

"Oh. OK."

And so, after feeling trapped—borderline miserable—for nearly a year, and having the most pedestrian sex imaginable, not to mention spending too many days trolling art fairs and antique barns doing what couples think other couples do and signing up for dance classes at Arthur Murry, here we were: Barefoot Bill was moving in with me. But also with Maureen, and Abraham—and Louis and Martha. The lot of us. It was clearly destined to be a temporary thing. Initially it went well. I appreciated Bill's goofball antics and playing fetch with Sheba, the neighbor's dog. I liked his deft ways around the kitchen and, since he was easy on the eye I liked that my friends were envious and secretly objectified him.

As time went by and the veneer started wearing thin we got roped into student liberation movements, Bill joining because the political temperature had reached simmering point. Whites could no longer be spectators. Black communities started grassroots movements to wrest control over their governance from the hands of the local counsellors who were toadies to the Apartheid machine. Small groups sprouted in Black townships—street by street—mobilizing residents and canvassing for possible delegates, forming local committees resulting in a constant onslaught of protests strikes and boycotts. Magazines ran doomsday articles about sanctions and the government response was that whatever we can't make, or get elsewhere, we don't need. Pepsi left. Coke got bigger; Agfa, gone. Hello Fuji. Bands threatened to stay away, saying that they "ain't gonna play at

Sun City," but many did. Of course no one else on earth wanted them, but who cared: "Lady in Red"was beautiful, no matter what the fallout.

South Africa was slipping into anarchy. Breaking the shackle would require force. The people's demand for self-governance got stronger and their voices louder as ordinary people braced for turbulence realizing that the non-threatening, non-violence Ghandhian Way was fast coming to an end and we were now knee-deep in the 1986 State of Emergency. Everything running counter to orthodoxy was declared "subversive," and ordinary policing became a quasi military endeavor. Parts of the country became an orgy of people's resistance and government response: break-ins, assassinations, torture, riots, ritual killings, bombings, disinformation, fear: apocalypse. In other parts, life carried on. Regardless.

Anything is possible in life. Anything can happen. Sometimes, when too much happened, as the decade was moving to a close and positions of authority or legitimacy were being threatened by a new political dispensation, frayed nerves would have the otherwise sane and sensible blurt out the quiet bits. Fancying themselves under threat—but, in fact, politically impotent by their own hand—made entitled white Africans completely lose their composure as they raged against the *swart gevaar*, the black threat, and the dire imagined consequences in the wake of an all-but-inevitable Black ascendency. South Africans—white ones—also developed a penchant for morbidity, talking about the coming revolution and the reckoning that surely awaited at every turn without doing anything about it and without, in a meaningful way, trying to accept some blame or offering the merest mea culpa as a measurable token of contrition. As a result, political correctness born—not as the PC police, gaslit version that would invoke ire in the future—but as a tool towards establishing a lexicon of healing. A way of pointing out that certain words or concepts are loaded. And that rebuilding our country as a democracy would demand at the very least, that our words be less divisive. That we simply think before we speak. Barefoot Bill had a long way to go with this concept.

"Not everything is a Black thing. We just can't seem to get away from this. It's defining us. It's controlling us."

There was nothing quite like the sheer tone-deafness of well-meaning white saviors who cared too much and did too little. It was, after all, still their world. And the sheer imperialism of his worldview coupled with his obtuse inability to understand neither his performance of whiteness nor its toxic way of bearing witness to social change both painful and boring in its deliberate repetitiveness. Clearly, his days were numbered.

Bill was next in a long line of men chosen by me for their short-circuit potential, thereby guaranteeing minimal emotional expenditure while maximizing possible pleasure outcomes. It allowed me to create little episodes of dependence which would set in motion a barrage of complaints about the unforeseen burdens that seemed part and parcel of grown-up relationships which would lead to audacious moves as they force the liaison to its inevitable conclusion, some downright ending it, while others started to warm up for their planned runner by minimizing the intensity of the dalliance until it suffocates.

But not Bill. He stuck around like shit on a blanket.

"Do you want to talk about last night? Did you dream about your dad?" His tone was cloying.

"Why? That's weird."

"It sounded like you did. You bolted upright and you were scared. Don't you remember?"

"No. I really don't want to talk about it."

And so I closed the door on the discussion. What was there to say? That Bill was less of what I craved? That I had been consumed with anxiety for weeks? That I was concerned for my father's well-being and equally suspicious of my mother's buoyed behavior not to mention her newly-refreshed appearance? I could have told Bill that Maureen's drinking has always mirrored Abraham's addiction to sluts and slots—he would spend entire nights at the subterranean gambling joints—and that since Irma's death and her husband going AWOL in their marriage, she was no slouch when it

came to polishing off a bottle of brandy herself. I could have told Bill that I could feel a noose tightening around this family—even more than usual.

But then, Bill would only try to pacify me, encouraging me to try and see the good in people and M. Scott Pecking my way around our pain before spewing bullshit about "feeling better when I cut her some slack" before landing on self-help gold, "because sometimes good people have bad days."

"Fuck you, Bill. Sometimes bad people have even worse days. I don't have to take it."

"I think we need to move out of this house babe. It's not good for you here."

We settled down in a commune on a smallholding just outside the city on the way to Kyalami, a Formula 1 racetrack not far from Alex, a township with a significant unplanned population which, since inception in 1912, overloaded its lacking infrastructure to such an extent that water pressure was laughably low with sewers frequently getting blocked, overflowing as a result—a less laughable situation. Maintenance of such systems was difficult because high density and backyard development mades access well-nigh impossible in places.

Kyalami was not without its quirks either. The original Grand Prix circuit was built in 1961, hosting eighteen F1 World Championships between 1967 until 1985. Niki Lauda became the most successful driver at Kyalami, with third and final victory in 1984 while greats like Alain Prost, Nigel Mansell, and Jackie Stewart were joint second-most successful drivers at the circuit, with two wins each. The track was unbelievably quick by the standards of today, not a straight-line slipstreamer like Monza, but a never-ending roller coaster of sweeps, curves, undulating crests and exhilarating dips. It was loud on race days but them we were seldom at home long enough to care since everyday brought new political fallout to protest over.

We would spend evenings in quasi domestic bliss—as domestic as one could get in a nosy commune—at the Kyalami farmette, getting stoned on Durban Poison cultivated behind the house from seeds and we would lie around and talk about starting a band. As luck would have it, some guys

who actually *had* a band on campus moved onto the adjacent smallholding—girlfriends in tow. From our ramshackle yet enchanting farmhouse you could walk across fields of cosmos flowers in April, and get to their equally distressed home. It was the best decision to move to Kyalami and, for a while, our Elysian bliss sustaining me, our new-found peace—the direct result of a cessation of hostilities with Maureen—distracting me.

On a morning in late-April Bill surprised me by putting a box on the bed.

"Happy birthday."

"It's not by birthday, babe." I noticed the box move. "Am I high? Did that box just move?"

"Yes, you're high. But yes, it moved."

I frowned, trying to figure out what was happening.

Bill touched my knee and leaned over to kiss me. "And you'd better open it."

All things end and Max, the ever-attentive Golden Retriever who looked more like a flaxen bear than a dog, was a harbinger of the fate that would befall my relationship with Barefoot Bill. I loved Max. I think he loved me. I think Bill loved me too. I did not—neither myself nor him.

A tiny snag was that sex with Bill was awful, requiring of me Oscar-worthy performances simulating a veritable apotheosis, thereby unwittingly feeding his ego—stroking it—conditioning him into believing that his ho-hum moves were somehow those of a bonafide Lothario, dooming every one of his future partners to sub-par, shoddy sex. But, in my defense, it was easier just to moan—convincingly cross-eyed—executing a few mildly convulsive movements, rather than engage in exhausting conversations aimed at soothing his wounded pride, and try to convince him that it wasn't his skills, but rather my demons that prevented my reaching climax. I was my mother's child: needy, distant, and eternally dissatisfied. But some men don't notice, so wrapped in their own experience that their partner fades into a comprimario role such as sturdy stooge, lovable buffoon, or, in this instance, needy basketcase with mother-issues.

A few days later I accidentally let slip to my counsellor that my relationship with Bill seemed arbitrary, sexually mismatched, and socially doomed, due to his constant flippancy and, of course, his checkered past. After liberally spilling more guts—the usual stuff: Maureen, Abraham, Irma who would have been the world's greatest lover, blah blah blah—she suggested I try something else. Another guy, maybe—in the name of research, of course. It was an unexpected, somewhat surreal recommendation.

"Are there *any* men that you find…shall we say…compelling?" Dr Isserow had a heavy Yiddish accent.

"Yes. The guy…my Art History professor."

"What would happen if you simply ask if he would like to have a cup of coffee after class someday? And then see what happens." She winked saucily on the word coffee, enunciating it as if she was saying a dirty word.

"I could never."

"You could try."

Convinced by Dr Isserow's raised eyebrows and sassy incantations—not to mention her no-nonsense Jo'burg logic—I decided to let no more grass grow under my dragging feet, and with military precision coupled with exceptional timing after the next lecture, I approached my prey.

"Would you like to join me for a cup of coffee after class, at your convenience of course?"

"Sure. What are you doing right now?"

And so we engaged in a sordid affair—both of us unfaithful, though he a little more than me as he was married and to be honest, being the true adult in this situation he should have known better. But he knew what he was doing and I was grateful because I felt for the first time ever what sex was. It was also a lesson in wielding sex a weapon, enabling me to confront Bill. And stand up to the specter of Maureen.

In the weeks that followed my resolve to stay the course with my newfound paramour did not fade. If anything, it grew stronger.

"This is not really working, Bill. It's not a relationship. But don't worry—I'll take care of it. I'll move out, and you take because I'm seeing this other man and you're…well you're not seeing anybody and you'll be lonely." I gave him Max, and I moved out. But, as is frequently the case with best laid plans, I did not move in with the prof after all as I had hoped, planned, and bragged. He got cold feet—they often do—forcing me, tail between my legs, to move back to Germiston. Jim and Max stayed on in Kyalami.

I don't remember much about the next few weeks. Days blurred together as I settled in, getting used to life under Maureen's erratic rule and frequently jumping in my car and driving off aimlessly, exasperated and desperate to just be. It's a weird feeling—the suspicion that your life poised for change. All that was expected of me was to assume the position. To be ready. To gird my loins and jump.

I woke up especially early one morning, a few weeks later. I was feeling anxious after my restless night with so little sleep. I remember that in my dream that night I was sedated but lucid, standing in a silent place in profound yet menacing darkness, barely able make out what space was. A shard of light appeared in front of me—a horizontal beam—and on the other side of the light, Max trotted up, stopping right at its edge. He looked at me, cocking his head to one side, holding up a front paw. I called loudly, "Max—Max—Maxieeeee!!" like I used to. He just stood. Unresponsive. After a long time, staring at me, he looked away as if being called by an unseen, unheard voice. I hadn't noticed up to that point, a stern-looking woman dressed soberly in a gray business suit and white blouse, standing to the side of Max, observing me. Max looked intently at her and then looked back at me. He was a being such a good boy. I was silent—unavailable—not really there. He was probably

waiting for me. To call him back to me. To say something. He looked at the stern woman again, watching me simultaneously out of the corner if his eye.

"Well, Max, if you want to go with her, that's all right. It's OK."

Later that morning, the phone rang.

"Is it OK if I stopped by to see you later this morning?"

"Sure. I'll be here."

A while later there was a heavy knock. Bill was a sturdy man always wearing his engineer boots—the bane of Maureen's existence—and I looked nervously to see just how caked with mud they were before ordering him to take off his boots and leave them outside. Easier said than done, because by that stage of any visit, Max would be pushing past Bill, jump all over me, and demand attention.

"Where's Max?"

"That's…why…I'm here."

He looked at me the same way I saw Abraham look at Maureen my whole life. With little emotion and even less empathy Bill told me that Max was hit by a car the previous night. He died that morning. Apparently, Bill went for a walk next to the farm. It seemed, much like the men in my life tended to do, he "kind of…sort of…just forgot to pay attention." A car ran a stop sign and hit Max.

"I picked him up…from the side of the road. I carried him back—he was so weak. I put him on his favorite sofa, the striped one, and I sat next to him." Bill patted his head, he said. Until he died.

"I am sorry," he said.

9

Sometimes nothing happens.

An average swimmer, ordinary looking, and scholastically lackluster, Martha never questioned her interest in fleshy appendages and wobbly bits. Never one to ponder the complexities of life, it would be fair to say that she surprised even herself by just how extraordinarily intrigued she was by the bait and tackle of the boy physique. And when her friends fantasized about frosted tips, and how to not get pregnant while doing the only thing that can get them that way, Martha would plaster her locker with posters of teenage heartthrobs sporting wayward penises, and cocksure cricketers with a VPL.

When she was younger, Martha would lie on her stomach next to the sofa watching TV thinking she was invisible or something, rolling from side to side and pressing her body against the carpet so hard watching The Hoff jump into KITT, that Maureen would lean over, grab her by the scruff and tell her cut it out, before shooting any visitor—mostly Auntie Penny—a wink and a knowing smile.

Maureen was never comfortable with Martha's friendliness. She was just too chatty with strangers and too eager to jump on the sofa with Abraham when no one else was in the room. Maureen complained bitterly to anyone with ears that her husband was spending way too long downstairs under the "cuddle blanket" and not nearly enough time with her—she would make loud coughing noises and slam a few windows in the hope of putting a stop to Martha and her father's chuckling and chortling. So concerned, Maureen developed a skin rash out of sheer worry about her daughter's emerging sexuality, but truth be told, she was more concerned about being usurped in her role as siren than for her daughter's emotional well-being and development.

For this reason, Maureen decided to stay very close to Martha and conceal any hostility she felt towards her. It was during one such period of frisky game playing invariably ending in a run to the swimming pool in underwear only that Maureen had the first of what would be a life defined by lack of sleep and disconcerting dreams. She dreamt that she was in bed when an atom bomb detonated over her bed. Her own flesh incinerated and what was left of her skin, a waxy dripping substance, she turned and saw that her children and husband had all befallen the same fate, except Hannah, who was radiant, holding a baby.

"I don't know, lovie. I just told my boyf, Dirk, that we need to be so grateful for the chance God has graced us with. I'm so lucky. Only got eyes for me, that one."

Auntie Penny, Maureen's best friend who lived across the street was over to watch the news, as she had done since becoming friends in the 1970s. Happily divorced, she has recently started dating a man who worked for Germiston police. Dirk. Her "boyf," as Penny would aim to populate as many sentences and conversations with references to him.

"My boyf, Dirk, drove all the way to the Doll House in Orange Grove for burgers last night. He is SO sweet."

And, "Dirk, my boyf, doesn't like me to wear much makeup. He says guys like seeing clean skin and pink lips. You should try it Maureen," to which mother replied that she suspects Dirk meant Penny's other lips, and that hers were plump, and pink.

"I think he meant he can't see past your bush, sweetheart."

To be sure, the fact that Dirk took Auntie Penny to the Doll House was less an act of selfless love and no expression of a man with hopes of climbing the culinary tree. The Doll House was an institution, but not for the reasons most would think. It was food in the sense that you could eat it—the beef was vaguely beefy, but it could have been dog for that matter and the lettuce was soggy,

probably reconstituted and re-plated, while the tomatoes were limp but the onion rings were eyewateringly peppery and crisp. Dating back to 1936, the roadhouse was in institution from day one. Precious little was open after ten in the Jo'burg burbs and the Doll House came with the benefit of impromptu late night drag races down Louis Botha Avenue, the side streets blocked by cars parked sideways.

The Doll became the place to be seen after a night out. Or the place to go if you came from Germiston. All kinds gathered there. Temple Shalom next door, with its Reformed values, tolerated the heady aroma of near-incinerated bacon with grace though for sure, during the fast on Yom Kippur it must have been unbearable. But the place was more than bad burgers and a sign proclaiming, "No Hooting—Please Flick Lights."

Set against the charged atmosphere of the late 1980s, The Doll House appeared almost Roman in its trenchant aggression. A colosseum of sorts, where angry white men would battle each other, fighting dirty, until one's neck was broken under the weight of another's foot. It brought out the worst in its patrons. Unlike its role model, the American roadhouse—replete with its nuclear family mythologies where bobby-socked families remained ensconced in luxury vehicles while served by peppy college kids on roller skates—the Johannesburg version was a different animal.

Because in Johannesburg, the golden city on the hill that Apartheid built, service and indentured servitude looked very similar. Here it was a Black man in a bowtie and a submissive grin that served white clientele in the most servile way imaginable—knowing that he'd better scrape and perform for his measly tip of he's lucky, and that he'd better get comfortable with the insults and invisibility that defined the Black experience in a city such as this. And, of course, he'd be the butt of the joke when Dirk, despite what the sign said, hoots maniacally—and Dirk showed him who was the boss of whom.

All Maureen and Penny's talk about Dirk made Martha want to look at him all the time. She was obsessed with the fit of his polyester trousers and they way the made a little tent where his dick was when he sat on the sofa. She instinctively knew that she cannot —dare not—be caught dead staring, and so she played cock-a-boo as often as she could. Glimpses of the real thing, zipped up, tantalizingly close, and yet so utterly forbidden as she rubbed Sheba, Penny's fox terrier, against her lap so hard that one night she ejaculated in her panties. Her moan, the result of her newfound love of frottage, make Dirk look sideways and smile at her. She died.

Her senses heightened by her surreptitious rubbing and compulsive staring Martha grew to love his smell: musty, a little sweaty, a hint of tobacco, and once on a Sunday, after helping Maureen carry a heavy ceramic chip-'n-dip bowl to the kitchen, he returned with a barely detectable floral note that Martha could not quite put her finger on. It reminded her of Maureen's special occasion Anais Anais, coincidentally worn at mass that morning, the scent wafting behind her as she left the pew to receive the sacraments.

Dirk, on a Sunday night in the future, would smell of rose a little too much and Auntie Penny would shout "She's all over you," and wail "She's in your beard. She's all over this room. Her cheap fucking *Lace*." Auntie Penny would try to cut her wrists a few hours later—*Lace* still thick in the air when her kids will discover her and accuse Maureen as the bearer of the rose/oak moss scent, the iron from her blood mingling with Yardley's relentless perkiness.

"I don't wear Lace, sweetheart. Cacharel for me. Anais Anais," which she pronounced as Anus Anus, Maureen would replay a few days later when visiting her recovering neighbor. "Besides. It's ridiculous. What grown woman would wear such cat piss? It's a scent for horny sixteen-year-olds, don't you think, Martha?"

But on this night was Martha was still young. She was at Dirk's feet. On the carpet. Looking up she could see a bulge in Dirk's jeans. She looked away, seeing the bulge when she closed his eyes

again, smelling his smell. She put her head on the carpet, right next to his shoes. He could smell them—him. She wanted to be inside them, deeply inhaling the leather and his muskiness, smelling the man with the bulge who was stuck in her head. She was her mother's daughter.

10

Giving up on life is so easy to do.

"I've never touched her hair," Louis said in an uncharacteristically serious tone.

"That's a weird thing to remember."

"It's not about the hair. It's that she always seemed to pull away. Like she did not want her hair touched."

Sitting beside me, Louis seemed to be oddly at peace when he spoke of Maureen. "*She* did not want to be touched. But she was movie-star beautiful. It was so soon after Irma, I remember mom trying to feed me, holding up a silver spoon and I remember wondering if she was trying…I knew…I knew she didn't want to raise another baby. That was clear from my very entry into her destroyed world. I have no memory of her. Of sitting in her arms or touching her or of sitting in her lap. Ever. What I do remember is sparse and hostile. I sat there, looking at the silver spoon, feeling her intense sadness, waiting for me to open my mouth and wondering, is this poison? How I even knew that word—God knows."

"You know, she drove us both crazy and by the time I was six or seven, the hostility between us had grown thick and impenetrable. I'd be in my bedroom, randomly torturing bears and dolls, and she'd call me from upstairs after having been quietly drunk—mercifully incapacitated—for a few hours. I would go and sit at the bottom of the stairs. She'd be at the top just yelling down at me about everything that was wrong with me: what a gigantic disappointment I was, how much Irma suffered, and how she was now sitting with Jesus, weeping. And how ungrateful I was. I would just sit there and listen. Finally, she'd just stop, as is a switch had been flipped. She would turn around, go back to her room, slam the door, and I would go back and continue torturing my dolls and bears."

Louis seldom spoke in past tense terms because much about his relationship with Maureen was hard to comprehend and even harder to share with anyone. As a baby, feeling threatened and unloved, he refused to eat and didn't drink much—certainly nothing that came from her—so he could barely poop. Louis has also suffered from a life-long suspicion that Maureen was trying to poison him, which certainly did not help. But there he was, emaciated, thirsty, and perpetually wailing living with a mother who would rather not have had to deal with a stubborn shitless child. Therefore, when the time came to potty-train Louis, Maureen was essentially sequestered in a bathroom waiting for this kid who was, for all intents and purposes, empty. There was simply no poop. And, since he was severely dehydrated, whatever *was* in there, couldn't move. And so there they were, stuck in the ugly upstairs bathroom, staring each other down for extended periods when time would simply stand still, every day, waiting for poop that won't happen. Maureen, sitting with her back against the door, her legs stretched out in front of her, smoking one cigarette after the other, and Louis, propped up in the shower with the curtain open. "I can still see the stripe and arrow pattern on the tiles pointing at her on the floor and I can still remember wishing she would get up and leave. Or that I had to," he once concluded aloud when asked about his earliest memories of his mother.

For Maureen, life was mostly boredom, Stolli, and making her children as miserable as she could. Her weird hate towards Louis was curated from a very early age, frequently for example, telling him that he was adopted. She encouraged him to live in a constant state of gratefulness lest he be sent back from whence he came—by the sounds of it a Dickensian workhouse replete with furnaces and ritual whippings—a place of such horror that no matter what Maureen meted out, it would pale into comparison with her description of the fresh hell served up at that orphanage.

The eldest, after Irma's death, Louis had no one to verify the facts of his alleged adoption and, given his flaxen hair, round face, Abraham's nose, not to mention a potato-famine build, it because

increasingly unlikely that he was indeed the spawn of some other hapless teenagers in the throes of hormonal lust.

And so, to prove a point on a warm midsummer day when the gin had run out and Louis made the fatal error of running in from the swimming pool—dripping wet—leaving feet-shaped puddles of poolwater on the linoleum and equally large wet spots on the rug all the way to his room, Maureen snapped. Another, more reasonable mother, may have laughed. A housewife teetering on the edge of a manic fuge state or nervous breakdown may have sighed and rolled her eyes. The most house-proud anal-retentive schoolmarmish bitch may, conceivably, have shrieked a "heavens to Betsy" and called a maid to wipe up the mess. But Maureen was not any of that. Not in her increasingly unhinged book. Instead, Maureen sighed, "well. That's it. I've had enough of that fucking little bitch."

Her heels clicked purposefully over the tiled floor as she headed for the telephone table—the epicenter of the house—in the dining room. An acoustic wonder, the telephone table was positioned next to a door just off the passage and visible from the kitchen's passthrough hutch. It was fair to say that if our house was a palace and Maureen its queen, this was the exact spot from where she would rule, swaying a leaky black Koki pen like a scepter.

The sound of her long nails trying to negotiate the rotary dial reverberated through the house. "Oh. Hi Mrs Vorster. It's Maureen Strijdom of Germiston just outside Johannesburg here." He voice was theatrical. It was her story voice. Still, it was unclear if she spoke to a real person on the other side.

There was a long pause laden with possible meaning and ripe with meaning and symbolism.

"Well, I hope you can help me. This boy I got from you has turned out to be very naughty. I'd like to send him back."

Another overly long pause followed.

"Yes Mrs Vorster—he is one of yours. I would never have had such a useless child."

A longer pause. But this one punctuated by an "Ahhh," an "Hmmm," and an "Uh-huh." They sounded sympathetic.

"Well. Louis is a very bad boy. I don't want him anymore. He is ungrateful to me and doesn't appreciate the things I've done for him. I think it best if he goes back to the orphanage. I cannot live with him for a single day longer. He doesn't listen. Doesn't behave. I have done with him. I'm tired of crying all the time over a nancy boy. I can do no more. Louis is impossible to love. Can you send someone to collect him?"

Fear replaced bemusement. Maureen was not bluffing. How was this possible? Could she even do this? Was Louis really adopted?

"Alright then. I'll have Louis pack a suitcase."

The mood, as we listened from the stairs, turned increasingly somber. Louis was crying loudly begging her to stop. To forgive him. To give him another change so that he could show her that he, too, could be a good boy.

"Of course. No rush. His suitcase will be packed. We can leave it by the door and no, it's fine, you can come at any point over the next month. Maybe that will teach young Louis a lesson. I'll say goodbye to him now and he can wait outside for you. Maybe his new mother with do better with him."

And so, for the next few days, Louis's little suitcase sat the by door, with him dutifully waiting next to it.

No one came. But something did leave our house that day. Call it love.

It was hard to know if it was the sight of poolwater in the house, or whether it was a deep realization that, once again, her kids where unattended by the same gunite hole in the ground that took her firstborn a few years prior. But something snapped in Maureen that afternoon. The next day she called around until she found someone who could come bay and drain every last drop of water from her Greek idyll and, underling the fact that she was, now, in a radically compromised

headspace, she started meticulously removing every agapanthus, every aloe, and every tree she had planted during the house-honeymoon phase when she still called her husband Braam. It was as if every living thing at 15 Sandilands Road had to pay the price for her brokenness—had to be disconnected from life or stripped of hope—and all that would be left was a grey barrenness.

Out of all of us, Louis had the hardest time dealing with the rudiments of living with a mother like Maureen. Certainly, after Irma, but especially after Abraham's murder. It unsettled him deeply, knowing how unprepared we all were for the harshness of life without the safety-net represented by our father.

He paused and, without realizing, his tone darkened like it sometimes does nowadays. "We need to do what is right. Time is running out. As we get older the landing strip seems to get so much shorter."

"You're lucky. You have your Dutch good looks and a gorgeous girlfriend…"

"Friend," he interrupted.

"Who adores you, by the way. I meant girl who is your friend."

Louis thought for a moment. "She's cool. I do love her. But of course, not in *that* way!"

"I can tell. You tried to use kuchi-whatsit in a sentence the other day."

"Kuchisabishii…" he said solemnly.

"I'm still on wabi-sabi," I interrupted.

"It's when you eat because your mouth is lonely."

"I love that."

I watched Louis stub out his cigarette. He had a softness about him that was only occasionally betrayed by his struggling with his ambivalence towards Maureen—he kowtowed in her presence while being barely able to restrain himself from his hatred of her when she was not around. And, without fail, Louis would pivot from joy to melancholy at a bewildering pace, a trait he inherited

from her, no doubt. I counted myself lucky as Maureen constantly railed against Louis, calling him names—Gramma Mollie's wake, for example—when Maureen told everyone that Louis gave Grammol cancer because she was so worried about him being a "fucking poofter."

"Remember that time when I set the curtain on fire," he whispered softly, as if telling a secret or like he was embarrassed. "And how she beat me with a leather belt to teach me a lesson?"

"I do. All the neighbors were staring out of their windows. You *were* bleeding. And screaming blue murder."

"She humiliated me. By design. All those people watching. Her screaming. And yet, you know, I felt nothing. She could have beaten me to death. I just remember seeing all the neighbors and feeling so ashamed that I was being punished so publicly. By my own mother. I didn't even feel my ear." He looked away, frowning.

"You did nearly burn the house down. And you had your ears pierced. I actually don't know which one pissed her off more."

During the beating, Louis lost a chunk of earlobe when Maureen changed her grip on the belt mid-lash, the buckle getting away from her, and it hit him against the side of the head, the prong getting stuck in the small earring, ripping a chunk of lobe right off his ear. "There was so much blood, remember?" He smiled broadly—unexpectedly—like people who've dealt with something sometimes do, as if he was trying to make me feel comfortable.

But there is no getting comfortable—ever—with the sight of your maniacal mother physically abusing your brother until, and only when, she is stopped mid-strike by the sight of gushing blood from his head forcing her to rush him to the local hospital under pretense of some vague accident in the games room, "you know how kids are. Maybe you can just put the little flap of ear back, doctor?" But there was no sewing the chunk of lobe back on and, a few stitches later, mother and son were seated at a nearby cake shop enjoying elaborate strawberry, ice cream, and jelly parfaits. Maureen regaled all and sundry, repeating her games room fabrication not suspecting for a minute

that, by now, the whole neighborhood had heard about the thrashing she gave her son, thereby solidifying her already-sketchy reputation. At least she made a silent commitment to herself that she would seek help for her drinking and anger. And that she would not beat any of her children again.

"She talked so much shit my whole life. It was weird. She never did hit me again. And you know, funny thing was, it wasn't love or affection. But, at least, I felt something."

There was a long silence. I sat staring ahead, thinking about all the ways in which our mother had affected us. Louis sat with his head lowered.

"What is it that you felt?" I asked quietly, not wanting to put him on the spot, and not expecting an answer.

"Hate."

11

I won't regret my choice.

"What have you been up to, sweetheart? I had to come and see how you were. I worry about you out here in your little place. Aren't you cold? There's a real nip in the air today."

Having her cup of tea, Maureen was etched against the unbearable blue—her favorite old-bruise blue—faded in some areas and greasy in others where the oil from my frying bacon and eggs has left a sticky residue that attracted dust and gnats. The poolhouse kitchen was an oddly large space which over the years had only seldom been used by the family most notably during periods of renovations at the main house, that may have rendered the house kitchen out of commission. The space certainly never lived up to its intended use—due to obvious reasons—as a summer kitchen, given its location near the swimming pool and the fact that it faced due south, escaping the bright light and searing heat of the average hot African summer.

"What's up with you sweetheart?" She said, taking another little sip, her tone hardening almost imperceptibly when she said the last two words. She gave me a wry little smile, but her tone betrayed that she was uncomfortable with who I was and therefore putting up a facade of acceptability—as she saw it—hence the teacup, the girly voice, and the forced little smiles. Even as a child I hated it when she called me "sweetheart" or worse, "my dear." Maureen had a way of insinuating—an unsaid tonal judgment. A few pitches lower the same words would have signaled kindness or even generosity—as it did when she deployed that very tone for those she wanted to impress. She addressed Louis, for example, with a different cadence, an indulgent one—albeit the same pitch she used for me—and it ended up sounding a little more like someone negotiating a response and treat episode with their dog.

The tone she reserved for me, was pointed and steely. It told me that I didn't fit in. That I was alien to her now and to the woman she was when she bore me. The sound of her words jarred with the meaning they were meant to convey.

Today, though, she sounded raspy and slurred, the way the overly tired do, although it was only eight in the morning and her tonal stabs at resentment seemed somewhat manufactured, lacking the frisson I had come to expect from a first class bitch, such as my mother.

"I'm a fucking ball of nerves, you know. This country is going to shit." Maureen placed extraordinary value on a wrapt and riveted audience and, to that end, gauged engagement with automated precision. True to form, she paused in dramatic fashion side-eyeing me, the signal indicating that nothing less than a compassionate gaze and a tone to match in response would suffice. I obliged accordingly.

"What are you so upset about, mother?"

"Well, since you asked, it's these necklacings I've been hearing so much about. It's so barbaric. I can't believe it. I just read *The Star* this morning and a woman was burnt to death. It was caught on TV. Unfuckingbelievable. These anti-Apartheid guys put a car tire around her neck, poured petrol over her and then set her on fire."

The woman Maureen was referring to was Maki Skosana who was suspected of being an informant, and her agonized screams as she burned to death were for many their first time witnessing a form of public execution that would reverberate around the word. Out of all the awful ways to die, necklacing was particularly brutal. A throng of angry vigilantes, desperate for justice and with nothing to lose, would force a car tire around the neck and arms of the convicted, the tire resembling a macabre necklace and so heavy that the petrified victim about to be immolated is essentially restrained, unable to get away. But some in the mob would take it a grisly step further, roughly amputating the hands of the victim. Next, the victim would be set on fire and while their skin burned and roasted, the car tire would liquefy and render searing hot tar, leaving the corpse to

burn until it, too, was completely incinerated beyond recognition, the charred remains quickly earning the nickname—Kentuckies—so-named after the fried chicken franchise. The act necklacing was so entirely outside the scope of what it means to be human, so insanely cruel that then-Bishop Desmond Tutu warned, after saving a man from angry mob in Duduza, Johannesburg in 1985 that "if you do this kind of thing, I will find it difficult to speak for the cause of liberation. If the violence continues, I will pack my bags, collect my family and leave this beautiful country that I love so passionately and so deeply … I say to you that I condemn in the strongest possible terms what happened in Duduza." But it wasn't the end. And necklacings would become symbolic of a certain liberation appetite, one that drove already-nervous whites to the edge of stress disorder.

"When is it our turn? I'm shitting myself. And I cannot talk to you father acout this. And you know," she continued with wide eyes in hushed tones, "Winnie Mandela herself said earlier this year that they will liberate this country with their boxes of matches and their necklaces."

It's a weird feeling, sitting in the floor with your mother whom you actively disliked, and knowing that everything you have ever been taught is wrong and that now, the only thing you can be sure of is that you cannot be sure of anything. All you can do is sit it out, not make a noise, not get noticed, and hopefully make it out alive. For a while it felt like jumping without a parachute, still hoping for a soft landing.

"But come on sweetheart," said Maureen after an extended pause, offering me a cigarette which I accepted gladly. "Let's talk about something else. Tell me about this gorgeous hunk of a man that's been around here a lot less." Maureen dragged on her Black Russian and stared into the distance of the greasy blue wallpaper. To casual observers she would have appeared delightfully theatrical—life of the party kind of stuff—and got prove the point she wore ostentatious flea-market earrings each decorated with six tiny bells that shivered nervously as she moved her head, tinkling just enough to break bleak silences with cheap cheerfulness. She looked like a drag queen—like a young Granny Lee on the patio at Connections, the gay bar in Hillbrow.

"And as you know—I accept everybody. But he was a little too high calorie, don't you think? A touch desperate to insert himself—so to speak. Into the family, sweetheart, before you get the wrong idea." She winked and appeared to be focusing on something in the distance before she continued. "Such a waste."

I was unsure if she was referring to Bill or me. If she meant Bill, I was casually OK with that. She was partially correct: I could have done better. Or could I? I doubt it.

Of course, Maureen could also have been referring to me. I'm sure I should have been outraged but, truth be told, I didn't care what she thought. Of me, or much else. I watched her as she sipped her tea and looked around appearing almost carefree and childlike for a moment. I wondered how things got this far and considered—again—what my, or my sibling's roles in this relationship souring to this extent could have been. It occurred to me that our less-than-stellar connection was comprehensively permeated by the constant presence of anxiety, affliction, and aggravation and that it had led to a dense atmosphere of ill humor punctuated by what felt like constant chaos. How does love thrive in conditions such as these? I strongly suspected that it did not and felt at peace with my view that it wasn't up to us, as kids, to do that and that if this was a dysfunctional mess of a family, barely surviving and consumed by resentment it was because we had a dysfunctional mess of a mother who was barely surviving, consumed—as she was—by resentment.

She continued after clearing her throat a little. "Is he even white? Are they considered white?" She put on a frowning, quizzical look to accompany her inane question, before giving the answer herself. "I never know. You know the country club we go to doesn't allow Eyetalians." She fucking killed me and, alas, she wasn't joking. And nor was the club who, for the best part of a century, had a sign on the gate that screamed 'NO DOGS. OR JEWS.' Or Eyetalians, it seemed.

"He looks a little like George Michael, don't you think?" She bopped her head from side to side as she seemed to hear George Michel belt "Jitterbug" in her head, her little bells brightly tinkling away. She looked happy, for a minute. "God. Come to think of it, that's even worse than *Eyetalians*.

No Greek Gods left anymore sweetheart, just goddamn Greeks. Nice pools though. You know, the one Penny Pappas had—my moodboard pool back in the day." She looked at me, waiting for a response. "You're too young to remember. Actually, that whole garlic belt, sweetheart. No good. Not the Spanish and especially not the Porras. Unless you want to manage a greengrocer's."

"George Michael is gay," I said with a tone that betrayed my burgeoning belligerence.

"What? That's bullshit, sweetheart, you're just trying to rile me up. He's too handsome. And too manly. And he's Greek for fuck's sake."

"Exactly. And yes. Blue-velour-hotpants-wearing George Michael. Not pushing any hate-buttons? Somebody had better wake you up, mother, before you go-go, because George Michael, for you at least, is a no-go."

She ignored me. "Dad looked like a little like Bill. The smile, I mean. A real killer—a little paler in the face. It's a Dutch thing you know. Your mother sure likes 'em like that—a little more tanned."

"Just leave it, mother."

"I just don't know with you kids. I like the Chink. She is very pretty. Louis could have anyone you know. But I didn't know he likes eating rice that much! At least he's trying."

"She's Japanese. And I wish you would not say things like that. Dad likes Percy."

"He's got a thing for rice too, you know. Breyani, it turns out."

Maureen giggled at her name calling efforts. She suddenly, silently—visibly—shifted to a darker place, as she often did. Hardwired for misery, her racist jabs filled with bigotry could sustain her interest for only so long before the sadness came over her again. It was, however, hard to grasp what exact the cause of the sadness was. It did genuinely seem past its prime if this was all still as result of Irma the Dreary and I wondered to what extent she drove my father away by her simply dwelling too long and blaming too much. But then it could also have been me—my fault—or any of us for that matter. Or all of us. It could be that this was family was a volatile blend. Why could I not just be content with her version of life and get on with it, expecting less and therefore—possibly maybe—

more happy. Perhaps if I didn't try and claw so desperately out of what I perceived as a bad situation I would notice that I had inadvertently missed something. That, maybe, she was good mother and that, maybe, my expectations were just too high.

"Will you look at the time. I have to skedaddle." She started getting up and headed for the door. "Thanks for the chat sweetheart. We should do this more often. We're not all that different, you and I."

"No. We're not."

ACT 3

1987

12

How the fuck did we get here?

I.

All things have a beginning and the disruptive white—Dutch—presence in South Africa has a definite starting date. The complicated history of colonialism and settlement began with the Dutch in March 1647, when the Nieuwe Haarlem ran aground in the shallow blue water of what is now know as Table Bay, so named for the distinctive flat shape of Table Mountain that dominates the landscape in every direction. Fifty-eight survivors were repatriated soon after the event but sixty-two castaways remained, setting about building Fort Zandenburch—Sand Fort of the Cape of Good Hope—and ended up staying at the foot of the continent for nearly a year before being rescued by a twelve ship-strong fleet commandeered by W.G. de Jong. It's no exaggeration to say that few, if any, seafaring calamity ever, has been more consequential or had a greater impact on the fate of a nation.

You see, while staying at the fort the Dutch had some contact with the local First People, and upon their return to Europe gave glowing reports of their African adventure. A little too glowing, some may say, as the Dutch East India Company soon pounced on the opportunity to establish a refreshment station, a Tavern of the Seas, as the pitstop would become known as. For the job, they sent their best man, Jan Van Riebeeck, no newbie to the route or task since he was part of De Jongh's 1648 twelve-ship rescue mission. On the April 6, 1652, Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape of Good Hope on the Dromedaris, accompanied by two more vessels; Reijger, and Goede Hoop, accompanied by 82 men—and 8 women—including his wife of two years, Maria.

On 3 June 1652 the first Dutch child at the Cape of Good Hope was born.

A community of free settlers was developed. On land that had belonged to First Nation South Africans, according to archeologists, for more than a 100,000 years and as self-identified Khoi and San, for thousands of years.

When Khoi leader, Autshamayo, encountered the Dutch delegation, he was nice enough, considering. He bartered a little and—big mistake—assumed that this bunch of Dutch, too, were passing by as many before had done. But they stayed, instead expanding the simple refreshment stop into an enterprise. Slowly a sense of animosity developed. The Dutch were digging in, pushing the Khoi-San away from adequate pasture for their cattle.

Progress was swift. In 1655, a seafaring vessel made of Cape timber was successfully launched.

By 1657, two groups of Dutch farmers settled as far as three miles from the castle at Groenevelt —Dutch Garden—and Rondebosch, still a thriving suburb today.

Also, during 1657, the Dutch East India Company imported the first slaves from India and the Indonesian Islands and India, bringing much-needed skills and labour to the Cape, embarking on a period of slavery that would last for 176 years of slavery at the Cape.

By 1658, the Cape Colony had swollen to 162 persons, slaves included.

Wine was pressed—for the first time—from Cape grapes, in 1659.

In 1660, one-hundred-fifty Angolan slaves arrived at the Cape and later the same year, another ship arrived, with even more slaves, the number of slaves alone in the settlement soaring to 187. A school was quickly founded to ensure Dutch and religious instruction to white children, and, significantly, to mixed race and Khoi children, too.

A wooden fort with four bastions was built on the left bank of the Salt River. On January 2, 1666, the first stone was laid and soon the original fort was replaced by the Kasteel de Goede Hoop, an imposing pentagonal fortress complete with moat and five mean-looking bastions: Nassau, Leerdam, Oranje, Catzenellenbogen, and Buuren, one at each corner.

II.

The first Strijdom ancestor in Africa, Joost Strijdom, arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in May 1678 as an *adelborst* (marine cadet) on the Tidore, a Dutch East India Company (VOC) ship, named after one of the two small spice islands in what is now northeast Indonesia. Tidore and Ternate were favored for their clove trees, sought throughout Asia and Europe as both condiment and medicine; the Dutch even believing clove oil able to ward off the plague.

Prior to joining the Dutch East India Company, Strijdom had been at Fort Liefkenshoek in Kallo, a part of the village of Beveren in present-day Belgium, which together with Fort Lillo, was established for the defense of Antwerp against the Spanish towards the end of the 16th century. Named Liefkenshoek—Liefken's Corner—the fort was positioned at the very place where a creek, the Liefkine, meets the river Schelde. This area—the Waasland—was home to generations of Strijdoms, it was the place Joost came from when he decided to join the VOC, and it was a place that lived through the Eighty Years's War from 1568 to 1648, as the new Dutch Republic struggled to free itself from its Spanish overlords. The war with Spain accomplished little except for cementing the Dutch Republic as sovereign state, gaining in power and influence for the next several centuries. Fresh borders between the Netherlands and Belgium were drawn, while both the VOC and WIC (Dutch West India Company), gained power and territory. And the Spain lost its reputation as a formidable European force—they had, lest we forget, lost the war to a ridiculously small country. But one with spirit and courage—both much-needed qualities as the Dutch occupied, raped, and shackled their way through Africa.

Arriving in the port of Table Bay in Cape Town, Joost was released from VOC service on May 11, 1683, becoming a cobbler, and marrying Maryna Ras—who was baptized in Cape Town on June 23, 1669—daughter of Hans Ras, immigrant from Angeln, and Catharina (Trijn) Ustinx. Joost and

Maryna Strijdom had five children, and we know for sure that two of them, Matthys and Johannes, are the progenitors of the two branches of what would become the Strydom family. Maryna died young—before 1714. We know that because Joost remarried, taking the widow Susanna Groen as wife on February 11, 1714. Joost was still alive in 1711. His name appeared on a VOC-commissioned of civilian census at the Cape in 1717.

The surname Strijdom and variants, however, is not found in registers of 17th and 18th century Netherlands, Flanders, Germany, or France, although Flemish names such as Strijd, Strijveen, Strijbosch are found. Related names from Poland such as Strydomiu, a 17th century iteration it turns out; and place-names such as Stradom, part of old-town Kraków in Poland; Stradomno, between Kisielice and Ilawa, both in Poland; Stradouň in the Czech Republic; and Stridone in Croatia, suggests Central European or Polish origins, possibly as refugees from 17th century anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland. In addition, one could hunt for connections with the ancient town of Stridon (Stridone, Stridonius, Stridom) in the Roman province of Illyrica which was set somewhere between Pannonia, Istria, and Dalmatia and was famous for being the birthplace of Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius (c.342-420), commonly known as Saint Jerome, a major Catholic scholar and translator of the Vulgate, the fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible produced from ancient Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and existing Latin manuscripts. The town of Stridon was totally destroyed with the fall of the Roman Empire. It is thought to have been in the Čičarija mountain region of Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy, while others suspect it is part of modern Ljubljana.

Another origin, a Belgian one, is also possible—and certainly more plausible. The "van Strijdonck" surname was exclusively located in Waasland near Antwerp during the 16th and 17th centuries. Today, the modern spelling "Strydom" is widely used, following Afrikaans spelling convention, although odd appearances of "Strijdom" still occurs, such as the Strijdoms of Johannesburg.

As a side-note and illustration of the fighting spirit that runs thick in these veins, Joost Strijdom's mother-in-law, Trijn Ras, was a formidable figure at the Cape. Of Danish extraction, the 20-year old Catharina Ustinx arrived—disguised as a man, possibly to ensure passage—at the Cape of Good Hope, on the 't Hoff van Zeeland, which set sail from the German port of Lübeck during the southern late summer of 1662—a mere ten years after Jan Van Riebeeck himself arrived at the newly established pitstop en route to the Dutch East Indies. That spring, on September 3, 1662, she married Hans Ras, who nearly died during a knife fight with a wedding guest on their wedding day, when, on the wagon journey from Table Bay to Hans' farm on the Liesbeeck river at Rondebosch, the wagon drivers—Frans Gerrit of Uijthoorn and Thieleman Hendricksz, both drunk—tried to outrun each other until one wagon was ultimately forced off the road. An argument ensued about who was responsible when Hendricksz, much to Ras' annoyance, resorted to foul language—*scheltewoorden*—and, of course, a fight broke out. Hendricksz stabbed Ras twice, breaking the blade of his knife in Ras' ribs with the second blow. Ras luckily survived to father four children—including Joost's eventual wife, Maryna— before he was killed by a lion in 1671. Trijn remarried on April 16, 1672.

Unfortunately her new husband, Francoys Schanfellaar from Ghent, was killed a year later by local Bushmen. Undeterred, Trijn married Laurens Cornelisz from Gottenburg, becoming her next husband on October 28, 1673, who, after adding two more children to her household, disappeared in 1679 while hunting hippo, presumably trampled by elephants or hippo. Her *kneg*, servant, Matthys Michiel, of Gluckstadt in Schleswig-Holstein, was next to become her husband, marrying Trijn on January 28, 1680 and they had one daughter.

Commissioner Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein, Lord of Mydrecht, on an official visit to the Cape, visited Trijn's farm in 1685. She made a deeply favorable impression on him. Van Rheede wrote in his diary:

Wednesday 30 May 1685. Today we again set out on our horses and arrived at a farm dwelling lying beneath the Steenberg. Here the lady of the house and her marriageable daughter presented us with her compliments some home grown produce consisting of very delicious firm cabbage, freshly baked bread and some radishes. Her name was Kryn Ras and she was then married to her fourth husband. The first had been killed by a lion, the second by the Hottentots and the third probably by an elephant for he had gone out to shoot hippo for his family and was never heard of again. Here she was with a house full of children and married to her foreman. Her nearest neighbour lived four hours away. Three times she had been comfortably off and well established and three times impoverished. Her farm consisted of 12 morgen of good grainland with sufficient stock for her needs. She was accustomed to ride astride, quite alone, to the Cape settlement and back in a remarkably short time and the manner of so doing would have terrified anyone who met her en route if they had not known who she was. Her daughter could easily have passed for an Egyptian fortune-teller and the rest of the family could have been wild Indians from Brazil.

13

It will all come to head soon, you'll see.

Nearly four centuries and several political and social missteps later, the sheer weight of history, culpability, and legacy placed a heavy burden on Abraham Strijdom's very sense of belonging in this place—and to it. As the holder of no other form of citizenship, Abraham Strijdom held little optimism for the future. Europe held no meaning. It seemed far away—foreign—and after so many generations on African soil it was an open—yet often unspoken—question: after so many years, were they still while settlers or were they now white Africans? And where the possibility of Dutchness, or Frenchness, was an alluring yet completely foreign concept, it was really only Africa, that spoke to him. The only place that was home. And the thing that he and others like him started believing that they would have to die for, in order to protect. The issue was to become one of the things to shape the white hive over the next five years until the March 17, 1992, whites-only referendum that would gauge the temperature among the electorate for the dismantling of Apartheid—a moot point. The system was dead already. The referendum would in effect be a *how soon?* as opposed to a *should we?* amounting to an option poll on when to remove the carrion and how to sage the house. The "Yes" vote would be overwhelming: nearly 70%.

But try as you may, one can never get angry at Abraham—or frequently those who looked like him who were both jesters and devils. The white devils. Lovable loons who wore the alienation and rejection of occupation and colonialism like a second skin, one sewn from a collective inheritance that for some, like me, will one day come to be an albatross. Every action and response, measured and weighed. The legacy of self-displacement becoming a comfortable yet constant questioning of identity and the seductive angst of living ensconced, precariously perhaps in the safety of

community and lapsed—often meaningless—religion. And for few more so than the large Afrikaner families that made up the endless villages dotted around the mine dumps of the East Rand of Johannesburg. It is was their obsessively hyphenated identities that brought the country to the edge of insanity as the 1980s drew to a close: part rebellion, part calamity, part hate.

Abraham never understood much of politics or, for that matter, anything about his contradictory self: his penchant for perfidy, nor his love for Maureen who was a fiasco-trigger, leaving him passively consumed by rancor, and permanently on tenterhooks in anticipation of her next episode. But through the word of God and the pervasive—and persuasive—perceived need of a threatened Afrikanerdom, he felt a profound responsibility to keep to his kind and swell the numbers—no matter the cost.

But, like other Afrikaners, he was in a tough spot, trying to hang on to what he considered a Godgiven right to the land which they occupied while, for some at least, growing a conscience and some recover and ounce of semblance of compassion and empathy, echoing Archbishop Desmond Tutu, quoted in an October, 1984 *New York Times* article as having said that Black South Africans *need* to "be nice to whites, they need you to rediscover their humanity." And some, like Abraham, teetering on the edge of regaining some of that lost generosity of spirit so needed in place teeming with such diversity, started to see the evolution of how they got where they are and the countless unforced errors made in the name of a European or white ideal. It was beginning to be understood that in order to advance the settlement of land and expansionist agendas, Black inhabitants of this land had to be made to appear artless and unsophisticated, dimwitted, and craven.

Then, when segregation started taking root, they were said to be bloodthirsty heathens, conveniently so skilled at warfare that when the Ncome River ran thick with Zulu blood in 1838—an event henceforth glorified as the Battle of Blood River—the victory over King Dingane was celebrated as God's benevolent response to white pioneer's covenant with Him to forever celebrate December, 16, by building a church and observing the date in perpetuity as a scared day of God.

And when Apartheid became the law of the land in 1948, Black South Africans, by now punch-drunk but not by any means beaten, were aggressively painted as lazy, dishonest, violent, and communist. But they gardened well, so there was that. Slowly, over time, the realization dawned in the minds of some increasingly enlightened Afrikaners—Abraham included—that never in the bloodied history of South Africa, have by-now white Africans sought to integrate or institutionally value the input—or even the mere presence—of Black Africans, who had, quite simply, been there first.

"I read something interesting in the paper today. A letter to the editor asked if there really is such a thing as a white African?" Abraham knew the answer, or at least what Maureen would say.

"Well that's a stupid question, sweetheart. If you can get African Americans, then you can get European Africans."

"I don't like that term. It reminds me of a ticket office at the station with a 'Europeans Only' sign. And the ones at the public toilets. Anyway—are all Black people in Africa necessarily African? My people, and yours, the Trichardts, have all been here since forever. By now… I mean…I'm Dutch only in name, and you, Huguenot…but we are Afrikaners. The word Africa is in our very name. It's literally the only place we know. The rest—Dutch, Hugenot—are just words. Term in a history book. They mean nothing. Africa is my only home. Our home. The question is not my Africanness. It should be what type of African do we want to be."

"Well, there are those who would say that you are nothing but a settler. That we don't belong." Maureen looked at her husband, a little doubtful. It was true: her family had been in the country for several generations, but unlike her husband, hers was not a deep connection by any description. In some ways she wasn't sure why she felt so compelled to play "angry white madam" all the time, and why she found it so hard to recognize the inevitability of the situation—the reckoning—that was fast approaching, She could never understand that concept either because in her world, any darker than her skin tone simply mattered less—if at all. But the real tragedy of living in a hopeless place

was the fact that despite South Africa's beauty, it's potential for goodness—and as it would turn out, its boundless capacity for amnesty and forgiveness—people like Maureen Strijdom chose to live with precious little empathy and even less dignity while actively spurning the dignity of others. "They'll want us to go back to where we came from," she said, dejectedly.

"For me to sit here talking to you, it took twelve generations. Do you know what that number is Maureen?"

She shook her head partly out of disinterest and partly because, well, mathematics.

"That works out to 4,096 ancestors over the last four-hundred years, or put a different way, 2,048 ninth great-grandparents. But the numbers are not the point, Maureen." Abraham knew that facts made his wife glaze over. "For me—for us—to be here, sitting outside on our patio enjoying a drink worrying about our future, just how much struggle is contained in that number? How many battles? And yes, how much sadness? I have nowhere to go. I would sooner die than give up what we have fought so hard for. All 4,096 of us."

"Be that as it may sweetheart, but things are grim right now. We are facing a new order. We'll have to think about who we are and how we belong. I sometimes feel as if we don't really belong here. I honestly don't know if the kids will have a future once a new president takes over, and there is so much talk about Mandela getting released from prison. Although, I think it's still years away. Certainly not while P.W. is president, and he's not going away."

Little did Maureen know that in just two years, in February 1989, Botha would resign from the National Party after suffering a mild stroke, but not as State President despite F.W. de Klerk's election as new leader of the country and in a dick move of note, one of many over the span of his career, Botha would insist on keeping the seat warm until months later, variously threatening to stay and/or run again for another term, before an abrupt resignation in August 1989. Within moths of being sworn in officially, de Klerk ordered the unbanning of the African National Congress and the release of Nelson Mandela, thereby setting the county on an unchartered, but significantly more

equitable course. Least of all did Maureen grasp that her and some other's burgeoning mien for white supremacy was the issue they had to solve, rather than focus on irrational fear stoked by rightwing propaganda. And, equally, little did men like Abraham understand that mere empathy — the kind that of "care" that came with wringing of hands but precious little change—was never going to be enough and that their overt expressions of racism and discrimination needed to be confessed in the hope that truth and reconciliation may provide a way out. And maybe how to find their lost dignity and what was left of their humanity.

But sitting on the *stoep*, talking politics, getting a little tipsy, Abraham knew that Maureen—the eternal square peg in a round hole—will never fit easily into any new political dispensation. Despite her praising the maid, running after pool boys with freshly squeezed orange juice, or donating a blankets and tinned food to the poor and homeless in the townships, she will never want to be of this place. Not really. She will never be an agent of change in Africa. She will never see the stain of what was perpetrated in her name, nor try to feel the pain of those who were forced to share—forceably evacuated and displaced from—this soil.

14

How are things—with your husband?

Perhaps, all it takes is one thing. The last straw. A thing that makes us snap. It may well be that we have a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for acceptance—an innate ability to move on—until, one day, a nerve is hit, and the only reasonable response is to draw a line in the sand. Or, perhaps, for some, it's a collection of things—a super-sized, combo deal of shit——that, over time, inches them closer to a dealbreaker moment from which there is no walking away.

For Maureen, it happened when Abraham came home with a young woman who just happened to be his right hand at the newly conquered brush factory in Troyeville. Maureen knew something was up when Abraham simply could not shut up about the "delightful Indian girl with the MBA, and the almond eyes, and the sweetest smile." Most of all, he just went on and on about her "tasty little samosas," which Maureen always suspected was a euphemism, but, for sanity's sake, she elected not to go there.

Cassie was her name. Her full name was Fazlin Cassiem, but, perhaps spurred on by a need to appear—on paper at least— more masculine in a male-driven, cutthroat, brush-selling business, or perhaps, it was an effort to sound less Muslim in a city that, unlike Cape Town, had a relatively small Muslim community. South Africa's first Muslims arrived at the Cape of Good Hope in 1658, just six years after the first Dutch ships dropped anchor. Brought from Indonesia, Malaysia, Bengal, the Malabar Coast, and Madagascar, the Muslim arrivals were political exiles and slaves, and from the very beginning, dissidents like sheik Yusuf of Macassar, 1629-1699, and Tuan Guru of Tidore,

1712-1807, were seen as fiery symbols against Dutch oppression. Anyway, the point being that Fazlin chose to introduce herself as Cassie.

The Cassims—Abraham was quick to point out to Maureen during another teachable moment —were Gujarati Muslims, independent merchants who, upon arriving in 1860 along with plantation workers from Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay, settled in the port city of Durban before heading for Johannesburg, where a sizeable trading community was taking shape. Freedom from bondage—and sugar plantations—meant opportunity for social and economic growth. Still, young upwardly mobile Indians were met with derision from colonial authorities under constant pressure from white settlers to tighten their hawkish grip on anyone less-than. Over the next one hundred years, a litany of legislation with a distant racist tone would curb the mobility, trading rights, settlement patterns, marital choices, and educational access of Indian and Muslim South Africans.

The Boer Republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State restricted the rights of Indians to live in white areas while also denying them the right to vote, own land, and run businesses without purposely complicated registration. Indians were restricted from moving outside Natal. On September 11, 1891, all Indians were deported from the Orange Free State and were never allowed to settle in the Republic of the Orange Free State again. The Transvaal Boers disliked anyone — everyone really—with darker skin seeing them as inferior, heathens even and Indians were summarily placed in "Coolie Compounds" where conditions were, to say the absolute least, unhygienic. Indians had to walk on the opposite side of the pavement if a white person approached them on a given side of the road. They were kept separate from whites; they could not travel first- or second-class on trains; Indians could not be out on the streets after 9 PM, and they, too, had to carry passbooks.

And so, overnight, and largely because of Abraham's apparent infatuation with the brown girl with almond eyes, Maureen intensely felt the presence of a third wheel in their lives. Given her fragile emotional state, Maureen would frequently consider that, perhaps, *she* was, in fact, the third,

fucked-up wheel because no matter what she did or how hard she tried, Cassie, whether in the flesh, in spirit, or in name, was always there. Even the kids liked her, and that said a lot, given how distant and disobedient they—we—were, to begin with. And Abraham, never one for overt academia, philosophy, or rampant intellectualism of any kind, showed an inordinate interest in the plight of the South African Indian population and their exploitation under nationalist rule. When Abraham started to read *Siddhartha*, Maureen read the sign as clear as day: the kitten gloves would have to come off.

But, try as she might, Maureen always felt that she was the damaged one, seeking out the input and support—or just attention—of the man she married and was now very obviously missing in action. But the more she ran after him, playing emotional hide-and-seek, the more distance he became. It felt increasingly as if she was losing him, and after the death of their child and having to work with her therapist to get to the point of forgiveness, it seemed to her as if they would not be able to negotiate their differences and, therefore, not be able to negotiate their conflict.

Next, she tried to predict and preempt potential stress situations with the children, getting them not to be seen as much—and heard even less—just in case they were taking up her husband's headspace as much as they did hers. The shrink did make Maureen think long and hard about how Abraham also had feelings, and that he may possibly also have been struggling with mental health challenges that may have caused him to pull away.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"Fine."

"You can talk to me, you know."

"About?"

"Well, I don't know. I'm just saying, you can speak to me."

"About what?"

"What do you think? How you feel…how your day was. You know, maybe respond with, I don't know…a sentence."

"I'm tired. There. Happy?"

"You always do this, Abraham. You always fucken look for shit. I'm trying here. And you are acting like I am not even in the room."

"How can I? You never leave."

Little sparring sessions like these, which over time would grow more frequent and significantly more aggressive, chipped away at what hope Maureen had left. What point was there to admit that she was part of the cycle of negativity or to acknowledge that her anger and sense of loss contributed to the marriage failing. Sometimes she would try, despite his monosyllabic grunts and single-word responses.

"I'm sorry, Abraham. I am sorry that you feel upset and tense. I know when you get angry, it makes you turn away. And I know you got angry because I miss you and I'm scared."

And then, sometimes, he would respond to her quasi-catholic attempts at confession and contrition by silently holding her as if nothing had ever happened like he still loved her. Or he would surprise her in the morning with a modest, handwritten note on the fridge, thanking her for dinner the previous evening, or her would come home with a carton of cigarettes—menthols *nogal*—and he would even offer to take the kids to the mall so she can clean the house.

But call her jaded, Maureen smelled a rat whenever niceness became Abrahams's preset du jour because it reeked of guilt and looked a little half-assed as if he knew he had to push the boat out a little but not enough to arouse suspicion. And that was precisely what made her more suspicious, to begin with, because a little bunch of flowers would not have been as dubious as his feeble attempts at going above and beyond.

"You know, sweetheart," Maureen would sometimes say when he least expected it, "you look really snazzy. Those are some lucky people in Troyeville who get to be visited by such a well-dressed boss!"

She would always compliment her husband on his snappy safari suits in summer and find something positive to say about his more funereal winter look. But over time, she noticed that he had indeed grown in terms of sartorial expressions and had started to wear jaunty bowties and the odd cravat—with pocket squares—whenever the occasion halfway warranted it. He had started to take care of his skin, using moisturizer liberally, and replaced his trusty Brylcreem with a somewhat swishier mousse.

"Is that a new deodorant? Or no, wait…are you wearing cologne?"

"It was a gift. One of the girls in the office, I think."

"Fancy gift. You don't think?"

The air in the room suddenly felt stifling, too real, and more than a little on-the-nose.

"Not *that* fancy, Maureen. Simmer down, it's just Aramis."

"I'm just saying, Abraham. Women don't *just* buy men cologne."

"Maybe they should. Then we know."

It was around the time of the takeover that Maureen noticed a drastic shift in her husband's schedule, one that went way beyond the demands of a new venture and seemed extraordinarily focused around dinners and drinks. It was odd, she thought, that after the ink was dry, a deal remained that dependent on such a high level of schmoozing but brushed it off as she was too busy planning a career of her own.

"He seems to be too busy to create time to spend with me and the kids, but he's not too busy—or too tired—to create more time to have another dinner or a quick trip to Sun City," she would vent to her friends who all read the glaring signs of a philandering husband. But they seldom had the courtesy to tell the friend in question—Maureen in this case—instead, turning a blind eye because,

quite frankly, life was hard enough for a white woman in Africa without wondering in what hole her husband plowed his dick into the night before, as long as he didn't bring home AIDS. Or a baby, a horrifying prospect and one that would soon make Maureen sick with worry for her own occasional sexploits as well, so much so that she would have the Marie Stopes Clinic on speed dial before the year was out, just in case. She just didn't know it yet.

Naturally, when Maureen confronted Abraham with his expanding schedule and questionable timekeeping skills—but refraining from accusations of infidelity—he completely flipped the script on her, instead accusing her of being obsessed with fitness videos, racy boutique underwear, and the fact that she had a new, more professional hair-do for her upcoming job interview with Dominion Brushware.

"My hair! Are you fucking kidding me? You organized me an interview with your company, and now you wonder why I've gone with the Priscilla Presley?" Presley's Jenna Wade hair-do was a big deal for Johannesburg ladies, having just moved out of a more matriarchal style, backcombed to death, and held together with Elnett hairspray.

But Abraham was premature in his accusations. It would be more than a year before she would do all that "slutty stuff" and more—after he'll introduce her to Angel Fourie—and, indeed, her Priscilla would graduate on to "freshly fucked," exactly as Abraham suspected. At the same time, her undergarments would pretty much convey the same message.

In the meanwhile, Maureen started getting suspicious that something was awry in their marriage and that, perhaps, her husband's flirtatious nature had gotten the better of him. She noticed that he had been making more significant than usual cash withdrawals, frequently noticing that his wallet lay on the counter in all its beer belly glory only to be flat and lean a few hours later upon Abraham's return. It puzzled her since work events and entertainment could be paid for with the corporate credit card, and even if the purchases were non-business related, their joint account card would do

the job adequately. Unless, of course, he didn't want her to find out exactly where the card was swiped.

There was also a slow but sure shift in how he started conversations.

"Stop me if I've I told you this," he would say, almost daily, and continue about a subject that she had heard a thing about before that minute.

"No, not at all, sweetheart. You haven't told me. It's all new to me," and she would wonder why he though he did.

"I don't always know. I talk to so many people. I don't want to repeat myself."

"Either you have Alzheimer's sweetheart, or you are telling too many some of this stuff and then forgetting whom you told what," she would say, irritated at his blasé attitude. "Perhaps someone else is more interested in your bullshit. Either way, I don't care, and given your recent history, there is a not-insignificant chance that you may forget this conversation anyway."

But if there was one thing that Abraham never seemed to tire of—or forgot to check on—it was the state of her schedule.

"What you doing today, babe?"

He only called her babe when he was angling for information, fishing for what she had planned for tomorrow and overmorrow. And the following week—even the next month. Recently, he had been calling her "babe" a lot.

"I'm meeting Penny at the mall," she would say, for example.

"What time, babe? And which one? Eastgate? Or Sandton?" It was a critically important detail as Eastgate was a five-minute drive while Sandton, on a bad day, could take an hour.

"Haven't decided. Penny is buying stuff, I'm just going along for the ride.

These kinds of quick conversations had become part of life in the Strijdom household, with Abraham seeming to have an inexhaustible interest in his wife's goings-on as if he was looking for pockets of time, allowing him a brief escape. But Maureen never caught on to his masterstroke: if

she were at home and in the way, it would make sense to keep her busy, and since she was a lazy housewife but a skilled ballbreaker, Abraham started sowing the seeds of auto-suggestion. He set about suggesting to his wife that a woman of her caliber was wasted in the home. And that, at Academy Brushware at least, a glass ceiling still existed, which, given her uselessness at cleaning, she may as well break.

But, despite months being kept in the dark by a man whom she admittedly didn't love anymore but still felt deeply connected to through shared tragedy, the thing that bothered Maureen most was the fact that he ceased to acknowledge her presence, let alone care about her well-being—as one would a dog—or expect from a relationship that had lasted nearly twenty years.

Where once, not that long ago, in fact, he would get riled up, hurling abuse and stomp around, now, there was nothing. It was as if he had moved on. As if this was not worth fighting for—fight over. It was like he was not affected by her, the kids, or their lives. And while her mother tried to tell her that a silent, distant man is a blessing and a sure sign of a couple's newfound appreciation of patience, Maureen didn't buy it, and she could not stop thinking that instead of more patient, "the fucker has simply become distracted," as she would call it.

Eventually, she noticed that Abraham had stopped talking about the future entirely, and when she mentioned a holiday together or buying a beach house, he would glaze over and grow silent. It was apparent that he had checked out. And her friends noticed it too, as did her mother. There was no more ignoring the fact that she was married to a man who questioned if she had a role in his future and, even more critically, to her sanity if he had a role in hers.

And so, on the day Maureen—intrigued and smitten—met the new building manager of her husband's latest real estate venture, she had a feeling in her gut. After a lifetime of tension, depression, and guilt, she was relieved to feel a butterfly in the pit of her stomach the moment she shook Angel Fourie's hand. She felt alive. He left her feeling funny and all fluffy inside.

"It's nothing," she told herself. "It's just a little crush."

15

I'm supposed to love you, but I can't.

Maureen was siting on the floor in her bruise-tinted kitchen, face-deep in a box of Jungle Oats, clearly drunk, throwing raw oats in her mouth faster than she could swallow. It was a humid Saturday afternoon—late summer. Her face was covered with oats partially reconstituted with spit and her hair caked with spit-soaked oats balls. Her nightie, worn religiously every night in the hope that my father would notice her like he did she was a high school cheerleader, had a burn on the front—proof that it had come between a Black Russian and an ashtray. On the fridge were magnets with inspirational verses holding in place photographs of three kids in happier times wearing their school uniforms.

"I'm sorry my sweetheart," she said, pulling a sad face. The look, complete with pursed lips and squinched eyes was effectively more quizzical than sad per se, but, either way, her face reeked of vodka and desperation.

"Why are you apologizing? Just pull down your—whatever this is. Your dress?"

"It's a light summer kaftan, sweetheart. I got it from the Oriental Plaza, in Fordsburg."

Not content with the sheerness of the garment, she had also chosen to go commando, her kaftan by now, the result of summer heat and drunken stupor, hoisted high above her waist revealing more than just a little too much. It was clear that earlier in the day, maybe when she woke up, the combination of Highveld heat and humidity also caused her face to puff up.

"Fucking cunt," she murmured, trying to focusing on me through her inebriation. "You fucking little cunt. You screwed up my life. You do realize that, don't you?"

Propped up with one arm and now, the arm having gone to sleep, she struggled to get upright again. She looked helpless in the yellowy light against the ugly blue of the kitchen. It unsettled me. Her decay unsettled me. The advanced state of her decay always unsettled me. She was clearly unable to move or reposition herself—her physical strength having been diluted by a bottle of no-name vodka. Bill, always around like a dog under a table waiting for scraps, had come to take me to the movies, looked alarmed.

"You're drunk, mother."

"And you're the reason why."

I knelt next to her, "Let's get you cleaned up. Where's Dad?"

"The casino." Her tone hardened instantly. "He's never here. You know. He's never fucking here."

She paused, recalibrating her focus, desperate to appear less drunk. I thought she was embarrassed.

"I'll be right back. She gets like this. Have a drink. Look in the fridge."

"Great. Don't slip in the vomit though." Barefoot Bill seemed unperturbed but nonetheless suitably wide-eyed at the spectacle.

"Hello, Billy. How are you my darling. Come and give me a smooch."

He walked over and orbited Maureen's moonlike face before finding a clean spot to plant an obligatory kiss. He turned and smiled at me. An annoying, smirky smile. The kind that says that he had just proven a point—and that if I tried just a little harder, I too could experience an emotional breakthrough. As if a drunken peck on the cheek could possibly constitute a magnificent new benchmark on the road to achieving a modicum of humanity in a woman who was as emotionally barren as she was morally bankrupt. Unable to completely avoid Maureen's crusty oats-slop, he emerged from the ill-advised kiss with a few of her oats-'n-spit balls on his face. Smarmy fuck.

I chose to ignore it. I gave him a thumbs up.

"Great job Bill. I'll be back just now."

"Your now or my now?"

"Now now."

It was a slow walk to the stairs and an even slower climb to get Maureen up them. From the entrance hall, which doubles as a bar, the staircase lead up through a gaping hole to the master bedroom—the implication being that Maureen's bedroom is best entered while inebriated. The symbolism, although unintended, was stunning.

The upholstered bar counter resembled a bordello and it was the first thing visitors noticed when invited to turn right into the sea-green and pink sitting room packed with ornate sofas and festooned curtains. It was a white trash expression of what a wealthy person's sitting room looked like. The whole thing: wrought-iron spiral staircase, velvet bar, circular hole, and the entire master bedroom in the roof, which ran the length of the house, was added several years after first moving in. It was, like Maureen, a taste-free zone—a place where happiness went to die.

I wiped the face of the woman I didn't know and couldn't love with a lukewarm cloth. I rinsed her hair, taking time to remove the caked-on oats. Maureen's helpless stare persisted, amplified by the familiar post-booze vacancy that always settled in. It was, by then, a familiar sight. I grew up looking out for the big-blank to take hold signaling a repose from the verbal abuse and crying that would follow her relentless tanking.

Her stare was blank and emotionless, but now with added glare. On her messy dressing table was a collection of framed images, one of them showing her as a cheerleader doing a high jump, and another taken on her wedding day less than a year later. Glowing, she looked contemplative next to a boisterous Abraham—but a callousness that annexed her eyes had by then set in.

"Are you feeling better?"

I smiled. Maybe she would respond by showing thanks, as one could reasonably expect from the social contract that governs the interaction between a mother and her son.

I got up and drew the curtains.

For some reason, Abraham and Maureen Strijdom thought it was a good idea to install walls of windows on both sides of the bedroom. They clearly underestimated the amount of fighting they engaged in. And the pathetic sight of a visibly drunk woman pacing the length of the room wildly staring out of the widows on each turn, in case her husband pulled into the driveway. Most of all, they never considered that with that many windows their lives and battles were on full display to a neighborhood hungry for scandal that could make their own lives seems halfway decent and purposeful.

"You look better."

"Just a little sweetheart. I don't know what happened there. I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

Our saccharine moment was brusquely interrupted by a courier's incessant banging at the new next-door neighbor's. The street has been abuzz with news of the new arrivals not least of which by the revelation that the new owner had launched a local Weight Watchers support group—herself being circumferentially challenged—and since our street had seen a steady stream of Germistonians compelled to shed a stone or five.

The banging at the door entered its second cycle.

Maureen hated it all. Not just of "mopey fatties" as she called them, but the invasive nature of the support group members who kept sticking their heads over the wall while she was watering the roses saying "hi!" in the cheeriest voices imaginable, forcing her to engage and pretend to care. Given her state this afternoon the banging was a big ask for a woman at the end of her tether.

By the start of the third banging cycle, Maureen snapped.

"Can you stop that ruckus, please?"

By now she was leaning halfway out of her bedroom window.

"They're fat, you know. Not deaf."

Satisfied with chasing the delivery guy away she relished in the peace and quiet.

"It doesn't work anyway. Weight Watchers. It's a crock of shit. Food combining is better. *Fit For Life*. You should read it."

"You look fine mother. Why do you care? Dad likes you."

"He likes Cassie more.'

"I don't know her."

"She's that Indian chick. The one that worked for the brush factory in Troyeville that Academy took over last year. Now, she's his right hand."

"He won't do that. He doesn't do that."

"Who knew? Tired of not eating at home so he's taken to take-out samosas. Two can play this game, sweetheart. I'm not dead yet."

16

Ein Heldenleben.

"Remember when Mrs De Vos took the class to see a production of *Elektra* with Marita Napier as Chrysothemis at the Jo'burg Civic? I think Helga Dernesch was Klytaemnestra. I hated it. Not a tune to be found but it wasn't as bad as a student production of *The Rape of Lucretia* in Pretoria, which was truly awful. Dernesch. I mean. I must have been a philistine and she must have been amazing. In fact, I know she was amazing. There's a bootleg of her Elektra—also with Napier—from the same period at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. It *is* something else." Louis knew his stuff and over the last few years he had developed into somewhat of a musical snob and a cultural poser.

"But what makes Strauss, Strauss?" I frequently feigned interest and had come to find the best way to do achieve that was through an open-question technique, avoiding yes or no answers allowing the respondent, in this case my brother, to wax lyrical or vent frustration about the subject I'm supposedly ignorant about. In this case, an emotional probe was called for. I needed Louis to situate himself in a comfortable place. A memory perhaps. Or a feeling. Maybe a combination of the two. It didn't much matter, as long as could get him to masturbate intellectually for a few minutes until he felt sufficiently gooey inside before I did the old switcheroony, hitting him with a hard truth or two about the 100lbs gorilla in the house, called Maureen.

"Strauss adds psychology to his work. It sits in the background, something that up to that point in music history had only been hinted at by other composers."

"That's so interesting. How does he do that, Louis?" Again. Mostly to artificially stimulate the near-catatonically stilted conversation I do what I can to seem engaged and appreciative.

"Well, you see—I'm so glad you asked that—Wagner uses the leitmotif, but for him it's more of a calling card while Strauss uses the leitmotif as a kind of shorthand, indicating deeper motivation." He smiled and then added in a deprecating way, "that's how I see it, anyway. Others may differ."

"Wow. Louis. I'm not sure I follow. But I think I get it…"

"Take for example when Elektra is flailing around losing her marbles, the Agamemnon theme is there, looming over the background, and despite what else is happening on that moment, you know, what she says, or how she acts, Strauss is telling us why she is doing what she is. But on an emotional level."

"Really."

Louis dropped the needle on the third track from the *Vier Letzte Leider,* also by Strauss.

"*Beim Schlafengehen*. It's the Schwarzkopf recording." Louis shared this information with a certain reverence, making it clear that this was not just about the song, but specifically this woman's reading of it that was notable. Composed on 1948 when Strauss was already 84, *Vier Letzte Leider* inhabits a sepulcral tone-world announcing, if you will, a farewell to the corporeal but with a seductive—calm—acceptance and completeness. *Beim Schlafengehen*—literally "at bedtime"—was set to a poem by Herman Hesse during which, after a lush orchestral introduction, the soprano sings incandescently of her deep yearning for slumber and the level of peace it will bring.

"Out of everything I own, this is the one work where I find I need many recordings. Each singer brings something. Lisa Della Casa under Böhm—the '53 recording with the Vienna Philharmonic—has a divinely inspired simplicity. Jessye Norman, I find, is more in line with the Flagstad. Hers is like an imposing ship navigating a narrow canal and when she lets go—it's unbelievable. But for *Beim Schlafengehen* it's Schwarzkopf."

She starts off resigned, putting less effort into singing as such, instead hinting at a singing tone but really more invested in mirroring speech rather than singing with a capital S. "It' s where lesser

sopranos already go wrong with overt placing and unsubtle attacking—you know, like…siingiing." He makes an exaggerated gesture

"Schwarzkopf really leans into the word "müd." She dis and, despite the subdued nature of the work, she never turned mawkish.

"I totally get the sense that the song will be shaped and informed by her tiredness—her weariness—maybe even longing for some kind of release."

"Maybe even her own," I said.

Despite Schwarzkopf—and Strauss'—best efforts, the atmosphere in the room was a little strained. There was an unspoken issue tainting our conversation, lending a stilted quality and I couldn't help but feel that we were drifting apart. It made me wonder if we were ever meant *not* to, or, if we were one of those families doomed to drift.

"Yes," Louis looked at me, maybe a little irritated, "I'm in no doubt—it's a contented weariness. It's a sleepy-tired, you know like the kind kids get after a full day playing in the mud and chasing stuff."

Something about his almost childlike insistence reminde me of our little droop-and-drool cat-naps in our favorite chairs when we were kids. "I can relate to that. It like a "whatever" sigh to life's mysteries because some shit will never change and at a certain point you have to stop caring."

"Whatever." He paused, aware of how callous he may have sounded. "I love how she opens the timbre of her voice slightly on *gestirnte* as if she's reaching for silvery stars. You can hear her voice taking on a slight shimmer on the word before dropping to *nacht*. Perhaps because I had reached wits' end, I detected a directness in Hesse's words, and Strauss' autumnal setting that seemed to confront mortality and its eventual resolve: death. And that certain demise is not an end in itself, but, rather part of flux—a wild oscillation—though the how is obscured and all but guaranteed.

A thing about some music I had not considered much up to that point, but that Louis and his impromptu lesson had made me aware of, was the almost indescribable ardency it inspires and how

that serves a bookmark of sorts for future reference and a measuring tool for some. It also seemed to me as if the music and the poetry presented Louis with a reprieve from our normal lives. It was his version of a secret garden and an alluring, yet melancholy, place. A bittersweet souvenir of youth and loss. I wondered what blissful acceptance felt like. I wished I knew what forgetting was but I suspected that I was lost in my own existential disconnect.

Louis giggled. "It's the next section that I come to party for." The contemplative violin solo in the second half of the song conveyed acquiescence more than it dwelled on the theme of sorrowness, foreshadowing the voice's return in the last stanza and its symbolism of the liberated soul—airborne— reaching every higher to the heavens, bookended by the ethereal call of French horns.

"It's beautiful—I love it. I love how she matches the violin in intensity and tone. Some bits sounded a little like jazz right there. That was amazing."

"I don't hear it."

In many ways, in the absence of better examples especially since Abraham's murder, Louis had become the judge and jury of the household. He became relentlessly rigid and so, if something looked like a square and acted like a square, but, on measurement, was revealed to have a slight difference on the axis and therefore marginally closer to being a rectangle, Louis would rather have died than call it a square. Despite the resolve and rigor, notwithstanding his love of music and frippery, his spirit seemed calloused—worn—and absent. Much like mine.

"I have made a decision. I'm going to join the army. I've had call-up papers again, and since I can't get into university I have to either become a conscientious objector, or I have to go. And after this last year…"

"Are you sure?"

"It's not up to me. You've got college. And Bill. I don't have much. Besides, it'll make a man out of me."

"I'm not sure, Louis. Can you kill a man?"

"Eventually." He made a come-hither look. I got the joke. I didn't get him. And he didn't get what he was about to do. None of us di—none of us *knew*. Louis couldn't possibly predict that soon, forced conscription would reduce from two years of national service to one year, before being scrapped altogether in just a few years as the county hurtled to democracy. He couldn't possibly know that a bullshit, made-up war in the Caprivi strip, the border between Namibia and Angola would see young men come back so damaged, so traumatized, carrying little trophy tins stuffed with the preserved hacked-off ears of other young men deemed the "red danger" from Angola, but whose true threat lay in their blackness.

"Strauss get pretty pessimistic given half a chance and even *Der Rosenkavalier* which is, you know, all sparkly, the mopey countess serves as a reminder that sooner or later Octavian will stray and Sophie will end up at alone at her dressing table, also reflecting that *der zeit is ein sonderbar ding*, you know, like the countess said."

"It's how it goes." I rolled my eyes. "They'll piss on your leg telling you think its raining."

"It all about a steady resolve. And a righteous hand."

"A steady hand, yes. And a righteous resolve. It's a message of hope, Louis. It's a scribbled note in a bottle that, by the time you read it—when you really need to read it—you may have to accept that life has carried on, despite you. We may have to accept that peace resides in the knowledge that death is swift. And not exactly unexpected."

I need Louis to make a connection here. I'm desperate for him to tell me that he is as affected by the truth about our mother and her avenging Angel. And that removing both from this—our home—will be our transfiguration. It may save us.

"When the time comes I will be back and be the hand that tips that scale. I will be the judge. I will be executioner."

"And I will finally know a day of peace. I look forward to finally laying down for a full night of rest. Dying peacefully in one's sleep is so desirable. But one not destined for her."

ACT 4

1988

17

Structure of Blame.

I

Pinky Pinky is a devil—a dybbuk.

Pinky Pinky is a rogue—a monster. Pinky Pinky is a legend.

He lies under the beds of hankering, horny girls waiting to harm them if they've been bad—or if they even think about it.

He grabs wayward boys by the ankles when they go for a swim in a farm dam to cool off after a hot, idle day on the devil's playground—doing nothing—pulling them under the water, choking them as he tries to snatch their souls.

He attacks innocents in bathroom stalls, violating them for no reason save robbing them of their virtue—what little they may have—and shaming the family—when they come walking home with bulging bellies and tall tales.

He lies in wait under the bridge and he delights in jumping out when singing girls—carrying water home—are halfway across and then he whistles to make them stop while he points and laughs at the slowest—fattest—one who, unable to get away, will soon moan, his name on her lips.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

Some swear that he is shapeless—and they say that he is everywhere—and they say that he is nowhere. Those who know say he has red burning holes where his eyes should be and one look at him is all it takes to steal your soul.

Some swear that he can reach through a wall—and that, before you know it—he will lick your eyeball, sucking so hard that your eye will pop right out of its sockets.

Some swear that, while the rest of us are catatonic—mesmerized by the creaking straps of an earthbound coffin—he will stick a long pink finger deep in the bereaved's belly button—a gentle jolt in the nexus of the solar plexus.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

Then, on Fridays—after school—kids who are too young meet in remote shebeens that are too sleazy in parts of town that are too dangerous where one will suddenly shout at a pink flash—they claim—is ricocheting around the airless, humid room and everyone will join—screaming—at the nothing that is seen to be something in a room, hitherto silent—the voices now too strident—and the space will be too cramped as the stench of fear will overwhelm, and so they take to the street.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

Soon sweaty wild-eyed boys and pretty—heaving—girls point at the sky while they shout the name that every elder fears. Because its him that made them drink and he that made them come. Some sway and tilt their heads while some stomp and kick up soil, clapping their hands while their warm bodies—aroused by the heavy air and shimmering dust—finally feel alive—feel like a dream—but real.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

And eventually the fever breaks and calm descends.

The kids get drowsy and limp.

And the elders wring their hands, mustering concern, and ask: "What is this thing that so terrorizes our children? Is it a dybbuk? Is it a rogue—a monster—or is it the ghost of an old man who—even in death—cannot stop himself from eagerly wanting innocent flesh? Can it be a

tokoloshe, lying in wait to punish the depraved? Is there a witch in the village, wild and wanton, settling old scores?

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

And sometimes, one of our own appears—bruised—on his arms—welts—on his legs and perhaps, he may have a swollen eye. And another may come limping home, her skirt torn with long scratches on her back and on her legs. Some are never seen or heard from again. And sometimes we find a body so badly beaten as to be unrecognizable, violated—having failed to pray the gay away—and corrected, the gay raped right out of them, beaten to death with rocks. Because that's how the righteous and holy roll in these God-fearing parts.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

II

But not around here. Not in these parts.

Because our people are innocent. Our young don't watch television nor do they stand in lines at bioscopes waiting to corrupt their fertile, ungirded minds with the most sordid of deviancies. Besides, we are good—chosen—folk who, after Sunday sacraments—Monday bible hour—Tuesday Christian Mingle—Wednesday prayer circle—Thursday whatever-the-fuck—fish fry Friday, and Saturday ice cream social, won't be caught exchanging our modesty for fleeting salaciousness, like some who do. Get caught, that is—Praise! But when we are—caught—trouser dropped and two feet deep in dual shopping bags concealing a midday toilet-stall-tryst with a latrine loverboy, our own pink flash of blame will be ready to be trotted out.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

This thing, this liability, this sublime shrug of callowness had, over time, started shaping *us*—instead of us, it—grabbing us and pulling us under and robbing the pale native of his moral

compass and his remaining scruples, replacing it with a seductive lure—one of power and a promise of wealth. Some may say there's a red burning hole where our humanity should be.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

And so white men hunt out of boredom and white men kill in the name of independence. White men, who subjugate the demoralized—and demoralize the subjugated—forced to bend or break, whatever/whoever comes first. And it's all about white man's trauma—white man's frailness —white man's post traumatic stress disorder. A convenient keep-me-unaccountable-so-don't-ask-me card.

But who are we to judge?

Who's to question the how—and why—the what that we do and who will point the finger pontificating that ours is an act of malice, conceived in hate.

There is no choice.

Our fear—the fuel of our trauma.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

And then, when it's just us, when *we* sway and stomp in our hot rooms—when danger in the night smells a little too familiar and it's easier just to blame the other whose worth is valued as less, we find ourselves broken—bruised—infected with a murderous desire. We may even end up with our spouse's head in a bowling bag. And we can always tell ourselves it was the pink flash that licked your eyeballs.

Pinky Pinky! Pinky Pinky!

18

She always looked around, unsmilingly.

At least Maureen was consistent in her role as much-chagrined pale native in Johannesburg, the African Gotham, a pressure cooker of a place since a State of Emergency was declared in 1986. Her vacant glare, caustic humor, and absence of kindness indicators, however, betrayed a preoccupation with something altogether darker. It was as if a demon had exterminated her light, leaving her bereft of what meagre joy she may once have possessed, resulting in perpetual dourness and consumed by resentment toward her philandering husband, and children—especially me—who were embarrassed by her presence, and the severity of her image.

Before leaving the house for as much as a liter of milk, her gingerly laid Clairol Hot Rollers would do overtime creating her bouncy, auburn flollops and it has to be said that, for a woman of a certain age belonging to a group facing cataclysmic end-time reckoning for their role in four-hundred years of oppression, Maureen Strijdom's borderline honky tonk tresses were less than appropriate. Constantly sucking a Black Russian, as she had been for a decade after switching from then-déclassé Dunhill, and defiantly wielding a pleather monogrammed Bucci handbag as shield as if leading combat, she entered—conquered—any room with a bravura display of sauciness tempered by conceit. But much like her beloved Johannesburg, she wore her scars and fake designer labels—thanks sanctions—with annoying élan.

It was clear from her love of costume jewelry that Maureen dwelled in a taste-free zone, unencumbered by propriety or the kind of restraint that sees French women remove—at least—one accessory before venturing out. She lorded it over onlookers, justifying her conspicuous consumption with a zingy "and why not, sweetheart?" or "because, sweetheart, I'm a special girl,"

making her sound like a walking shampoo commercial. "Sweetheart" by the way, her generic term of address for mortals: shopkeepers, wait staff, and, on occasion, her spawn.

Even as a child, raised in the shadow of a mine dump, her fervent prayers revolved around quitting ordinary in favor of the big bright lights and discotheques of Africa's richest city. Then she got knocked up, and, instead of coat-hangering the still-fresh blood clot that was the genesis of Irma out of her at the nearest Marie Stopes and just getting on—suitably contrite, of course—with her life, she found herself in a conjugal trap. The joyless couple became the very picture of upward mobility with the kind of ambition that feasted on the dying spasms of an ancien regime which itself survived on foolhardiness and a flimsy but desperate belief in its anemic supremacy. And after just a few years, she grew tepid at being flouted as trophy in the passenger seat of Abraham's showy Beemer, a luxury easily afforded as president—complete with a rosaceous nose and a shapeless suit —of Dominion Brushware, a seat he would occupy until his fateful tête-à-tête with the trenchant blade of a cane-cutting panga machete, a Swahili word that, somewhat misleadingly, means "big knife."

Unlike other murdering wives, Maureen never really—seriously—considered life without her husband, not at first at any rate, but over time she did allow herself to fantasize a little about what life may have been like had she not fallen pregnant and had she not married Abraham Strijdom. She started considering that getting him out of the house and out of her life may the kindest thing she could do for herself. And that the act or process of severing the cord—whatever that shape that would take—was an act of self-therapy. She suspected that she was not killer. She doubted she had the appetite. Maureen abhorred the thought of a gun, despite its brevity in execution and its undeniable stopping power, and she loathed the thought of trapsing around the house in the dead of night with a cudgel and bringing it down on the unsuspecting head of her sleeping husband. She quickly dismissed the idea of poison—she was no Daisy de Melker—and there was no way she was going to pipe exhaust fumes into a carefully taped-up room so that her husband could peacefully

asphyxiate his way into Kingdom Come. So she gave up on the idea and moved on, caught in her trapped, miserable life, reconciled to the fact that things for her will probably never change.

But it did—all of it—on the fateful day Maureen Strijdom met Angel Fourie, the man that would change her life and its very trajectory thanks to a heinous deed devised, orchestrated, and encouraged by our mother. And for that, the bitch will pay.

19

Incest, like its cousin barbarism, begins at home.

Angel Fourie was a silent man with a spaced-out vacant stare and a countenance that suggested greater excitement than he could actually muster and so, some women—Maureen Strijdom included—found him intoxicating, frequently citing his broodiness and less-than-hidden attempts at manipulation as attractive qualities. Maureen was intrigued—smitten—from the minute she laid eyes on him when Abraham introduced her to Angel as the new building manager of Duchess Court. The building, a Beaux Arts apartment block that had seen better days, excited Abraham firstly for its imposing architecture that harkened back to the city's glory days when it was still basking in the glow of a gold rush, and secondly, because for the last ten years or so he had gone about adding diverse structures to his ever-expanding portfolio of slightly decrepit structures. Situated on the leafy O'Reilly Street in Berea, Duchess Court was home to an eclectic mix of residents who appreciated living in a vibrant inner-city Johannesburg neighborhood, itself home to a motley mess of inhabitants running the gamut from Jewish grannies, punks, commie pinkos, to out-and-proud gay couples. Indeed, Abraham was concerned about the neighborhood being a little eclectic for its own good, and particularly bothered by the proximity of Pullingerkop Park, a cruisy place with a reputation for violence where gay men nonetheless would meet up every night for anonymous sex, set romantically against the twinkly skyline.

In fact, on the day he closed the deal on Duchess Court a body was found, pegged to the thatched roof of the Pullingerkop Park gazebo, the sight of which shaking him to his core as he said a Hail Mary, contemplating that it was a horrific way to die. But Angel, sensing that the new owner of the belle époque edifice was more than just a little freaked out over the corpse pegged onto the

cupola of an otherwise benign looking bandstand tucked away in the small park overlooking the city was uncharacteristically upbeat when he said, "don't worry Mister Strijdom—it was just another *fokken* faggot."

Born to Marie Fourie, dirt-poor and herself born into less than auspicious surroundings, Angel was the product of what really constituted white advantage in South Africa at the height of its obsession with separate development, and the issue of Marie's post-game quickie behind the bleachers with one of Abraham's distant cousins, Julius Strydom, himself the black sheep of an already inbred side of the Strijdom family—so distant were they that their surname over time had indeed adapted to the later variant, Strydom, which by the middle of the twentieth century had become more prevalent. Never acknowledged by the Strijdoms that mattered and too proud to acknowledge a social paralysis that was largely their own making, people like the Strydoms and the Fouries were too poor to risk anything resembling inclusiveness, theirs was the flavor of entitlement increasingly under threat. And while crazy pinkos tried to unban the ANC and free Mandela, folks like Marie Fourie and many others around them were force-fed a steady stream of state-sponsored propaganda and biblical bullshit about being a chosen race all serving as welcome fodder for justifying white supremacy under the abiding—sanctioning—eye of the Dutch Reformed Church, a collective of crackpots and zealots who were actively setting the world on fire just to keep their toes warm in the glow.

As a result of woefully misguided and entirely misappropriated sense of privilege, the last vestige of poor whites had become a refrain that, "we may have nothing and going nowhere, but at least we are not Black," and several contortions and variations on that theme. And this Faustian "better than" pact yielded few rewards yet proved consequential to say the least.

"You remember "Road to Nowhere" by the Talking Heads?"

Angel was always up for a little joke with a nihilist flavor.

"Ya—that's a good tune."

"I hear it'll be South Africa's new anthem. When they take over."

The exchange summarized the brooding schism in the country. The impending state of unity was, for some, akin to admitting defeat. A hands-up instead of the all-hands-on-deck peddled by the media and thought-leaders. It was unthinkable to some that the country can just be given away like that. It was an attitude that caused Archbishop Desmond Tutu to exclaim that "we need to to be patient with whites because they have lost their soul." Lost their soul—think about that. But he was right. They did. And now, living in the ruins of the soulless orgy of hate that was Apartheid, it was hard to miss the spiritual bankruptcy that had set in. Abuse was rife—alcohol and otherwise.

Racy jokes aside, Angel's earliest memories were of drunk men arguing around an open fire and bravura displays of fragile machismo when guns come out and arguments are settled with a roll of a barrel loaded with a single bullet. He often remembers his handsy mother who insisted that she give him a goodnight "peck on the pecker" after shower time and once bit him so hard that his penis bled. He would be haunted for the rest of his life by the memory of the night when, as a sixteen-year-old a strong arm pulled him into a cow shed at the end of the plot of land, blindfolding him before prodding his body—raping him—while placing the other hand over his throat for so long and so hard that he lost consciousness. When he was found three hours later he pointed—unable to speak—at his mother's third husband, John, leaving her so incensed that she fetched her rifle and held it to Angel's head all the time yelling, "How can you fucking do this to me? How can you seduce my baby like that?" She meant her husband, John whatever the fuck his surname was. Besides, Angel knew he would never be her baby. Or matter to her, even.

Over time Angel started believing that all this was normal. That kids were meant to be hit so hard that they lose the ability to hear for a week. And that school nurses, when they discover red welts and massive bruises, the kind that run up your back and down your legs, will simply look away and say nothing. And that even if Child Welfare calls the house, because a neighbor suspected

something really bad was going on from the yells and screams and sobs, they would do so to schedule an appointment in a week's time, and then arrive at a happy home that looked every inch like Doris Day herself was about to pull an apple pie from the oven.

For this reason, Marie Fourie preferred her son to be seen and not heard when he was being hurt. She would duct tape his mouth shut to keep him nice and quiet and then, when evenings got late and conversations ran dry, she would wake him up, order him to strip down to his Y-front and have him parade around with a fully stocked drinks tray, ready to serve and be fondled, for such was life in a godless place where people were expendable and lives—even white ones—that fell outside a very narrow definition of what was acceptable and desirable to the upper echelons of Afrikaner aristocracy, did not matter, and so you did what you had to, to earn a buck.

All the while, Angel Fourie got more paranoid and preoccupied with feeling that he was being observed. It was in no small measure exacerbated by John's habit of spying on Angel going as far as drilling a large—very obvious—hole through the bedroom wall, from where he could observe Angel when he came home after school to change out of his uniform, or after a shower. Angel eventually discovered a tight area right next to the peephole, where he could curl up—unobserved, unseen, silent, and humiliated. Those were, incidentally, qualities he would take with him for the rest of his life.

The Duchess Court gig was a good deal for Angel Fourie. He got to stay for free in Unit # 1, right next to the entrance, with its own balcony despite being on the ground floor and the job came with the added benefit of an on-site security guard—one of two—who were government permitted to reside at the back of the building above the garage in living quarters that stank of gasoline fumes from the cars below and a mix of urine and excrement from the shared bathroom that was constantly out of service and evidently impossible to fix.

Angel liked the new boss, Abraham, quickly figuring him to be a man of some wealth but little moxie, his experiences at the hands of sexually frustrated dominant men as a younger man giving him the infallible ability to place any man on a machismo scale thereby preparing himself for the correct course of action when the time came and the situation got handsy.

From a young age, Angel Fourie fantasized about the day he would meet the woman who make him whole again. Someone who would make him feel like the man he was meant to be before it was compromised and made dubious, not least of which due to his slight build and the effete quality he knew he had bit tried hard to overcompensate for. Who could be a mother and whore—able to intoxicate him with her wiles, seduce him with a single stare, and inspire him with her fiery words. A rare bird who would not emasculate him like his mother did and make him forget.

Maureen was that woman.

When she flung her legs out of the husband's Beemer on the day she came to look at new acquisition for herself, as if gliding through the entrance and down the passage, Angel Fourie knew that no matter what it was, anything she told him to do he would. She felt the same energy.

But he could not know at that time that in a mere few moths, on a late Saturday night, Maureen would arrive with a torn skirt and smeared make-up claiming that Abraham assaulted her. He would not know she did all that to herself, nor would he know that she left an urgent message for Abraham at the newly acquired Troyeville brush factory, where he was attending a small staff party, informing him that there was an incident at Duchess that needed his urgent attention, and that he could not delay his coming there.

Angel could not know that she would claim that Abraham was coming for her and that they would have to kill him.

Nor that she was already armed with a large net that would incapacitate Abraham, so that Angel could proceed with the act.

But standing at the building on the day Abraham hired him he knew one thing. It was useful to have Black men around. They're good to blame in a crisis.

20

He seemed somewhat unstable.

Shopping around for the perfect murder weapon, Angel Fourie was immediately drawn to the Cold Steel 97LPMS panga's distinctive—pronounced—priapistically curved shape complete with its perky, almost cheery, upturned tip. Its hanging belly suggested robust impact potential, making the implement suitable for small and large jobs alike, the blade's channeled grooves allowing it some flex and just enough yield to not snap under duress: perfect for stabby gestures at coconuts and crabs. Or shitty people, the graceful but lethal Haitian art of "Tire Machét" being a case in point. Look it up. Angel did.

For him, in the market for an affordable and durable panga as he was, the Cold Steel 97LPMS presented a sure bet. Forged with 1055 carbon steel, the black blade with its baked-on Anti-Rust Matte Finish is thick, extra-long and the heavy tip guaranteed extra chopping power when needed.

A sidenote: the length of a panga must ideally match the wielder's height. When holding a panga, arm straight down, does it touch the ground? It should! For anyone on the tall side, the Cold Steel 97LPMS promises to make quick—and easy—work of possibly cumbersome tasks, eliminating the need to stoop or crouch when making deep cuts at ground level. Another design feature—the kind of thing we just don't know the worth of until it's needed— is the Cold Steel 97LPMS's sharpened reverse side meaning that users may cut and slice on the backswing too, greatly reducing the time it takes to clear a village.

Murderous fashionistas have long hated how cheap panga sheaths left much to be desired, but the Cold Steel 97LPMS comes with a durable, stitched leather sheath. Simple to snap shut and loop onto combat trousers for convenient open carry. Angel appreciated the masculine visual impact of such an impressive swinging appendage.

But what intrigued him most, when chatting to the salesman, was that a Cold Steel 97LPMS handle stays firm—securely fixed—even after heavy batoning or recreational bâtonnage. A downside of lesser pangas is that the handle becomes hard to grip when moistened, and it's going to get that way since users are assumed to work their pangas for extended periods, and, lest we forget, it's a good—bloody—workout.

All of this appealed immensely to Angel, being as he was, under Maureen's strict instructions not to botch the butchery of Abraham Strijdom. He was confident however. The Cold Steel 97LPMS panga is not for nothing the gold standard machete on the entire African continent.

22

I'm aroused by my appetite for vengeance alone.

I.

What does one do when madness strikes?

It was nearly midnight when Louis came to see me at Garbo's, an intimate late-night bistro that served pricey cocktails and the kind of aggressively seasoned amuse-gueules that caused diners to order several more extortionate drinks. It was a small space, a short drive to any of the city's famed gay clubs and packed to capacity nightly by a loyal gay clientele, who thought of Johannesburg as nothing less than the New York City of Africa, a description not entirely unjustified as Jo'burg was, after all, the continent's financial powerhouse and the closest thing around these parts to a big city that rides roughshod over inconvenient social issues such as equity or ethics. By design, Garbo's was bewitchingly dim, the decor grindingly peppy with jazz-age pretensions, gray and while walls relying heavily on neatly framed black and white photographs of the legend herself, while the evening's soundtrack was provided courtesy of a stack of vocal—Garland, Fitzgerald, Leander and other catnip-for-gays—big-band cassettes. Drag queens loved Garbo's and mustachioed leather types, themselves costumed to the hilt, could hardly get enough.

Louis returned from Duchess Court on O'Reilly, mere blocks away—where Abraham's car was parked—worried because there was no sign of him, anywhere. En route to Garbo's Louis popped into the subterranean slot machine casino where Abraham spent far too many evenings after work but he had not been there the entire evening. Louis then had a look at Estoril, a magazine emporium, as well as both record shops just in case our errant father was in any of those, but, as he

pointed out, Abraham never walked more than absolutely necessary and even if he was at any of the venues Louis had checked, his car would have been right outside any one of them.

It was getting late. I suggested we run over to Duchess Court to see if we could find Abraham —maybe he had returned. Perhaps, by now, his car was gone, and we can relax, or, for some reason, he was at the building talking to the building manager. Arriving, red-faced from the brisk walk, at Duchess we startled the night guard who promptly excused himself to fetch Angel, whom the guard said, was taking a shower. By now it was after midnight—an advanced hour for ablutions. Our sudden arrival seemed to interrupt the guard who had just started to scrub the zigzagging metal staircase which ran up the back of the building, much of it covered with blood.

"Someone fell," Angel said dismissively, after being fetched by the guard. Both of them seemed oddly disengaged—nonchalant even—as if what was a bloody mess on a, external metal staircase was run-of-the-mill. Nothing to see here.

"Must've a been a bleeder." I shot back, irritated by their passive-aggressive snub strategy.

But there it was, glowing in the dim light: a red, jammy still-fresh smear leading all the way down the stairs, the carnal odor of decaying meat, rust and fungal iron dulling, arresting—etherizing—my senses. I instinctively knew two things. The raw taint—that stain—was my father's. The blood, mine. Strijdom blood.

And then, gnawing at my sanity, was the issue of the subtlest of calling cards: a scintilla of Moroccan jasmine, barely noticeable yet cloying—diffused—but unmistakable as the key ingredient in Anaïs Anaïs, Maureen's favorite perfume.

II.

There was nothing left but for us to report Abraham missing.

Louis bore witness to the scene of carnage we stumbled upon at Duchess.

The police sent us home, telling us not to worry.

We stayed up all night—worrying.

When we got home Maureen was sitting topless on the edge of the pool, her legs dangling over the deep-side before slipping into the cool blue water that stole her daughter.

At 8 AM the cops arrived. Abraham's body had been found.

The autopsy report would indicate "a total of forty slash and hack wounds as well as contused lacerations" identified on Abraham's face, neck, and torso. In addition, "superficial abrasions were identified on the skin. The cause of death, due to extensive brain contusion following fragmentation of the neurocranium." The injuries, resulting in the death of Abraham Strijdom, were "sustained during an assault on the cranium with a panga machete, which was used both as slashing implement and blunt instrument."

Angel Fourie fingered the night guard as the culprit and, in turn, the guard mumbled something about a robber and that he tried to protect the building.

Abraham Strijdom's mutilated body was dragged down the stairwell where we smelled his blood, through the parking garage, across Prospect Street, down the alley next to Highrise Apartments, across Fife Street and, finally, left for dead in Pullingerkop Park—a gay cruising park—unceremoniously hooked onto the roof of a thatched gazebo.

My father's was an undignified death. A brutal end to a good—if somewhat ineffectual—man's life.

23

They made love—in the dark—without a word.

"The softest thing about Maureen is her teeth." After seven months together, Angel still told the same lame joke when they had company over. "She's a goddamn velvet hammer!" He paused and raised a glass. "Happy New Year, my love."

And Maureen smiled, like she did every time, this time raising her glass to toast the occasion concealing the fact that she barely tolerated his oafishness. Everyone else laughed—bwahaha'd, really—like they, too, did every time, but without snorts that signaled realness or tears of merriment rolling. It was the kind of reaction generally reserved for a tin-pot tyrant holding court, a little too spirited and a touch too theatrical. Such was her hold.

It was genuinely amusing to her—a welcome diversion—and instead of being insulted or embarrassed, she rather liked the frisson of the moment. The friction made her horny. It made her feel alive. It also made her somewhat aggressive—forceful—she knew that Angel liked that. Besides, he was not wrong. *Fucker. He knows me, after all.* And she always shot back.

"Don't you forget that, Shady-Angie! "

Maureen always called him Shady. She knew it got a rise out of Angel when she intimated that his dark hair and olive complexion made him appear less than white. She also liked to double-barrel her jab, dropping "Angie" into the mix since she knew her emasculating taunts—verbally feminizing him—riled Angel up, getting him to pipe down for the rest of the night, and she would wink and flash him a pursed-lip grin.

"Maybe I'll call to have you reclassified as Coloured, sweetheart."

Race, in South Africa, was destiny. Every citizen was classified into four racial categories: white, black, Coloured—meaning mixed-race—or Indian. Classification determined where you could sit, wait, walk, pray, learn, and shop. Anything less than whiteness was a handicap, and designated "race detectives," with no experience of anthropology or genetics, would juggle the well-being—and destinies—of fellow countrymen by creeping around private lives, collecting data, which would be presented to the race classification board. Suspected personae non gratae would have pencils shoved into their hair to see if it falls out after vigorous head-shaking—stuck pencils indicated Black hair. Wobbly pencils—Coloured. Buttocks and jawlines were scrutinized. Arms pinched to elicit response. Afrikaans yelps were preferred, being the lingua franca of most whites and Coloured folk, but "ouch!" yelled in an African language was a fait accompli. Babies were inspected by the "race inspector" for being "blue bums," a giveaway of their being Coloured due to "Mongolian blue spots" over the sacrum of newborns.

"A touch of the tar, alright," Maureen would chide Angel and silently admonish herself, imaging the look Abraham would have given her for daring to go there. And after a little mental shrug, she would realize she was glad to be done with Abraham because he always acted like he had a stick up his ass.

But, she reasoned with herself, badinage was her thing after all—men jabbed, she retorted. It was her idea of chemistry. It was what good rapport was supposed to look like, resembling repartee of the variety you saw on Maude or Archie Bunker. But anyone who looked closely, gauging the temperature of her responses, would be confident that Maureen was underlining hard truth with searing nonchalance. That there was indeed nothing soft about her. And she was just fine with that because Angel, much like Abraham before him, was, in fact, a broken man. And that suited her.

* * *

But, no matter how hard Maureen tried, her now-deceased husband was always there. And Irma. He was there when she woke up—*if* she woke up since her ability to sleep has been robbed since the dreadful deed—and he was there in the eyes of her children. He was in her thoughts and lurking in the words of others. Abraham's was a constant presence—suspended in the ether. Abraham the drunk. The lousy lover who fucked her only as many times as it would take to impregnate her and an impotent political player whose flaccid single term as mayor was over when a rival outed him for his mounting gambling debt and loutish behavior, often involving Maureen. Most notable was that time she worked on his nerves so much that he threw the television out of the hotel room, into the swimming pool. She liked that. It was as funny as it was impressive to see how far she could push him.

"I'd better watch out for your darkies," Abraham would say. Or joke. Or insinuate, worrying Maureen that he may have seen evidence of her lust. But then, one never really knew with Abraham. With gifts for both parsimony and the gab, he could turn his coat to the wind with scant effort, going from fiery anti-nationalist liberalist fervor to cracking the kind of jokes that acted as bat-signals—gaslights, really—that like-minded souls would pick up on, recognizing scantily-concealed vitriol from kinfolk, and soon, like happy pigs, they would roll around in shitty rhetoric.

"Especially with this one, she's had the taste a few times, I think. You know what they say,… once you go Black…"

And Maureen would fire back—unnerved and off guard—but not missing a beat.

"It's a hard choice, sweetheart. It's a BIG difference, after all. A man with meat between his legs or one with meat in his name? Know what I mean, Abra*ham*?"

And so, through gossamer-thin veiled insults and surgically precise provocations aimed at cutting Abraham to size, so to speak, Maureen would feel better about herself. Until she didn't anymore.

* * *

But that was then. And Maureen was supposed to be happy now.

"It's terrible what is happening to this country," Angel would continue at dinner parties with such vagueness that no one would know what he meant, whether his underseasoned word salad was a general comment on the effects of sanctions on South Africa, the impending death of white rule, the continued subjugation of the Black population, or possibly, the fact that the subjugated have started to coalesce around liberation ideologies while taking up an armed struggle against the regime —and white denialism—as opposed to the hereto preferred passive resistance ideology which garnished little in the way of actual, tangible results. It was probably the latter. A dinner party pooper if ever there was one—impending civil war makes for stifled chatter, after all.

Guests always nodded, po-faced, seemingly in agreement with Angel's pig-ignorance, and one would reliably volunteer that even on scorching summer days, they keep car windows tightly rolled up, especially at stop signs—if they even dare stop—because, you know, hijackings. And that they never leave home without a bible and a can of Mace in their handbags "just in case I'm violently assaulted by one of them, I'm ready to pray and spray." A few will complain about having to live in compounds with not one, but *two* security entrances *and* an electric fence *and* a team of private security, before noting that "they're prolly useless seeing as they are all black as well and, you know, they won't take a bullet to save the Lladró."

And as the evenings dragged on, stories got wilder, their tone darker, and some regaled the group with something they heard from a friend, who heard it from their cousin, who heard from someone else, about an exceptionally violent crime just down the street because "Black boys are thugs," and white girls are flowers—innocent—who fantasize, and joke, and tease, and call the police, claiming to feel imperiled—and Maureen would lament the days of the *dompas* when she could threaten to have the Black staff's passbooks revoked when they got sassy—because "Black boys are thugs" who *choose* to misread signals. She would regale the company with stories about the

seventies when the Blue Maria truck would patrol the streets of suburbia on Thursdays—frequently the day taken off by domestic workers—stopping them on the street, or in their rooms, insisting on seeing their passbooks, the hated *dompas*, checking that they are allowed to even be there. Failure to produce would see them arrested or sent back to their rural homes. And Maureen would lament the recent abolition of the passbook, and how this, surely, was a harbinger of a grim future. But in Maureen's world—the manicured white enclaves of suburbia—white was beyond reproach, woefully misunderstood, while Blacks—well…whatever. Who cared? They simply didn't *really* matter. Money made impenetrable walls.

"It's a system that's been around since the Fifties, for fuck's sake," she would carp, "what are we going to do now? How are we supposed to know if they are allowed to be here? What's next?" And amid the manufactured outrage and the furious spinning of yet another urban legend, no one suspected that Maureen, reclining on her lounger next to her Greek idyll kidney-shaped pool, frequently encouraged her gardener to cool off in the pool. It was indeed scandalous, but not rare, to find a madam encouraging a muscular gardener to dive in wearing only underwear—"jump in Nkosi, sweetheart—*die water hy is warm!*"

It would have been outrageous, but not unheard of, to find her watching him emerge from the water, barely able to concentrate on her cigarette as she mixed him a refreshing Rose's Lime with extra lemonade and a twist of lime peel, which she carried out submissively batting her eyelids at "the other"—the object—with its promise of phallic jouissance.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. You don't need a costume!" She would poke her prey in the chest, gently, teasing, with just a hint of a smile and a clumsy wink outlining her words. "If there's anything I haven't seen, sweetheart, I'll hang my hat on it! And it's a big one."

And yet, for all the flirting and drunken fantasies; for all her peering through dusty net curtains while safely ensconced in her dismal bruise-colored kitchen, as she appreciatively studied the fine physique of her obliging lay-for-pay pool boy while pressing her lonely body against the corner of

the kitchen counter, Maureen was too scared, and too scarred, to act impulsively on desire or, God forbid, garner the courage to fight for a cause. Any cause. Years of repression and feelings of inadequacy had left Maureen godless—hard pressed to think of any moral cause or social issue that she felt anything over.

Consequently, her spirit had grown more anemic—day by day—as she agreed and nodded with a husband who made inane, inflammatory jokes. Sometimes, in conversation, she felt herself slipping away, giving up on life, and, like an event experienced in slow-motion without the ability to interrupt and arrest the decay, she felt herself edge to nothingness.

She was comfortable with subjugating the skin she secretly yearned for. By proxy, she found a modicum of solace in the dusky pinkness of her equally misanthropic new husband who—drunk and still pissed off at her name-calling and attitude— may or may not force himself on his bride. She would give in, lie back, and think of diving into the blue pool, almost tasting the Rose's Lime, wet on her lips.

ACT 5

May 1, 1989

I'm aroused by my appetite for vengeance alone

alone adjective

\ ə-ˈlōn

1 : separated from others : ISOLATED

// I am utterly *alone* in this small room. My place—my home—now feels foreign.

2 : exclusive of anyone or anything else : ONLY

// It seems that I *alone* knows what really happened.

3 a : considered without reference to any other

// *Alone*, I will plot revenge and sharpen the blade.

b. : INCOMPARABLE, UNIQUE

// Abraham, my father, stood *alone* among men.

Synonyms: Adjective

- - *lone, lonely, lonesome, single, solitary, solo, unaccompanied*

-

alone adverb

1 : SOLELY, EXCLUSIVELY

// I do not blame my mother, Maureen, *alone*.

2 : without aid or support

// Since she *alone* did not swing this heartache, her henchman—and now new husband—too, MUST pay.

Synonyms: Adverb

- *independently, single-handed, single-handedly, singly, unaided, unassisted*

24

Things look different in confined spaces.

6 AM

On the day that everything changed I woke up especially early and alone, just like every day since the murder, my obsession with staying alert at any cost had wreaked havoc with may sleeping pattern and I entered a constant state of tiredness, numbed, but not enough. I woke up feeling slightly bilious, not unusual for me since the event, and took a Valoid which truth be told, the packaging does suggest that ii's indicated for motion sickness or to help curb nausea caused by radiotherapy, neither of which are motivating factors in my case, but I took one anyway. I chased it with a black coffee which I nursed in darkness next to the empty pool-shaped leaf-receptacle in the ground. There must have been a strong wind the night before, I thought. Since my father's murder I had learnt to find calmness in silence of early morning darkness in an attempt at self-therapy, often getting completely lost in contemplation, so much so that on that day I forgot to drink the last quarter of my coffee. I discovered that quiet dark mornings afforded me access to hidden—repressed—memories allowing me to claim them and dissecting each fragment with precision in an effort to gain some semblance of understanding exactly what led to the events of that day and how it all unfolded.

At first, my hope was that I be able to create a thoughtfully composed structure of events that would outline how one action followed the other while mindful that our grievances and wounds dated back to events that occurred well before my birth. Against all odds, I hoped to understand—empathize—and I wished, for all our sakes, that comprehension preceded forgiveness and that it

may lead to redemption. But my hope did not last. You see, I knew the enemy, made as we were, from the same cloth. And so I spent my days biding my time, stewing in my hate with a deep conviction that swift justice was required and that it had to be meted out intentionally and without mercy. I realized that I had difficulty distinguishing between lived experience—the things I could count on as having been witness to it—and the muddling mess of less-than-verified received information, manipulated and curated over generations about who we are and what we were meant to be. And of course, as my mother's child I along with my siblings had the misfortune to be reticent receptacles—and the products—of her ample hate. But I was also my fathers'. A mirror. A looking glass reflecting a fraction of who we once were, perhaps never the poster nuclear family but still, a far cry from what we had morphed into—this generational tumor that desperately needed to be lanced like a boil.

And so, each day, after aimlessly staring at my four walls, listening to the steady stream of gossip and complaints coming from outside my door, I always arrived at the same basic questions. What finally snapped? Did our father defend himself? Did he display strength? Or, in his final moments, did he just give up? Was he overpowered? Did he surrender? Or, did he wave the white flag, declinung to resist an assailant whom he had once loved but who, now, turned on him, thereby forever staining our name through her actions. In that moment, did he allow his own murder—did he willingly go straight up kamikaze pilot, knowings the odds, secure in the knowledge that his death will be avenged? That his death would necessitate the death of his murderer. I still like to think it did. No mere basic questions these, as it turned out, and like a hamster on a wheel I focused on the minutiae of our family history and the bits that I could gather from that day's slow unfolding, under pressure—self-imposed for sure—to piece it all together, worried that my memory of it all may fade, slip away, or be replaced with frivolity and fodder before I could get a decent handle on it. As it turned out, despite the horror, memories of him—and the day—were like quicksilver and the constant stream of revisionism fed me by all those who claim to have once known him soon made

me realize the importance of solitude and contemplation. I needed to not be reminded or advised on ways to "help me get over the shock and the emotional bump in the road." My only option became to lock myself in, allowing few inside—preferably no one.

It was getting light. Day was approaching. I never liked that time of day. I hated the rising sun's red tinge. I hated the way there was a soft ticking sound in my head, reminding me that time could not—would not—stop. It was relentless. I found a degree of relief in the sooty smoke that rose over the city early each morning and the woodsy smell of thousands of fires being made in townships like Alexandria and Thokosa—far enough to be unseen but close enough to smell and remind us that there were people there, impatient, like me biding their time for a reckoning.

I hated that my mother immediately took to the bed she had shared with my father for over twenty years with her accomplice. So soon. Too soon. The unwashed sheets still smelled like her dead husband. The same bed that was a family refuge during power outages caused by ferocious thunderstorms. The same bed that played host to burnt-toast-breakfasts on Mother's Day every year, before she started drinking again, acting like a woman unencumbered by her marriage or family. The bed where she lay night after night next to her husband plotting his barbaric death. How satisfying it must have been for her to get fucked by Angel Fourie on sheets that still reeked of my father.

I found, I could not close my eyes. Try as I might, I could not unsee the bloodied panga machete or unsmell the thick scent of blood around the iron staircase where he was slaughtered like a pig—his blood still dripping from the walls. I struggled to recall much else about that night—I remembered rushing to get to the building and Louis's wild eyes—but most of all, it was the cocky presence of Angel that stayed with me, his attitude daring anyone to point a finger at him when he had conveniently provided the perfect killer in the shape of the Black night-guard. And of course. The something else—the secret signature—the heady hit of jasmine, the prime ingredient in Maureen's Anaïs Anaïs.

Most days—every day, who am I kidding—I felt lost and I took great pains to avoid the newspapers and TV, for fear of distraction. When you have a gut feeling that your life is basically over, most diversions fail to make much of an impression. SABC television least of all. My daily existence had become one of forced compliance with the laws of nature. I had to eat: simple enough, and so, eventually, I had to shit. I kept awake to think and plot and plan. And so, eventually I drifted off to some netherworld like a nervous street dog ready to respond to unfavorable advances. And repeat. All the time I just wanted it all to be over. I was alive. But I was hardly living.

I was alone in that place. It may not have looked like much to the casual observer, but it was a sacred site. It was the home where he lived—where he once stood. I would have paid any price to see him again, both eyes open, full of life. I desperately wanted to remember how the blood that poured from his open wounds formed a crust in the shape of a crown, and as red as roses around his head. It was unthinkable that life could just carry on. Like nothing ever happened.

Night after night I bargained and bartered with the dead to be shown a sign. Just one. Nothing extravagant—I didn't need books to go flying or doors to slam. No Poltergeist stuff. A modest shadow on the wall would have done—something that only I could see because I was now the only one left who seemed willing to do what it took to avenge his killing. And attention had to be paid—a death is not nothing, after all. It cannot ever be.

Each night without fail I dreamed about my mother, her lover, and those who served them. I dreamed that their waxy bodies, bruised and naked, rolled into open pits as life slowly seeped from them. I dreamed about slaughtering their last remnants as I drove even their dogs into the undignified mass grave before I slit their throats because they too were the spawn of the litter of the litter of the people who betrayed him—the people who were not worthy of even sitting at his feet. And when this had been done, when the exorcism of all that is evil from this house has been

completed and his death was avenged, I would raise a flag on this site: the house that Abraham Strijdom built—the ugly mess in a crap neighborhood on the edge of a pressure cooker which, for a while at least, was home. Or something.

And then I dreamed I would dance. I would step on the soil where he once lived and I would dance over the metal stairway where he was executed. I would dance around his grave and over the lifeless bodies of that woman and her bitch—I would raise my knees high and stomp on the ground, releasing clouds of thick red dust and from all over the city of Germiston people come to see me celebrate and they admire the plumes made by my ecstatic feet.

"This is our home," I would exclaim for all to hear, my pride unrestrained and matched only by their boundless admiration. And the people who see me are left will be in no doubt. They will recognize the pomp and circumstance of a festival at a house that had known such pain, and they will comment that Abraham must be proud—that he was now revered and remembered like the proud warrior that he was—a Strijdom—and that his grave was consecrated by his dancing child, and that finally, by slaying the slayer, we were victorious.

And in my dream, through the Highveld grass, the answer would come, "Inkosi yekhaya lethu." Head of this home, indeed.

25

Emergencies of self.

8 AM

My garden apartment's walls appeared satisfyingly sombre thanks to Farrow and Ball's Down Pipe no. 26—a color I still recommend for its shade of inferred drama, offset by bluish undertones which, according to the pamphlet, is "fabulous as a background to art, and extremely effective for use in halls to create a deeply dramatic entrance to the home." Like I needed that.

Combined with pewter block-out curtains, it was tricky to determine the hour, the velvet reassuringly banning summer's frivolities. No mean feat as my quarters, a repurposed poolroom, abutted the emptied-out, kidney-shaped pool with its faded Greek Key waterline border and jaunty columns—a 1980s white-trash confection posing as Greek idyll.

~~I live~~d ~~in the shadows~~.

This shadow under which I merely subsisted, biding my time, was foisted upon me.

It must have been a Monday, judging by the commotion outside my door. At the start of each week, mother dutifully ordered a cleaner, her personal caregiver, and a *sangoma* to case the joint and get me to piss in a cup in the hope that it would be tainted—useful as evidence. The *sangoma* worked exclusively for suburban ladies who, tired of Tarot, wanted bones thrown to divine their destiny—any destiny—while she also did brisk business selling medicinal herbs to flaccid husbands who hoped to still feature in some of those assiduously divined futures.

The maid spoke with a tone as mellifluous as tinfoil on teeth as she knocked on the glass door.

"Any bets on what's wrong today?"

"I am sure there'll be something. There always is," the cleaner chirped.

"So ungrateful."

"I mean…just *look* at this place."

The Strijdom home started life as mid-century modest at best, set in blue-collar suburbia on the outskirts of Johannesburg in a sundown town where mine dumps resemble mountains, their contoured pockmarks sculpted not by an intelligent God with a creative bent, but dynamite. And when the sun set, announcing the nightly respite from detonations, wailing sirens summoned miners and maids, commanding them to head for the safety of the townships rather than get caught dead in pale enclaves. Surviving the ride in a police van had become worse than being beaten to death by a racist, sadistic cop—or shot in the head—because Black men and women who survived the paddy wagon were viewed antagonistically as those very informants who frequently ended up as crispy and charred "Kentuckies."

For suburbs like Germiston, diversity—an anathema—posed a mortal threat that endangered the status quo that assiduously ensured that one group, through mastery and melanin, would be forced to bend to the wishes and whims of another. Consequently, when a sundown town sounded the siren it was not as response to what the other *did*. It was simply because the other *was*.

And so, each night, cleansed of the unwanted and etched against the golden sunset, the streets glowed as though touched by an alchemist.

The maids always—predictably—commented favorably on the cavernous space where my mother's old settee came to die and my father thought it a good idea to install a pinball machine for when they have parties on a Saturday night. The kind of party where a fishbowl was available for car-keys —we've never had fish, incidentally—and the bowl was a premeditated purchase on Maureen's side since she had urges and Abraham, while adept with a stick on a pool table and rattling pool balls into

their bags with the kind of insecure dominance reserved for only the least secure among men, was, well, still sporadically as impotent as it got, despite the *sangoma's* hardest efforts.

As mentioned before, but worth repeating, the issue had become a core source of conflict and constant tension—just desserts for marrying above your station, which our mother certainly did—but then again, she probably would have suffered lack of hardness over actual hardship any day. Having been raised mostly in a modest worker's row-house next to a barren minedump in the city of gold, Maureen wasted little time when it came to making her suburban midcentury home her castle, adding a new garage—big enough for three cars parked in tandem, since prestige alone cannot widen a yard—and immediately plonking a very long, very awkwardly-shaped bedroom on top of the tandem garage, rendering the house lopsidedly charmless. Nevertheless, the dream team's lyrical waxings would continue unabated until the end.

"This is a beautiful house. I love what they've done with it." She knocked again.

"It's a jewel in Germiston's crown. Are you goin to open up?"

It truly was not. Even on the most ho-hum street in the most style-deprived suburb imaginable, this most jejune of houses, was remarkable for managing to be both ostentatious and terminally bland.

"You can't polish a turd, ladies. Someone should tell mother though. And no. I'm busy."

Having beaten the dead horse that was the house, attention rapidly pivoted to my garage-turned-garden-apartment.

"And this room. It *is* the old garage, but it's *very* nice."

"Tastefully converted. And you know what? It doesn't smell like a garage."

"You would never be able to tell."

"It *is* a very cushy set-up. Compared to how most people live."

"Compared to how *we* live."

"It's great."

"Ja. Great."

"We're being given the runaround. We have to come in, you know! *Aikôna*. That one. "

Fuck me.

"We need to clean the room. And Mabel wants you to go in this cup. It's been a month already. Your mother's orders. Don't shoot the messengers."

"It's an invasion of my privacy! I know my rights you fuckers. And don't tempt me."

"Ugh. Back to *that* are we? The eternal going on about rights being violated and being kept prisoner—none of which are true! You can actually leave."

"And the potty mouth."

"Your mother insists."

"Fuck that c—"

"Don't speak like that about your mother."

Her tone dropped when she addressed one of her colleagues. "I feel so sorry for that woman. After everything she has been through."

"At least she has Angel to rely on. He's a good man. He worships her. Better for her than the dead one."

It set me off when they referred to my father. It upset me when they did not use his name. Angel married a murderer. A whore. A scheming, two-timing plucky bitch whose faux-Catholic piety and relentlessly saccharine facade resonate with the warp and woof of those who also aspire to leave behind the slums of Troyeville and Hillbrow—no matter the cost. Just like she did.

"Strijdom! His name was Abraham Strijdom."

"And of course. Now this." I could almost feel the eye-roll toward me hidden in my barren poolhouse.

"It won't get better you know The behavior, the insults, the accusations."

I slid the door open. The maid, the nurse, and the *sangoma* with the burning sage looked at me as if snakes were writhing out of my head.

"Why are you staring at me? Don't you feel shame? Do you have no restraint? Or are you trying to distract me before riling me up after deliberately not mentioning the name of my father—Abraham—and the viciousness of his murder? The brutality of the act. At the hands of that woman and her toady?"

"I'm sorry. We are just not used to seeing you so…disheveled."

"She means you look tired."

"I do not look tired. I am tired. I look…like shit. Because I am caged up like an unloved dog."

"You really don'—"

"Just. Shut. Up." I do a sassy neck roll with a z-snap. "No." I punctuated the no with a choreographed nod. Realness.

"You can go anytime you want."

"She's right—you are here for your own good. And we can look after you. Just fill this little cup."

Mabel worried me. She was my mother's permanent companion. She pretended to be a nurse—always prescribing something. Melatonin to sleep and vitamin B to stay awake. And stronger stuff, "for when herbs don't work,"as mother said.

I closed the door and made a beeline for the bathroom.

"Looks like a dog, a mad one. I don't appreciate the way we are looked at. Or are spoken to, for that matter."

"These displays are so toxic and you're right, it is disrespectful."

"You know, I've come to realize it's better not to stare. It's just a trigger. And don't get too close. You never know. Don't trust a dog with distemper."

"I can still hear you! You're like bees that got too close to the golden honey pot. Or shit on a blanket. Kinda stuck."

I could feel the hostility through the glass door. I could hear them whisper, trying not to upset me. I could sense from the rhythm of their muffled words that they were rehearsing the report they'll give to mother. How they were working on striking the right balance between cautious optimism and polite condemnation. That they loved the sinner—it's the Christian thing to do, after all—but that they could not condone the sin, yet none would care a jot nor be compelled to pause and consider the hypocrisy of their words, or their selective—manufactured—outrage.

When speaking to my mother later that evening they will describe how my fingers looked like talons— claws really—and that I ate like a vulture, hunched over and wild. "You should see it madam, it's less eating as such and more of a feeding," one would opine. They will mime, making little hand movements, simulating my supposedly baboon-like gestures. And they will laugh.

"That our madam lets a monster squat in this beautiful poolroom speaks to her kindness."

"If that was my child I would not be as forgiving."

I flung the door open."What do you suggest ladies? That I be fed with the dogs, but humanely—with my own bowl—chained and tied?"

They ignored me but I sensed that the mood had shifted. It always did when they spoke of the hand that fed them.

"She is wonderful. You just choose not to see it."

"You will miss her when she is gone."

"She's a fucken queen, Mabel. She's a legend. And no, I won't. In fact—quite the contrary."

"'Maureen Strijdom is a good woman. If I was you, I would fall on my knees and thank her for this life you have."

"You know, that is a great idea. And while I'm down there I will rinse my father's blood off her feet with my tears."

"There is a cloud over this house these days and I think you need to give her a break. Do you hear me? We are trying to help, but you make it so hard."

"I'm sure there is, but it's a cloud of embarrassment, ladies. It's not unlike a dust cloud—one that keeps puffing up as she tries, frantically, to sweep her humiliation and hate under rugs and into corners, where she hopes no one will see it but for it's dissipating plumage—which she prays will be mistaken as proof of her diligence. But you know as well as I do that you are all staring at a cursed sack of corpulent excrement, one you so faithfully serve. The same one who willfully unlatched the door to her own demise. And we—her children—caked in the blood of her innocent husband, our father Abraham, are bound by duty to exact retribution. Here, take this golden gift. For mother."

The caregiver reached out as if to grab the little jar from me, and seeing that I had neglected to screw the lid on immediately checked her enthusiasm, and gave me a wry smile as if signaling that she saw me. She turned around and motioned the others to follow her back to the house.

With their departure—almost immediately—calmness settled again over the place where I chose to bide my time. But thinking back, I remember feeling tired. That I was still tired. Tired had by them become my default setting.

After a short while I went outside and sat on the stoep. Alone. In the warmth of the rising sun, the light took on a burnished tone—a reddish hue—making it look like the house, her house, was bathed in blood.

26

Africa, my dear, is not for sissies.

10 AM

"Mom wants to send you away."

"I figured as much. All this pissing in a jar once a month. I know she is up to something."

"I think they may try to lace your food, to frame you—or try to anyway. Be careful."

"I refuse to eat anything that comes from that kitchen. I flush the entire Tupperware every time."

"Are you surviving? I try and bring what I can, but I'm sure it's not enough."

"You're doing great. Thank you. I don't say that often enough. Don't worry about me. Irma also brings me stuff. Cousin Helena too. So, what's *la mère vipère* planning? Where exactly is she plotting to send me now?"

"To Tara."

"You're joking. She's obsessed with that place."

It was barely a secret to anyone who knew her that Maureen was indeed besotted, frequently ending any disagreement or any mildly exasperating interaction, by saying to whoever was still listening that, "you're going to send me straight to Tara." It was as familiar a refrain as one could wish for and beyond annoying, especially since we all knew what Tara was about.

Despite operating officially as a psychiatric hospital, Tara was pretty much as swanky as it got, and, to the casual observer, the patrician building may have resembled a boutique hotel or gentleman's estate more than the function it officially fulfilled. Perched on a hilltop, Tara afforded—and still does—spectacular views over the forested parklike northern suburbs of the city, and

sported manicured lawns, succulent-rich rockeries, a Gary Player-designed golf course, two tennis courts, and a swimming pool. "Our environment provides a haven for those in psychological distress," the brochure proclaimed, and with an on-site chef, it was small wonder Maureen constantly hinted at checking herself in.

Constructed during the 1930s, Tara House appeared every inch the opulent mansion, by any standards. Built with crimson brick and topped with a blood-red clay-tile roof, the structure made a suitably severe and imposing first impression. The entrance was paneled in solid teak, as were the hall and stairway, much of it destroyed in the 1940s when a wireless unceremoniously exploded, and the profusion of teak acted as tinder, making it nearly impossible for the local municipal fire engines to douse and save all the paneling. The building was sold to the South African government in 1942, first serving as Command Headquarters for the Defense Force, before it was leased to the Red Cross for a while, eventually doing duty as Major Jack Penn's plastic surgery clinic, and finally relaunched as a progressive mental health institution. More challenging psychological cases—meaning detained or Black ones—were committed to Krugersdorp's Sterkfontein Hospital, a place redolent of the bedlam we expect and appreciate from a less fine psychiatric facility.

All of which brings us to the Maureen and Mollie connection. Maureen's mother, Martha or Gramma Mollie as we called her, spent a few months at Tara in the 1970s, and visiting her forever skewed our view of mental health and its treatment, perpetually inspiring images of mansions and high tea. Grammol, no stranger to depression but mercifully not a danger to society, unlike her deranged daughter, chose Tara for treatment.

"More hip-hop—less hip op," she would bellow on her "up" days and then disappear under a mass of blankets for five days while the "black dog" bit her, as she put it. Maureen took after her mother in this sense.

Maybe I do too.

"It's the Trichardt curse," Grammol would remind us, "we're all eventually bitten by it."

From her intimate ward, Grammol had a choice of students from college, clinical psychology, occupational therapy, dinkum psychiatrists—often with a heavy hand when it came to prescriptions—and a daily choice of two puddings, one warm and one cold. She had never been happier, and since clinical depression ran deep and thick in Trichardt blood, Grammol's joy was no negligible achievement.

"How did you find out about this daft and frankly desperate Tara plan?"

"I heard Angel mention it to the nurse, whom he instructed to obtain urine samples from you. He was specific."

"Gross. Were you eavesdropping, sister? Did you press a little teacup against the wall? Was the window accidentally ajar? Or, are they feeding you these tantalizing tidbits so you can come here and piss me off for having to piss in a cup?"

"I happened to walk by. The door was not entirely shut."

"OK. So we're going with ajar. I would tread lightly past those doors if I were you. Never know when they might fling open without warning, and what you may see exposed and splayed open in the harsh light of day. One day soon it may be our brother in there, lopping off that viper's head."

"No need for dramatics. This isn't one of your little acting classes."

" You know Martha. You have a most irritating way of being simultaneously vulnerable and deeply offensive, and, in this instance, diminishing the importance of my interests and education."

"All I'm saying is that it gets tiring when everything about you is reduced to method acting or declamatory in style. Sometimes at the same time. It has become worse since father died. As if you are not rooted in reality and everything that you say comes across as, well, somewhat out of touch."

"OK. I get it. Let me try another way. Stop aligning yourself with her. Keep the lights low Martha. Don't draw attention to yourself. And just let happen what will."

"I'm not you. I cannot live in the shadows like you. I know what you want. I felt it as soon as I walked into this room. It's hanging over us. It's in the atmosphere. I hear it when you speak—I hear it when you say nothing."

"She must be neutralized, and you may very well get to take her seat at the head of the table, Martha."

"That table is bare now and the seat will never be fileld. I don't think we can ever go back. I walk around this cursed house from room to room, night after night, like a zombie, and where once there was at least *some* laughter and conversation—or her drunken parties—now, all that is left is her labored wheezing. That and the relentless drone of *Days of our Lives* on her TV."

"Ugh. The irony."

"I am trapped."

"By what? Her?"

I looked at Martha. I hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other, bored with the conversation.

"Go on. You can tell me," I said.

"Well, if it wasn't for you acting the way to do we could have gone away already. We could have made a run for it. Maybe moved to Durban or Cape Town. You always talk about Cape Town. But now, I don't know if we ever will."

"I'm hardly acting, Martha. Does any of this look like an act? Does her inciting that idiot Angel to hack our father to death on an iron stairway in the very building he owned seem like an act? I don't get it. I don't get you. In some ways, you're more like her than our father, more often then not excusing what she does and nitpicking over things to blame our father for."

There was a long silence during which Martha looked straight ahead. I could see that she was holding back tears.

"You're not the only one whose dad is dead," she said, after a while.

"I seem to be the only one who cares."

"You seem to be the only one who is stuck," she continued, sounding a little more agitated. "That's not the same thing. In fact, caring implies controlling your blind hatred, perhaps flirting with the concept of forgiveness, and oh, I don't know, just quitting being such a bitch. We all walk on eggs. Because, you know…you!"

"So I'm the problem? That's rich. I have lost everything. She cheated me of everything. A father. Love. Respectability. Because of her, I will probably never settle down. I don't think I'll ever have a family."

"I, too, want to feel alive again. Maybe for the first time ever. I don't think I have ever truly been. And I don't think I can be here. I want, more than anything, a child. And if I have to do that alone, so be it. It would be nice to have a father for the baby, one that needs me, holds me on winter nights, and calls in sick to the office when he wants to spend all day doing unspeakable things to my body."

"I get it. The queen of your castle but his private *fille de joie* in the bedroom."

"But seriously. You need to stop. For your own good. It won't bring him back. Nor Louis. But we are still here."

"We are here but have become shadows of what we used to be. The world is passing us by. Things are changing. There is talk that Mandela may be released from prison in the next few years. That the county will change. But here we are. Like people who stand at the ocean's edge, refusing to wade into the welcoming, warm, and salty water. We sit here—survivors waiting to hear news of our war dead, and who will remain in the same place doing the same thing until we, too, become victims not at the hand of our enemy but through inertia because wrapping yourself in grief and denial is easier than confronting the truth. Our living, Martha, has been deferred."

"This is *not* living. I need a reason to be a woman. I would sooner be dead than slowly becoming a husk," she said while looking straight at me, accusing me or trying to taunt me into a response.

"Your only desire is to live as a common seedbed while we have a beast on our hands—sorry, *two* beasts—one with a net and one with a panga, and both with calamitous skills, as they so amply demonstrated when they slayed our father."

"Oh my God. Really? *You* are a monster. A seedbed?"

"Why Martha-Martha-bo-Bartha?" I responded, mocking her. "I just call it as I see it."

"Can't you just get over this? Can't we just go back to how we used to be? I want my head back. When did you become the boss of me? Who gave you permission to lord it over me and tell me what I can remember and who our father was? I remember him." Martha paused for a moment as if her truth about our father was hard for her to put into words. "He was a drunk. He screwed around. He had a girlfriend--his assistant from Troyeville whom he brought back to Germiston because she was supposedly so good. At what? Fucking? To flaunt her in front of mom. That's what she was good for. To humiliate our mother, whom you have always expect to take it, lying down."

"Just a minute sister. This situation is not like some painted barrel that a dancing dog darts around and lurches over during a Boswell Wilkie Circus matinee. Get over it? I get *over* it when I order a family bucket at Mister Rooster's, and instead of getting the promised four breasts, I get three. I get *over* it when I go to the hairdresser for a quick perm, and I walk out looking like Annie. This, Martha, is not something I can, or even want to, merely get over."

She thought for a moment. "You are tearing my soul apart."

"Our souls were spoken for when she did what she did. This isn't some I'm OK, you're OK moment where we close our eyes and follow our gut. Not for me, at least, I followed the trail of his blood. I still am."

"I cannot do this. I want out," she said after a short pause.

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"I want a rebirth. A child. Maybe more than one. A family. A husband. A home. A place that doesn't heave under the weight of memory."

"It will follow you—this weight. Your children's eyes will be her eyes and they will look at you, like I am now. With disappointment."

"Just give it a rest."

"But what if they don't give you a rest? What if they betray you like you are betraying the memory of our father?"

"It's over. Just let it go. Please."

"Over? It's not over. It's barely begun."

"I don't want to hear anymore."

"Funny. I suppose because I was there. I hear nothing else except for Angel's whispering and the night-guard's whimpering—his desperate scrubbing as he tries to rid the metal staircase of our father's blood. The only way that I can unhear any of this is to be there when the swing of the panga cleaves that woman in half."

A door slammed in the house, followed by loud slurping noises and choked barking.

"You'd better hide. She's coming out to see you today. She has not rested in weeks, and she's pissed off with some of her staff. Heads may roll."

"At least you've got that right."

"Watch out. She's unhinged."

The commotion suddenly got a lot louder—coming closer—and, from a distance, my mother's shape was barely recognizable hidden behind large Zulu shields while her maids, wielding *assegais* and *knopkierrries,* shuffled along like some exoskeletal creature.

"Relax, Martha. I am ready."

27

La mère vipère.

12 PM

Early Autumn had settled into musky ripeness over the city, bringing a hint of crispness to otherwise still-sultry days—the temperature just so—with fresh early-afternoon breezes naturally cooling down muggy Highveld homes, filling the air with the sugary scent of decomposing peaches and apricots, two trees commonly found in commuter belt backyards, yielding so prolifically that it's impossible to stay ahead of the fruity deluge.

Life went by without ado in a place, where, for the most part, white needs were adequately met. Having spent the early afternoon watching soap operas, a relaxed Maureen was standing on her bedroom balcony, squinting over her neatly framed backyard courtesy of her recently installed dusky precast concrete walls. A frugal choice, Vibracrete slabs went up in a few days, generally provided scant privacy, while, given their complete lack of charm or visual appeal, immediately reminded visitors that a terminally unhip, prison-like, suburban vortex had just been entered. Mercifully, Maureen decided not to chop down six peach trees, part of her protracted plan to render our property barren and in a permanent state of gray joylessness. Five peach trees were yellow cling—perfect for canning—and one, a nectarine tree, was specifically planted by Maureen because, for a while anyway, she loved its juiciness.

Since Abraham's murder, my prime focus had been to remain hidden from her view, knowing full well the futility of my efforts to minimize contact or exposure. That afternoon though, my jig

was up. I felt her piercing stare and braced for the inevitable. Her voice rang out needlessly loud over the backyard, the twofold result of having no filter to begin with and the fact that her ears were entirely covered by a skullcap encrusted with amulets and bones, meant to ward off evil and halt her prolonged bout of insomnia.

"Koo-wee! What was that lovie?"

She was pretending that I said something—she tended to do that al lot—one hand theatrically cupped behind where an ear was meant to be, the better to hear me with.

"Did you say something, sweetheart? I can't tell with this racket going on around me and this contraption on my head… I'm sure you said something though."

Frustrated by my brazen disinterest, she turned to her trusty caregiver.

"I don't get it. It just sits there with that glum face."

Maureen seemed genuinely unaware that I could hear every word. The backyard, after all, was not that large, and voices carried. Behind her, the sliding doors to her lair had been flung open, and the stench of her—a concentrated odor of decay and death—wafting in the now-unwelcome noon breeze.

Her caregiver leaned over. "And to think that you let *that* run wild around your home, madam. I don't know how you do it."

I smiled and waved at her nurse, who, suddenly looking directly at me, seemed well aware that I heard her. She continued in a louder, even more grating tone, but with a barely contained smugness.

"That unhinged animal has been frightening everyone with horror stories about you, madam, saying that the ancestors are coming for you and that you will only know peace once you have filled a gourd with your blood. What can that mean? She cannot possibly be serious."

Maureen glanced in my direction and pulled a face, clearly unmoved by her private caregiver's revelation.

"If that child could kill me with a single look…I don't know anymore. I can't see very well. Why all this cloak and dagger bullshit? Why punish me, like this?" She pauses for little sip of sundowner. "When did I become this tragic? Was it when Abraham came back from Troyeville with that trollop, parading her as his secretary when everyone knew he was shagging the bejeezus out of her? The humiliation of it. That shrimpy man, attempting to mount two mares, only one of whom able to push back in heat while the other was broken—in mourning. He never noticed you know…he never held me. And now my body is like that of a different person. What was once fertile is now fallow, unattractive, and undesirable, and I cannot stop its wasting away."

"*You* are wasting away, mother! But, like a weed in a concrete crack or a stubborn turd that won't flush, you are still here. Hard to avoid and tricky to get rid of, lest I want your stench on my hands."

"What was that?" She turned to the nurse. "Did any of you get any that? What does that even mean?"

"I think it means that you are a strong swimmer, madam. Unflushable, I think, was the word. A turd, but a stubborn one. I am sure it was meant as a compliment."

"Shut the fuck up. I think *you're* the fucking turd. This whole veiled threat is vaguely familiar. I've heard it all before. Everyone is a fucking mystic nowadays. Goddammit. That child knows how to burrow under my skin."

"You don't seem yourself, mother," I shouted, loudly, enjoying the ruckus I was causing. "That adder, always whispering in your ear, is confusing you. She hisses and muddles your thoughts, leaving you vulnerable, stumbling, as if in a drunken haze. It doesn't befit a woman of your stature."

"Just wait there. I'm coming over. I need to have a word with you. Now you talk like the child I once loved, the one I thought I had lost. You sound like you need healing too."

Maureen turned around slowly. The caregiver and *sangoma* held on to her, trying to steady her. She suddenly seemed old. One of them walked ahead, sweeping, as if pointing out landmines, a thing that would not have been unthinkable given how paranoid my mother had become. They

slowly made their way down the stairs, lighting up the frosted windows with shards of light coming from tiny mirrors that had been sown into her nightgown and skullcap, the sparkles emanating from her contrasting with the descending bulbous shape of an organic-looking, throbbing spectacle—once, my mother—accompanied by her goons. Finally, they arrived at the side door, a few meters away from the broad veranda that stretched around my quarters. She slumped into one of the white wicker loveseats that lined the wall, her bejeweled fingers eagerly beckoning me.

"What did you mean? Why did you mention my stench? I loathe my smell."

"You do reek, mother. We all do—some more than others. Look at you, hardly the picture of health. I'm not sure your staff knows how to care for you. A body that reeks requires cleansing, its demons exorcised. You did not always cause such offense, mother. I am sure you did not possess this…this…tang…when I crawled out of you, into the light. Nor was it there when I lay, naked and vulnerable, in your ambrosial lap. And when you raised me to your nourishing breast, giving me strength, I detected no hint of foulness. Just bliss. But now, fetid and decaying, still stained by my father's blood, we need to gather the fortitude to amputate the rot. The time too, it seems, is ripe."

"Is this any way to speak to your mother? You know, you hated me well before you were born. I could hear your first screams while still in my womb. I swear. You have no shame."

"I am entirely constructed of shame—tethered to it. I am shamed by your new husband when he wears my father's old shoes. That should shame you too. They don't appear to fit—they're just too big—or maybe, he is not man enough?"

The caregiver leaned over to Maureen, nudging her.

"You do not need to stay here for his madam. You can leave. It's all made up. Every word. False."

"I wish you would fuck off. Leave me. Every word that comes out of the lot of you is regurgitated crap you hear from Angel the dolt—the pale imitation. I should know. I married both. And Angel…no. Just no. I am tired of your incessant nagging and your wild staring. I have had

about as much as I can take of his pacing around in that room and of your—all of your—skittishness. This is still my house. Go on. Make yourself scarce. I want to speak to my child. Maybe it will calm me down. Maybe there is something there to salvage."

"I know nothing, mother. No one in this house tells me anything. Except for the rumor that the two of you are killers."

"Not a soul alive will dare say that I am a murderer. Or Angel, for that matter." She pauses, a hint of a smile appearing."Dear God, can you imagine that? Of his own volition? Him? Slaying?" She looked sideways, paused, and then stared directly at me. "Who has the nerve?"

I pointed at the nurse and the *sangoma*. "It could be them, mother."

"Maybe." She turned to her caregiver. "Are you talking behind my back? Do you take notes when I wake up, still woozy from the meds? Do you squirrel around like this, scribbling down what I say just in case you get a chance to use it against me? Do you tell others how swollen my eyes have become—how heavy my eyelids have started to look? Maybe you laugh a little behind my back at my jaundiced jowls, speculating that it's a sure sign of a cirrhotic liver and how only bad things can come from one who doesn't say no to a little drink while knowing full well that her liver has become so hard it bends biopsy needles?"

"I overheard them, mother. They say all of that, and then they whisper how they suspect a demon has made a nest for itself in your swollen head. They are like leeches sucking the life out of you. Maybe a bloodletting would be a good thing for you. We should cut off the supply."

The increasingly agitated caregiver interrupted angrily. "Madam, you need to go inside and not hear another word from this delusional animal, nor say anything you may live to regret."

"What is regret? What is contentment? I need to speak with my child. I need to hear something that will distract me. Give me a clearer perspective. I need my child to peel back the layers blocking my conscience. Maybe kiss my face, blowing a gentle breeze over my skin, like old friends next to a pool of cool, blue water. I want to forget about my inflamed wounds and withered skin. Perhaps my

wild child will turn out to be my balm. Perhaps I can even start afresh and learn to love myself, again. Perhaps for the first time."

With a flick of her heavy jewel-encrusted hand, she waved the staff away.

"Leave me alone. With my child."

28

April had settled over the city.

1 PM

The last few days had been hot, almost unbearably so, considering that summer was all but over, but the bright sun, blue skies, and slight humidity seldom lingered for too long. At the end of most afternoons a monsoon-like thunderstorm still interrupted the heat, the smell of petrichor dominating all other senses and the sight of millions of earthworms, some as long as a school ruler, writhing over wet soil and hot asphalt giving this place a primordial richness. But all that was of fleeting interest, given that I was expecting to allow the viper into my lair, and with some incredulity I opened the sliding door to my room so that we may enter.

"After you, mother." I waved her in and she smiled sweetly at my pleasantries.

The room, as I've mentioned before—given its state of near-darkness—created an austere impression, one that I was seeing through new eyes and it was obvious to me that Maureen was doing her level best to not let the dimness get to her. She was clearly determined to hear what I had to say—to humor me—yet see what she could possibly glean to help restore a semblance of normalcy to her life again.

Maureen was a woman of intentional, rehearsed words and myriad bombastic yet mostly improvised actions. Correspondingly, seldom one to leave anything up for interpretation, she had developed a range of intentional, rehearsed gestures over the years—waves and signals, really—and accompanying reactions that she frequently deployed in lieu of her curated lexicon and phrasebook

of hoary conversationalist chestnuts. It was not for nought that anyone who had ever met her considered her breathtakingly dismissive—and phony—and I was expecting more of the same. She was visibly irritated, beckoning her staff with angular—impatient—gestures and maniacal glares, barely taking time to gesticulate one thing before furiously pointing at the next. A wave of the hand, weighed down by several large rings each set with a different stone chosen for it's ability to ward off evil or cause good fortune, would be interrupted by a rigid finger suddenly sticking up, pointing at something vague accompanied by face pulling and a narrowing of her eyes betraying that she is somewhat vulnerable, trying to focus while adapting to the perpetual shadow-state of my living quarters.

Apprehensively, she positioned herself on the corner of the recamier next to a dim standing lamp. She was surrounded by a soft halo of light—ironically enough—peering at me through what she must have considered extra-lush luxurious lashes, but in actuality were heavy with mascara, clumped and pasted on unevenly.

"You look lovely, mother."

"Oh thank you, sweetheart. I have to be so careful, if I as much as touch my eyes I end up looking like a goddamn raccoon. The things we do…" She glanced as me. It was clear that she had difficulty seeing me, ensconced as I was in perpetual dusk, just out of range of the solitary lamp's glow that she was caught in. "Well. That *I* do, anyway," she quipped with a little shrug and after a short silence she scooched up against the backrest with her feet dangling, carefree, off the other end. "Nice to give the tootsies a break," her folksiness indicated her readiness to hold court.

"I have not slept in ages. I just don't know, the nights seem only to be getting longer. Maybe you will know," her half-closed eyes darted sideways before continuing in an affected, conspiratorial tone, "is there anything I can take to stop me from dreaming, from seeing things when I close my eyes? I just need sleep. And I do *not* need to dream any more."

"But mother, how do you know what is what? I mean, pardon me getting philosophical, what is a dream and what is memory anyway? You know, sometimes when I wake up I have to concentrate on calming my head because the experiences I had in my sleep were just so real, and just as vivid as real life. Of course, real life can be bitch, which causes one to dream and see thing, some of which cannot ever be unseen. Do you know what I mean?"

"OK. Can you please drop the I'm-a-fucking-genius attitude? I don't want to argue nor hear your pseudo intellectual psycho flapdoodle. Bite your tongue if you have to, like I do half the time. It's a two-way street, sweetheart. An olive branch." Maureen looked down softly muttering as if verbalizing an internal dialogue designed to calm her down, or get her to refocus. "Of course I dream," she continued calmly. "The older I get the more I dream. But dreams can be controlled, or even stopped, can't they? Listen here my sweetheart, why do you insist standing in the dark over there?"

"So I can observe you better, mother, and your can concentrate on your problem. Don't worry. I can hear you just fine. "

"OK. Well, when you're done playing shrinky-dink, you may want to consider coming to join me and just be my child. Anyway. My *sangoma* is helping me to summons the ancestors and coax them from their hiding places. Fat help that's turning out to be. She's fucken useless anyway. These bones have done absolutely nothing. They don't even look nice. Maybe where she comes from in the sticks they work, but we don't have those kind of ancestors. Not like that anyways. "

She shook her wrists vigorously gesturing while she spoke and her woven horsehair bracelets crammed with animal bones and stones rumbled like dice in a hollow cup, giving the room a weird kinetic ouija-board energy.

"Let me tell you something, sweetheart," she continued hesitantly, "it's in how one says something. A single word has the ability to ruin a whole sentence. And a clumsy sentence, locked and loaded, can change everything. It can even ruin a life. Of course, it could just be that he had a

little slip if the tongue, maybe he was tired or full from too much dinner or, perhaps, he was a little drunk and then we have the choice to let it go. To judge and forgive and move on. No mess, no fuss. But at some point you have to face an inconvenient choice because he shot his mouth off again, trying to manipulate you with his instant unbosoming and unwelcome candor, and when you hurt so much that you cannot hear another word, when all you want is the peace and comfort afforded by a warm bed in a cold room, he flees the house to find solace in the arms of his hapless paramour. At the most inopportune time."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, mother? Are you talking about my father?"

Maureen looked at me saying nothing, then she turned away as if she didn't want to hear any more questions, instead staring deeper into the distance. After a few minutes of silent staring she glanced at me again, and smiled.

"It's why I'm wearing all this stuff, in case you were wondering. All these little trinkets and stones. We're all connected you know. This thing that connects us. This force. You just have to learn how to wield it—like a sword. If you wanted to, you would say something to help me."

"The thing that connects us is the fact that you are my mother. Not a choice, but no less inconvenient. And yes, I do feel compelled to wield this tenuous force like a sword." I deliberately acted a little vaudeville just to unnerve her—I've always relished in the power of amdram, I got that from my father—grabbing my chest, making large eyes, and affecting a tone ordinarily saved for dogs who just had diarrhea on a white flokati.

"Oh you think you are as clever as all get-out. Your head is sharp and strong, and you recall things as if it just happened yesterday. I'm done. I'm like an old rug covering up stuff. Just a barrier keeping heavy things from damaging sensitive exposed parts."

Over the years, despite her natural inclinations, Maureen had also learnt to curate her words because Abraham was always so critical and Angel regularly bit her head off. Secretly, she hated what Angel said to her and how he said it—and what he didn't say—and it all got overwhelming, to the

point that she wanted to stand up and scream but, frequently, she could not find the right words to do even that, and so eventually the ability to respond honestly and impulsively had left her body entirely. She increasingly began feeling mute. It reminded her of the Mullers who used to live down the road from her as a kid. Both Muller parents were deaf and neither ever learnt to speak, using sign language exclusively, meaning that the Muller children would always have to be told to use "indoor voices" at school. "It was such a nice, quiet house," Maureen would joke, and then feel bad as her mother—her role model—had learnt sign language specifically to befriend the Mullers because she suspected they were lonely and it was the Christian thing to do, and the best she could do was joke about other's lives. But decades, and two marriages later, the quiet of the Muller home was the thing she thought of most—the peacefulness—consequently trying her damndest to block out as much as she could of whatever Angel said. Most days she couldn't tell if he snarled or said something nice as it all sounded the same to her and so she gave up little by little, more and more, leaving her to feel a little lightheaded—panicked—when she thought about that fact that she didn't care what he says or does either.

"You don't know what this is like, the nightmare of living with a body that is in utter chaos, while Angel…Angel teases me, and mocks me for how I look. He accuses me of unspeakable things. The very things he should be silent about and that he should repent over, staring, as we are, into the burning sun."

She moved around on the sofa, trembling slightly and looking desperate.

"You have something to say. I know you do. You are me. My younger version. You could tell me something that I could use to steel myself with, even if it is just a single word."

"It should be a breeze for you, mother. And yet, somewhere in that house, as day turn into night and back again, as you lie with your eyes wide, unable to find peace, it's not the lack of a word that torments you, nor is it pain or discomfort or something throttling you. You just lie. And wait. Taking it. You're in an abyss, mother. The realization that there is nothing behind the veil—no grand prize,

no free car. The revelation that, at the core of eternity, is vast emptiness—no peaks, no valleys. And yet as we are all discovering, nothingness is so overwhelming it resembles a degree of pain."

"Does it have to feel like torture to prove to me that I am actually still alive, that I can feel something because I am living as if I am dead. Am I nothing more than rotting, half-alive bait? Is it possible to exist—to thrive—when I feel like nothing more than roadside carrion?"

"When you confess and repent you may finally sleep and you may dream that the marrow in your bones is alive, and that time hasn't run out as you had feared, and the glow under the curtains is not the artificial flicker of a night light outside your room, twitching on and off like it, too, is dying but rather, it is the morning light breaking, watching you come alive after another night's good rest."

"I don't know who is doing this to me. Are they dead or do they still walk among us? Have they made a voodoo doll, an effigy, that resembles me, pockmarked and pinned? One that you possibly made, because I see you, standing there, and I wonder if you are the one doing this to me. I don't know you anymore. I don't know who you are. You don't seem to want to know me. You never did. And why should it matter now? Whether you are here or not, whether you are alive or dead, it means equally little to me. You are your father's child. *Were* your father's child." She seems taken aback at her own correction, embarrassed even, with a look that sometimes showed up when Abraham's name was mentioned. I will always think that deep down, to her, he was the one. "Turn your head. I do not want you looking at me—not like that. These dreams *must* come to an end. Wherever they are coming from. Whatever they mean. It is enough. Even the most adamant and perverse demon is guaranteed to disappear after a bloodletting."

"You are right, mother. Even the most perverse."

"Sweetheart, give it a rest. I don't care anymore. Spare me your snide little comments. You know, even if I have to drain the fucking life from each living thing, be they crawling or flying, I will do exactly that. Whatever it takes. I will gladly go to sleep, at peace, in the mist of fresh blood, and wake up refreshed. Rejuvenated and ready to start again. I no longer want to dream. Do you get that?"

"But when the panga severs the neck of misery's source, you will never dream again, mother. Do you, mother, *get* that?"

"Finally I feel we are getting somewhere. Tell me what you know about the sacred creature! The one that is the source of my misery and must be slaughtered."

"Not sacred, mother. Damned."

"I prefer sacred. And is this creature currently bound and caged? Easy to find? Or exotic? I have contacts, you know."

"The creature is free yet captive. Caught in a stupor of its own making."

Maureens eyes lit up. "It sounds promising. I am cautiously optimistic. I'm glad we are talking, sweetheart. Thank you for bringing me some joy for a change. For this little offering to do the trick, may we just hack away or are we bound by some obscure tribal ritual?" She giggled a little, nervously even.

"It will be premeditated. Precise. But also some hacking."

"Carry on. Tell me more. Does the sacrifice have a name?"

"I can tell you that it is female."

"I get it. It's a mother thing. End of the line and rebirth and stuff like that. Very clever and so symbolic, it just feels right. Is it an animal? Is it…a person? Oh my God. Can you imagine? Is it one of the maids? The ugly one? The virgin? Or perhaps who had known many men in her time?"

"You can say she has known a few."

"When will she find herself at the receiving end of that panga? And where? The *sangoma* told me that when it comes to making a sacrifice, I need to do it myself. Something about karma being non-transferable or something, I mean, I told her, 'Listen doll, this is not buying a house or *lobola* we are talking about,' but she was adamant. So there you go."

"It could be anywhere, mother. At any time. Be ready. And yes, you will be part of the hunt. Not to disagree with the sangoma, but I am not sure you will be the one holding the panga."

"Who will do it then? Who can possibly execute my sacrifice?"

"A man."

"Angel?"

"A brave man."

"Who? Tell me. Give me a name. Someone from around here? Or does it perhaps have to be a stranger?"

"Someone who from here but also not from here. A visitor."

"Oh for fuck's sake, don't make this complicated. I'm don't have time for stupid riddles. Listen to me. I am happy today. I am grateful that you are not in one of your moods. You tend to be a little cantankerous you know, like your father was. I never responded well to that and I get a little annoyed when you act too much like him. I know you think I'm too tough, when a mother takes a belt to her child the pain of each welt can teach them both a valuable lesson, and the understanding that it's the child who forced her hand. Marks are delible. Words aren't permanent either. They disappear once spoken. Wounds heal. An unloved mother managing on meager sleep and myriad worries still sees herself as the doting wife, dutiful on her nuptial bed, rather than a monster on a leash."

"It's the other way round for the child, mother. Some wounds never heal, words linger, and the thing that gets some children through the day is the certainty that some day the whipping-belt-mother will die—shunned and unloved—never to be mourned, and not comfortably reclining in an usurped bed and certainly not, as she may have hoped for, dreaming."

"What are you talking about now? Don't you understand? Nothing done cannot be undone. A bell can be unrung. A clock, turned back and it is noon again. Some of these things you talk about are a fog meant to obscure what otherwise has been a perfect day, so far at least. Now it is veiling us! What are you doing, bringing all this up in me? This is exactly why I cannot sleep. You always point fingers."

"I am pointing at the truth."

"Look, once and for all. This is where he lived, this isn't where he died; you have to move on, so I can move on. You have your father's eyes, his gaze, and it all faded in you after he died. In fact sweetheart, it was almost as if *you* died. You changed as you stared at me and I could see it happening, it was seamless with no gaps for hope left in between as the look in your eyes shifted from love to hate. It was good one moment, and then it was over, with no gaps, and no alarms. And I did nothing. Just as I did nothing when a part of me died with Irma."

"You're right, part of me did die that night or rather, you killed it. Along with your husband, and don't bring Irma into this. You always to that."

"How sharp you are when you choose your words."

"Not nearly as sharp as you, or as sharp as the panga you used, mother."

A visibly pale Martha in the meanwhile had come inside leaving me unsure exactly how much of the conversation she had heard but it was obvious that she was shaken. Her movements seemed less mechanical—less rehearsed—than normal. She was out of breath as if she rushed over to tell me something. She had the look of someone who walked into a room and instantly regretted her decision to do so, but now could't very well take her leave without arousing suspicion and unleashing a barrage of unwelcome questions. Martha never had a stomach for conflict and ever since we were kids, she would gravitate to the person in the room who could most accurately signal detente—and if there was one thing Maureen could do, it was play the white-flag-waving victim, as she was about to amply demonstrate.

As if on cue, Maureen waved at Martha who involuntarily—yet completely consistent with her demeanor and general lack of character—winced at the sight of her mother's outstretched talons, causing an embarrassed Maureen to glare at me. "I do not want to do this any more. If this was a discussion between me and your father he would have been gracious, encouraging me to reason with him, allowing me to be vulnerable, forgiving me should I cry, like old friends, when they meet. You are, perhaps, not your father's child after all."

"You talk about murder like it's a lover's tiff over a broken heirloom."

"Remind your sister that there is no reason to be like a beaten dog—retreating like that from a kind hand. I came here tonight not as your mother but rather as a friend and I would love it if we can speak freely. Enough with all this hate. If she plays her cards right Martha can be married off before winter sets in. You too, sweetheart. Why should I have all the fun?"

"You forget to mention the missing role in your play—Louis."

"I told you to never mention him."

"Still scared of him, mother?"

"Why? Who says I am scared?"

"Mother, you seem to be shivering. And yet it's so warm out. If I didn't know better, if you hadn't told me, I would have said you may be a little nervous."

"Who's nervous of a goddam fool? One who lisps and minces—lying around, sunbathing in the yard with pansie and God's other runts. He was given a clean place to live and he chose animals."

Maureen lowered her eyelids dramatically as if trying to unsee grave trespass.

"I think, and this is just a wild guess," I ventured, "that you would rather he never returns. One way or another."

"What are you talking about? I sent him money. I transferred cash to his Barclays card so he can access it while he is away in the army, maybe get himself something nice. I pray every day that he is well. I obsessively check the newspapers and live in permanent fear of a knock at the door in the middle of the night announcing his death in an ambush. It has been weeks since we have heard a thing."

"You are lying. You check the papers hoping for news of his battalion's demise."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I can see it glinting in the swollen slits where your eyes once were—a sign of your vulnerability. And I can tell from your shivering that you fear the possibility that he is alive and his possible return.

And I deduce from your lack of sleep that you think of nothing else, day and night—except him, stalking your thoughts and prowling your dreams like a lion circling its prey. I can see that your heart is withering away. You know, mother. That he is coming. Like he said he would. And that he will make you pay."

"You are wrong. Your medication is wearing thin. There isn't place for both of us in this house anymore. You must listen to me. I don't know what you are talking about, but this whole thing is easy to fix. Take your pills. I'm tired of hearing about it. Dreams aren't healthy. They drain energy and I, for one, am ready to grab life by the horns again and fuck right back. I refuse to become an old hag with a bulbous nose, clutching my possessions as if my life depends on it. Let me tell you about my nights and my dreams. I'm sick, yes. I'm sick of all this gossip and insults—I'm sick of you, and I don't want to be sick anymore. And rest assured I will find out who has to bleed to make me sleep again."

I stepped forward, further away from my darkness, closer to her, inching forward slowly. "You have to bleed, mother. Is it your neck that will be caught by your hunter, and when he catches you as you try to run away, does he coax you to the left, or lead you the right? Or does he strike you down in what is left of my father's bed? Either way, darkness has cast its net over you mother."

It was a curious thing. Throughout our conversation it seemed as if time was somehow suspended and I hadn't noticed that we were face to face, the closest we had been in years—*the irony!!*—predators each invading the other's space. I felt exhilarated, drunk on the high and lightheaded at the fact that her breathing seemed heavier than usual, almost mechanical and accompanied by an aspirated quality. Could it be that I had gotten through? That I finally got to her?

A sudden commotion coming from the house broke the silent spell. The *sangoma* came running out and straight at us, screaming "Madam!! Madam!!" She was visibly relieved to be a bearer of good tidings—for once—and, taking great care to turn her back to me lest I overheard, she whispered something in Maureen's ear.

Something in the message relayed by the *sangoma* had completely transformed my mother's demeanor and now, most unusual for her, she seemed visibly piqued, and with almost childlike giddy glee she bellowed, "Turn on the lights. Enough of this eternal darkness!" The *sangoma* immediately took her leave running back inside to switch on the floodlights. The brightness was unsettling and the tension across Maureen's face, so visible mere minutes ago, had made way for a curiously triumphant look. She stared at me, pointing, while whispersing something to her caregiver. It was obvious from their interaction that I had been dismissed, perhaps condemned. They turned around, ignoring me, and went back into the house. As the door shut I heard what to me, at least, was a most unfamiliar sound. My mother was laughing.

29

Sitting beside me.

4 PM

If anything, my conversation with Maureen that afternoon made it clear that something was underfoot. Whatever news she received visibly buoyed her, making her entire cackling episode all the more frustrating and hard to swallow, since up until that exact moment, Maureen had seemed genuinely—satisfyingly—downtrodden. Her moribund demeanor—up to cackle number one—being easier to deal with than that vulgar display of faux euphoria, and on top of everything, knowing that her advanced decay could very well still be the end her, without any of us having to soil our hands and burden our conscience. But today, of all days, the interruption by her *sangoma* had a remarkable effect, and it was—all other evidence to the contrary—rejuvenating. Redemptive even.

After Maureen left I went to sit next to the pool-shaped leaf-hole. As I finished my coffee, I saw Martha, by far the most disconnected from reality out of all of us, emerge from the house. She walked over to me, and I motioned that she sit next to me on the outside bench. She looked anxious and visibly upset—confused—by Maureen's sudden departure after our conversation, punctuated as it was, with her loud cackling. Not surprisingly, since our altercation, the atmosphere felt a little strained.

"Do you know what that was about? I mean, really. She is getting more crazy by the day. For God's sake, Martha—if you know, tell me too so I may have something to be happy about. It is hard to believe mother has a single thing to be happy about and yet, there she was, grinning and howling like a bitch in heat. You know, Martha, for the life of me I cannot work out she was told—what

sheer lies—to throw her into that misguided state that actually resembled joy. It is unthinkable. There is scarcely a single thing that the woman can be content with—let alone happy. Forget laughing."

"OK, don't be upset when I tell you this. I think the *sangoma* told Mom that Louis was killed in an ambush on the border when Angolan forces launched rockets at the armored convoy he was traveling in. And that there was no way he could have survived. That the heat and the power of the explosion would have been too much for him to survive."

My head wanted to explode. I wished Martha would be quiet or, at the very least, not feel the need to share so much detail. I would have have preferred her to excuse herself, get up from the bench, and go away. She pulled this kind of stunt at every available opportunity, delivering a complex mix of glumness, verbal diarrhea, and disengagement. Her sheer lack of empathy astounded me and, while she would go to almost any length to deny it, her inability to read people, their motives, and the situations they found themselves in—the contextual framework, for fuck's sake—had caused her to become increasingly insular, relying heavily on others to tune her into situations and, as a direct result, leaving her vulnerable to Maureen's insidious nature and silver tongue. It therefore fell upon me to occasionally snap Martha back to reality, gently coaxing her to shed the scales from her eyes so meticulously placed by our mother. But—as with any somnambulant—extreme caution and a wily touch were needed to minimize the risk of Martha clamming back up or worse, running back to Maureen, and in the process selling all three of us out in a misguided attempt to curry favor.

"When I innocently walked in on the conversation they all seemed to know already," she continued. "I mean, they were matter-of-fact and barely put out by it. It seemed to me that everyone knew—except us and mother at that stage. I felt like I was being treated like Hansel or Gretel, do you know what I mean? That I was being made to follow a trial of breadcrumbs."

"Martha, listen to me, nobody knows anything. No one *can* know anything. Because there is nothing to know. They are making this up, for their entertainment, to watch us freak out. Or, and this is a big or, they are being fed false information, deliberately."

Martha thought about what I said for a moment before getting up and pacing neurotically back and forth on the veranda for what felt like hours but in reality amounted to less than a few minutes before returning to the bench, planting herself next to me while looking around anxiously as if she is nervous about being bugged or observed. I reached out, resting my hand on her knee as a signal indicating an attempt to calm her down. She spent a lot of time in her head—we all did.

"Pull yourself together. It is not true. They are making this up. Someone has seen it fit to play a trick on mother and, for some unknown reason, give her false hope. You have to listen to me."

"Apparently there was a man at the house earlier today. I think he must have been from the police. He was here to convey the bad news and pay respects. I tell you—believe it or not—everyone there knew except us. I was there. This was not some cockamamie, quickly-stitched-together thing." Martha has a tendency to be a little suspicious and prone to fall victim to conspiracy.

"It's not possible, Martha. Think it through. He cannot be dead. I don't feel it, the finality of it, in my bones as I expect I would. What exactly did the maids say to each other, about this visitor, this policeman?"

"They didn't say too much, and it was hard to make sense of the details, except what I already told you. I'm so freaked out. We may as well be dead as well." She paused, cautiously, glancing at me for approval.

"What exactly did they say, Martha?" I asked again, faking patience. "Just go over it in your head and see if there are details that may be useful to us. Take a breath," I said, trying to use my bestest, nicest tone.

"From what I could make out there was attack on Valentine's Day in a place called Cuito Cuanavale. I think it's in Angola. The Cubans destroyed a convoy of South African tanks and in the

process killed our boys. Louis was in one of those tanks. Apparently, when a tank is nuked like that, the guys inside are certain to die. It's like putting a tin of sardines in a microwave. They said that he could never have survived that." Martha was visibly distressed at retelling the story. "I wonder if he thought of us when he died. I wonder if he had even a moment of hope, did he dream of escaping the inferno, or was he simply killed instantly? Was his death a victory for the enemy? Did they feel any remorse for such a senseless act of aggression? Did they bother to leave us a single thing to remember him by. It feels as if we, too, are not long for this world. As if we, perhaps, do not belong here."

"You sound like mother. It does not become you. Besides, what enemy worth his salt has remorse for an act of courage in a time of war? This news, now, more then ever, shows so clearly why we have to be strong and act in faith. Why we have to show courage and make her see us."

"What are you talking about?"

"Us, Martha. We need to be visible. We need to remind her that we are here…both of us—united—we are, in fact, engaged in a war, at home."

"What do you mean?"

"We have to plan our attack."

"Do what? Please, I don't know what you mean."

"It's been a good day. It will be a good night."

"Good for what?"

"What? Can you still be asking that? The task now falls on us. Our vow has not yet been attained and under no circumstances may it remain unfulfilled."

"What task are you talking about?"

"It now falls on us to go and execute the woman who had our father murdered, and with her, the man who did the deed and she now lies with in our father's bed."

"Are you talking about our mother?"

"Are you deliberately being thick Martha? You know as well as I do that the very last breath must be extinguished in her and in him, but, sister, save yours—talk is cheap and so are idle thoughts. The only thing we need to figure out is how we will do execute the plan."

"We?"

"Who else, Martha? Do you know of anyone? Maybe you have someone hidden in the attic or lurking about. Did our father spawn any other children that we don't know about? Anyone that we can call on to avenge his death? No Martha. He did not. At least what we know of… and therefore, it now falls on us."

"I get that. I'm not stupid. But, must we both go? Will this deed take four hands?"

"Don't worry about the details. Let me take care of that. And just remember, many hands make light work."

"I was thinking that, perhaps, it make take two hands. But maybe aided by a sharpened hunting knife."

"Oh for fuck's sake. A knife. Really? We are not talking about slitting the throat of a fattened pig, destined for a festive barbecue. We are not doing something easy here, like throwing a bag of kittens into the river."

"You are right. We need a panga. With a razor sharp wedge and a strong handle."

"We will use THE panga. The very one that was used to hack our father to death."

"What do you mean? Do you have it?"

"I buried it, saving it for Louis, but it increasingly looks like we will have to swing it."

"Us? Swing that? These hands—can I really do that? Bring Angel down?"

"You and me. First her, then him. Or him, and then her. Maybe me first and then you. Whatever —we can pull straws. Does it matter? Will it change the outcome?"

"You are different tonight. You seem more worked up than normal."

"Get over it, Martha. We can't go through life all shits and giggles—half-asleep and conveniently numb. Besides, this is about our father. It is not about us. We must to do the right thing. For him—for his name."

"Look at yourself. You are crossing the threshold from which you cannot return. Can you see the crazy in all of this?"

"I've had just about as much as I can take of your apathy, Martha. You may choose to stay asleep—constipated—in your made-up dream but remember, choosing to sleep your way through life is to willingly shackle yourself." I need to change direction. I am losing Martha. "Let me explain this to you in a different way. If, by some stroke of luck, they both get drunk and pass out on the sofa that would be easier. I could, possibly, manage that on my own. But there are no guarantees. They may not get drunk, as far-fetched as that seems, and they may not pass out. So, I need you there, with me."

"I am sure I can do that. I am not that strong. I can barely open a jar."

"Martha. You have to listen to me—come a little closer. It has to be you. You have her trust. You have access to her and the house. And you are strong—your modest nights and untouched body has made you more powerful than you realize. You are so lean and flexible—your arms are muscular—you fit through the smallest openings and enter through the highest windows with such ease and you have the strength to put any unwanted attention from unwelcome sources back in their place. You have a grip that could suffocate anyone. You are entirely constructed of power. Your strength is like a waterfall streaming from a rock."

"Stop. Enough. I really don't have that much strength."

"Feel me as I hold on to you with my weak and heartbroken body, trying to keep you here as you resist more and more. We are connected—can you not feel that? This is up to you. If you would only tug at the cord, make it tighter, so we may become one—and speak with one voice."

"Don't say any more. Please—leave it there."

"I can't. I won't. How are we supposed to do that? It is up to us. We need to act as one—be one. So conjoined that a knife won't not separate us, and we have to do this because, otherwise, we will be truly alone."

"I hear you. I know what you mean. Don't you think we should use our skills and knowledge to get out of here—escape all this—and start a better life somewhere else?"

"You represent our best—you are who I want to be. I envy your muscular body which reminds me of a racehorse, fleet-footed, certain how to move. Your warm pulse against my cool skin and the soft fuzz of your arms, Martha, you are like a ripe peach on picking-day. I want to be close to you again, like we were before all this tore us apart. I want us to share our dreams and fears and hopes and then I want to wait with you for the man that will come and claim you, as his bride and I will be there for you. I will draw your bath and I will brush your hair. I will be there the next morning after he caressed you and pulled you into his bed for the first time, as his wife."

"Stop please. Don't say that here. Not in this house of death and hate."

"I cannot keep quiet about this stuff anymore, Martha. After this deed, from this day forward, we will share the burden and reap the reward. And I will be there for you, like a faithful friend. When you are sick I will look after you and I'll keep your forehead cool for as long as it takes, warding off unwelcome attention. I will keep you safe and when the time comes for you to have that the child you so desire I will do what it takes to make sure that you are able to nurture and love your own in a way that we were denied."

"You need to take me away from this place. I fear that we will not survive this house."

"Martha—listen to me. You are beautiful. Your voice is strong. Use it. Let loose a rebel yell that will carry like a siren and stay the course with the determination of a rock climber, scanning for secure footing."

"I don't know what you are saying."

"It's quite simple, Martha. You cannot just escape this house—this legacy. There is no walking away. Not for us."

"Leave me alone."

"Meet me at the house's side-entrance tonight, when everything is quiet. Do you hear me?"

"Leave me alone."

"Martha. Don't fight it. It is easy to rinse off blood. It takes no time to burn a soiled shirt. And no one will suspect a thing ."

"Just leave me!"

"Do not be this. Do not be a coward.'

"I cannot do this."

"You must be there. For me. For him. For fuck's sake Martha."

"I can not."

"Look at me—I am begging you. I am literally begging you. I am on my knees."

"I will not do this. I am sorry."

"Fuck you Martha. Go lick the boots of that bitch whom you clearly hold in higher regard than me, your allegedly dead brother and your slain father. But mark my words, sister, you are destined to die alone."

I nodded at Martha to indicate that she had better take her leave. Her dourness was almost as hard to deal with as her recalcitrance, which already was a bitter pill to swallow. She had made her point. And I had not fully comprehended up until that exact moment just how fractured we were, funny that, given that I have spent years railing against my mother and actively recruiting a crack team of angry siblings to avenge my father's death, but, here we were.

As a direct result of my less-than-fruitful meeting with sister I had a sudden insight that life for each of us, fundamentally, was merely a protracted journey to stasis—a slow down—from yippity youthfulness to an indifference that came with age. Certainly, for Martha, this journey was

accelerated, and yet, siting there I felt my destiny may not have been as dissimilar from hers as I had hope—pretended—it to be. Our fates were connected by the womb we both sprung from and the sense of defeat we had lived with since our father's murder. And yet, despite so much that bound us, there was no solidarity. It may have been that we were never the products of love—neither through conception nor nurturing—and in the absence of it, any unity or search for sanctity of any sort was destined to be fruitless, certain to fail.

I know that my maudlin mood was going to be difficult to shake and so, after waiting for a half and hour I started to get to grips with the fact that it had come to this. It had to be—it was going to be up to me. I decided to go outside and sit on the veranda with an iced tea, from where I would be able to observe the house—I knew it would be dark soon, despite it being just past 5 PM—how it transitioned from late afternoon basking in the setting Autumn sun into evening as the lights inside got turned on one by one. I would bide my time. And start to dig.

30

But will it do the trick?

7 PM

It had come to this: if you want a job done well, best do it yourself, and so with a sense of déjà vu I again faced the fact that I was alone—*sola, perduta, abandonata,* as Louis would quote from just about every Italian opera ever—in seeking to avenge our father's murder, to clear our name of the stench left by his usurper and her henchman. Martha's eternal analysis paralysis and the now very real possibility that Louis may not return after all, left me with very little wiggle room. It seemed I had but one path open to me.

Instinct took over and I knew exactly what I had to do, however. First and foremost, I needed to be quiet—careful—not to attract unwanted attention. Dusk was the perfect time to dig since everyone would be in the house preoccupied with the normal sounds of rattling pots and clanking dishes that break every early-evening silence. From my vantage point at the back of the house I could accurately gauge exactly where everyone was and I was further assisted by the fact that each servant was clearly identifiable by their distinctive tells——and often uncouth signals—a stifled giggle, a tone of voice, or a sigh of exhaustion. From inside, somewhere, I heard Maureen's jarring cackles, clearly still in an upbeat mood after the good news she had received earlier. She was mercifully interrupted by a bright cheer, crystal clinking, and then the sound of expensive silver hitting fine porcelain. Dinner was served.

I moved from shadow to shadow, keeping a watchful eye on each of the windows, listening for any unusual sounds or indicators that I may be caught. With leopard-like stealth I moved, silently, to

the exact spot that I had memorized a thousand times over, ramming my searching fingers into the cool mud. It had rained a lot recently and the red clay released a familar mineral and mushroom aroma reminding me that as a kid we played in these very mud clay patches, creating paths and building mounds that resembled hills for toy cars and for Sindy, the 1963 Commonwealth Barbie, replete with puffball gowns by the Emanuels who designed Princess Diana's wedding dress. Before a rainstorm we would construct elaborate channels leading to a deep dug out section which, if our calculations were correct and the weather column in the paper was to be believed, would fill up with water and possibly—maybe—even form a modest mud pool for Sindy and her gal pals. It never happened. Forceful Highveld thunderstorms would obliterate all well-intentioned handiwork—the deluge flattening the surface, removing all traces or proof of our ever having played there, depriving Sindy of a lazy day by the pool.

Armed with this sort of intimate knowledge about this place, when it came to burying the panga that killed our father for future use, I counted on the nightly storm flattening the freshly dug area and any remaining blood soaking into the fecund red soil, guaranteed in the bright morning light to look no different than it did on any other day. I marked the spot—six feet from my bedroom wall and eight feet from the hole in the ground that was once a pool—by placing a mischievous-looking concrete gnome with a red cap and a bushy white beard over it. It was almost too obvious that the grinning gnome was hiding something and yet, no one noticed the clearly-out-of-place addition to the barren backyard. My suspicion was that it was interpreted as an ironic statement on my part and best left alone so as to not rile me up. Whatever. It worked.

I moved the ironic gnome out of the way and started to loosen the soil like a dog scratching at a scented patch of earth knowing that there's a bone there. I knew that I could it with my eyes closed since I had practiced the moment in my head so many times. I needed to be quick because a storm was brewing and soon the sacred place from where I would retrieve the panga that killed my father was sure to once again look benign and undisturbed but something felt a little off. A miscalculation

on my part. A thing not allowed for in my exhaustive mental preparations. I got the feeling that I was being observed. It unnerved me. I didn't quite know why or who or where and so I shrugged it off especially as the clanking of dinnerware was relentless and everyone had been accounted for anyway. Still, I couldn't quite shake the suspicion that I was not alone. I felt a little tired—somewhat worried as well—and decided to take a short break. The very last light of the day dipped behind the golden horizon—it gets dark so quickly on the Highveld—and I was, by then, entirely certain that somewhere lurking in the shadows, someone was indeed observing me.

"Hello?" I asked in a low voice. "Is someone there?" I'm somewhat weary of what possibly lurks in darkness. I've always been. "Who is there? Show yourself. Why are you hiding in the shadows? Do you enjoy watching me do a little…moonlight gardening? If you don't mind. I'd like to carry on, unobserved, and to be left alone." Unsurprisingly, there was no response and even less movement, still, I was certain that I was not alone. "It may be that you are out her for some quiet time too—and…I don't want to be rude here—but please, respond in kind. I am busy." Crickets. Actually, Armored Katydids—an entire orchestra of them—but don't let the children's book nomenclature fool you. There are a few less-than-expected reasons for Katydids to chirr. Males do so to grab the attention of a female—any female—with a monotonous, loud noise, and, when a suitable paramour is close by, they court her with softer, more mellifluous—by Katydid standards anyway—chirrups. Males, however, also use stridulating—rubbing body parts like legs, wings or other body parts together to produce extra-loud chirps—as a defense mechanism when encountering another male and they chirr equally loudly when alerting other Katydids of impending danger. They eat virtually anything, and, in turn, are eaten by virtually everything but don't go down all that easily due to an exoskeleton offering next-level protection thanks to sharp, thorn-like spines, and formidable jaws that easily break human skin. Failing all that, Armored Katydids squirt yellowish, foul-smelling blood—haemolymph—out of exoskeletal seams at the unsuspecting

predator and, when that too fails to produce results, they puke out their bowel contents, covering themselves. In many ways, as I thought more about it, Katydids reminded me of us.

I try again, my voice barely audible over the Katydid cacophony. "I know you are there. I can feel you…watching me. This is my house. I want to be left alone. Do you hear me?"

"I hope there is a reason for all this…this… digging," a man said in a low tone, as if aware that voices carry. "You seem to stab into the mud upon which this house was built—with your bare hands—like someone who has nothing more to lose. Do you really want me to leave you alone?" The man's tone was strangely soothing, sonorous—it reminded me of Abraham—and I was not alarmed, for some reason.

"I am alone. Left behind, I should say. It's as if the world has continued turning while I, in turn, am stuck. With nothing or no one to help me move on. No family to speak of and no child to live for. Look at this—my lips move, I have no voice. Not really. I'm not heard. I breathe, and yet…I'm not alive. My body works, it's strong, but I have no desire anymore—I feel nothing. I am unaroused by life."

"Your parents?"

"One is dead and the other may as well be. To me anyway. I'm the unwanted stray. Quick my friend—whoever you are—just go. Leave me here. Leave me alone. Please."

"You're digging in…"

"I'm hardly digging in," I interrupted, a little agitated, "I'm digging out. And it's not nothing. I'm digging for what has become the most important thing in my world, buried for now in warm earth, but soon to be held in my eager hands. Why, sir, are you here? Tell me."

"I'm observing. Just hanging out. Taking it all in." The stranger paused and lit a cigarette and I could make out that he wore a hooded sweater but little else as he cupped his hand defensively when lighting up, the click of the Zippo lighter making its distinctive echoing clank, despite the evening noises.

"Taking it all in?" I paused for a moment. His nonchalance was stunning. "You have got to be kidding me. This is not a fucking amusement park or a diorama at the history museum for you to gawk at."

"No. It is home."

"It was. It's not. You, on the other hand, have no business here. You who are just 'taking it all in.' I have an idea—go take something else in and do it somewhere else. Show yourself, my friend. Shit, or get off the pot."

"Soon. I'm expecting to be called at any minute." I couldn't see the ember light up by I was certain he took another drag. It smelled a lot like menthol.

"By whom? That bitch? How will you know? I think you are pulling a fast one on me. You are not needed here. I wish you, sir, goodnight. And take that cigarette with you. You can smell that thing from a mile away. Who smokes menthol anyway? It's going to make you sterile."

"Thank you for the tip. Nevertheless. I've been asked to wait here."

"For what? By whom? If anything you have been sent to watch me, scratching around in the red mud like a hungry animal in a barren yard—the very picture of misfortune. But, I have an idea for you. Why not go and wait to be called somewhere else, in a happier place perhaps, where your presence may be welcomed... encouraged, even? Trust me, there is nothing for you here. You've missed our best days. You should have been here back when we were better people. My father was a better man than most. A hundred times prouder and a hundred times more consequential, but, now, he is dead while I am left behind in perpetual mourning and while you are there, hidden, watching me, 'taking it all in,' all *I* can think about is that he is gone, his eyes hacked out of their sockets by his killer. And when I see your lips move and your mouth speak, I am reminded that his was silenced. What can I do to make you leave? How do I get you to leave this place?"

"What is it you want?" he asked after a few moments during which I thought that I had gotten through to my unseen visitor—the voice in the dark—but was clearly mistaken. "Your house

appears peaceful," he continued, "judging by the sound of your happy family sitting down to dinner. Idyllic, almost. But you, on the other hand, do not seem at peace or blissful. Why not let the dead rest? Let your father go. Leave your brother in peace." The visitor paused briefly, as if to let his unsolicited advice sink in. "Move on. Let them be a source of solace. Take comfort in the fact that everything happens as it should, that your father, when he was still alive, was satisfied to help where and how he could, as was your brother, but be mindful that life was not meant to be a cakewalk. Life is not easy. To live is to know disappointment. Life distrusts joy, and is suspicious unbound freedom and life will sooner douse the light than tolerate too much curiosity—at least that has been my experience. That life will gladly hang a fool from his own tree of destiny, the very one he had carefully nurtured from when it was a sapling, and then leave him swinging in the elements, like carrion for vultures. Your brother made his choice. He knew the price he would have to pay. That he was not meant to be here permanently, anyway."

"I resent how you talk about those who lived and left. As if it's something you tasted under duress and spat out because it wasn't seasoned to your liking. I am, however, still here. Do you get that? I…am…here. I live. Here. I lie here, knowing that they will never come back and that those who dwell in that house eat and drink and fuck like there will be no reckoning. But they are dead wrong. Justice is near."

"Which one are you?"

"Who cares. Who gives a fuck who I am? Even I don't care anymore."

"You are part of this family."

"I'm a gatecrasher at my mother's party—unsavory and ostracized by what is left of this family, treated like the misbegotten born in a vestry."

"How did you get this bitter? How did your eyes get to be so filled with hate and rage?"

"You know nothing about me. Go on. Say something nice about me. Anything. I'll wait. And be sure to repeat it once more when you leave. Perhaps that will make me nice and maybe you will cure

me of this acerbity, but don't hold your breath, sweetheart." I shrugged, suggesting that my fate was beyond my control, as indeed it was—in virtually every part of my life. There was no meaning anymore to much, no grand reveal, no surprised left in store for me. Above all, standing there, more than ever before I worried that I may, after all, be my mother's child.

"Who are you? Show yourself," I finally said, after a long pause.

"I cannot. I am half the man I once was. Scarred—like you, but different. We are a lot alike."

"Where do you come from with this shit?"

"You remind me of myself, that's all. Does she look after you? Does she hurt you?"

"No. Yes. Both. One cannot expect a queen to thrive on secondhand vegetables and even a zealot cannot preach while hopping around trying to escape the next sting of the whip." I pause for a moment. "I am more than this. Don't judge me by these rags or by what you see. I am more."

"What has she done to you? How did she use you? How does she allow it get this far—this out of control?"

"The same it's always been. Since I can remember anyway but I've always tried to forget. I think you need to go now. You may want to interview Martha, my sister, next. She's kept on a short leash, for special occasions."

"Listen to me…"

"No. I don't want to hear any more…I don't want to speak and you should not get any closer to me. I don't want you here. I have a job to do. I don't need the distraction."

"Wait. Your brother isn't dead. Don't make a sound. If you scream or make a fuss, it's all over."

"What do you mean? My brother? Louis? We heard that he is dead. Is he alive? Do you know where he is? I must know where he is. You have to tell me. Are you here to torment me? Did you come here to rip my heart out from my body and set it on fire with your lies before stuffing it back —blackened and bruised?"

"Your brother is well. He has returned. He is here."

"You must protect him. Don't let him be harmed. Give him a message…from me. Please tell him I need him."

"Don't be such a silly Nora." The stranger's tone sounded softer. "Even Sheba next door barked and recognized me. What's wrong with you?"

"No!" I take a deep breath to calm my nerves. "Louis? Is it you?"

"Fuck. Your knowing I am here may well be my undoing. If anyone overhears you now…and it's tickets."

"Let me look at you." He removed his cap and smiles at me. His face was scarred and the one side of his face didn't quite reflect his broad smile like the other. It felt like I was seeing my brother for the first time, as if his scars had somehow allowed his real beauty—his strength, and courage—to be noticed. I realized in that moment that had never really seen him. Not like this. Not *seen*. This Louis was a hardened and scarred man, a far cry from the carefree slip of a boy who left this house in anger and now, returned, hiding in its shadows. "I thought you had died in an ambush. We were just told you were dead." He winced as I reach out to touch his face. His scars felt leathery under my fingers. He turned away and lit another menthol.

"On the border you cup your hand over a cigarette when you take drag, otherwise the enemy simply shoots at the burning ember." He took another drag, hand cupped. "On Valentines Day last year, a tank-against-tank clash took place between us and the Cubans. We were clearing the Chambinga Heights, the tactical highpoint of the Cuito Cuanavale area."

"Who did this? Us? The SADF?"

"Yes. It was a joint operation between us and UNITA. I'm not sure how much of that news gets here but since Jonas Savimbi took over, he has been trying hard to fashion UNITA as anticommunist…as a guerrilla movement. I still don't know what the UNITA losses were on that day but we lost a Ratel. Four men died. Eleven of us were wounded."

"I'm so sorry, Louis," I said gently.

"I am ashamed of what I have become," he continued without hesitation. "I'm not the kid you remember, that you grew up with. I am a ghost of that person. I know that I was attractive once, when I chased things and I was naive—unsoiled—shining, not debased, not like now."

I looked away. I was embarrassed for Louis, and embarrassed that I may have put him on the spot. "You know, despite mother and all her bullshit, our lives were pretty perfect," I sighed. "We were living in the glow of a great city, the city of gold, with all its promises. And I remember always feeling lucky to be here," I went on, feeling a little uncomfortable, "…remember Sundays at church? When people commented on our blue eyes and soft, blond hair? But now…now, just look at me. My eyes are hollow and my matted hair makes my scalp itch so much, I scratch until I bleed just to make it stop."

He stared calmly into my eyes. "You're still amazing to me."

"I can only imagine how much you have sacrificed. I have no idea what you went through. But none of this has been easy, on any of us, Louis. Not even Martha, although I wonder sometimes." He smiled, and nodded. "I could not allow mother to go about acting happy as if nothing was wrong. I sacrificed my happiness. And I did so with gusto. I have become the demon in her soul, who allows her no rest, who waits patiently—observing—until her breathing became urgent and her moans the only sound that breaks the deathly silence that hangs over this house. And don't get me started on her concubine. He treats me with the dead-eyed resentment of stepfather who hates a child that he has now been saddled with. His adder-like tongue makes me cringe and I long for him to disappear as quickly and quietly as he came into our lives."

Louis paused and thought for a moment. "I have been not been able to rest. Night after night I force myself to face the fact that we are what happens when a parent stops loving their children, leaving them emotionally abandoned and compelled—driven—by an unnamed urge to prevail. Seeing you, my frigid soul has feels alive again, burning red and I cannot extinguish it, not until this hate I feel for her is incinerated—burnt-out—and charred." He took a quick drag of his cigarette, "I

know… I'm unlovable. I know she thinks I'm beyond redemption. But…I have also become wiser. I'm a better judge of character, now, I think." He took another long drag, as if hesitant to continue. "I know they both have to be neutralized and that she, the mastermind behind the plan who spent years fulminating against our father, watched from the shadows egging Angel on…she has to be reckoned with. She has to pay the heavier toll. And it falls on me to be the executioner."

"We both know what we have to do."

"It will end here. I won't look the viper in the eye. I will just swing the panga and swing it again and again until both she and Angel are both headless."

"You're doing the right thing. When it is done, after you've had a shower, I will have a fresh white shirt ready for you. You're ready for this."

"I am. This hate we harbor is septic. It has cannibalized everything in its path and it will consume us too. And love, don't be fooled, is no less virulent. It curries favor, it makes sacrifices, it's desperate to impress but is unable to get a grip on reason, which is futile, because talk…talk is easy, too much so. No amount of talk can pierce the distracted mind of the bitter, stubborn, or infatuated. But, deeds…deeds are what matter. They are measurable. And bravery…that matters as well. And to dig up the executioner's ax from the moist soil…that matters most of all. "

31

A tooth, for a tooth.

10 PM

Someone conveniently forgot to switch off the lights in the garden. Also, the side-door was frequently left unlocked as well, a mixture of forgetfulness and predictably slip-shod security—a fact I had used many times to gain access to the house with far less sanguinary motives.

I gestured at the door, handing Louis the panga. He stepped inside. I retreated into the shadows from where I planned to relish in the execution. I closed my eyes trying to make detailed mental snapshots as keepsakes. All I got were jimjams—screaming meemies—butterfuckingflies in my stomach?!

Fuck. What is going on with me, I thought.

A thunderclap headache was setting in—exploding—I needed a Migril. I was dizzy. Nauseated.

Probably excitement.

Focus.

I ferreted through my memories of the last two years, replaying snippets of conversation as if they happened that day.

Why could I not raise the panga?

Surely my hate is enough. My love, my entire life, has been taken over by this malignancy and my thirst for retribution and yet, it was insufficient. I was not made for love and, it seems, nor for delivering on hatred.

The wait was killing me.

A scream ripped through the tranquility of the summer evening. I knew that voice—I have had to restrain myself from silencing that strident throat so many times. I had endured the constant frenetic venting coming from that woman for longer than I cared to remember and I had imagined that very moment since the night of my father's murder.

"Again," I prayed.

A second scream.

More subdued. Disappointingly muffled even. As if the evil source of the sound was drowning in blood.

A third strike.

No shriek. No moan.

Just the satisfying clank of the Cold Steel 97LPMS carbon panga hitting stone.

Four.

Martha came rushing out.

"There is a murderer in the house. There is murder in our house!"

Gauging by her reaction to the evening's events, it was possible to live vicariously in the worlds of others without ever engaging, yet breathlessly celebrate their triumphs. All she ever needed was affection, food, and the froufrou trappings of suburban life.

Five.

A hollow whomp suggested the executioner was getting weary, wielding his righteous sword—decapitation is grunt-work.

Jesus loves you. Bitch.

"Why are you not saying something?" Martha looked at me. We were both staring at the house that we had known our whole lives and couldn't wait to get away from for the same length of time.

"I'm finished, Martha."

Angel arrived home at 10:30 PM. He seemed jolly enough as he approached me, clearly having had a few drinks, and blissfully unaware of his fate.

"Your landlady has departed it seems—it's just us now," I said, trying to sound sincere and contain my excitement at his imminent demise.

"What's got into you? Why are you shivering? It's a beautiful evening," he said cheerfully.

"It's perfect. I have no more to say." I shot him a welcoming look. "Don't let me keep you."

"Why are you swaying? Are you doing some weird little dance?" He laughed at his own stupid joke.

"Please step inside, Angel. There is someone else who wishes to see you." I made a somewhat nondescript gesture. "I'll get out of your way. I have always pestered you with my barbs and gripes but let me, for once, take my leave at the right time. Earlier, Mother was dying to see you."

He pulled a face, unconvinced by my effort at hospitality and said nothing as he stepped into the house. Obviously my efforts counted for naught, I thought as I stepped back into the safety of the shadows, taking a deep breath.

A sharp sound broke the serenity of the evening, followed by the heavy thud of flesh cleaved open. My chest was burning—I felt like exploding.

Martha's shrillness, however, breached the noise in my head. "He did it! It was Louis. We're free."

I stared at her. Disconnected. Unsure who she was, in every sense. Time seemed suspended and I was impatient for her to stop her incessant yakking.

"Do you want to get away from here? Do you hear me?"

"No, Martha." It was partially true. I heard nothing except what felt like tribal drums in my chest, the sound rising up from deep within me. Maureen's girls came running helter-skelter from the house, hysterical. The fleeing women's steps formed patterns of dull thuds absorbed by the earth, vibrating within me. The *sangoma* cut a line towards me, covered in fresh blood, her wide eyes

betrayed the carnage she'd just witnessed, fully aware that good fortune spared her from the executioner's relentless hand—for a day at least. Someone turned the lights on in the house, followed by perimeter security floodlights making the yard appear as bright as a summer day.

"Martha, everyone… the whole Germiston is waiting on me. Everyone. Waiting just for me. They want me to lead the celebration. They want me to start the party."

I took a heavy step forward, barely able to lift a foot. I felt moored to this place—this soil—that I loathed so deeply. Everyone around me—Martha, the maids—were covered in blood and dirt, their cheeks shimmering. They looked colorful, happy, as they shed joyful tears and seeing them made me feel stronger. I lifted my arms and, encouraged to stomp on the ground, I took a jubilant step toward where the patient panga had lain buried for a year, and, throwing my head back, I laughed for the first time in more than two years, ecstatic—possessed—by the potency of the moment. I pushed my knees forward with all my might, my arms stretching as high as I could raise them as I did my nameless, shapeless, formless dance making ever more deliberate strides forward.

"You can all join in! Be silent! Just dance. Come here… join in, Martha! It is us who carried this burden. Ours now is to revel in the release and to relish the ecstasy. We must dance! And anyone is welcome to join us as we celebrate living!"

I felt tired. It was as if a fog was enveloping me, overtaking my body. It had been a long night. Release from hate was more exhausting than I expected, I thought. I knew I had to take one more step, if it was the last thing I did. I owed myself that. I swayed to the side and took a step forward in celebration, my arms raised high above my head. I had prevailed. In the absence of justice, the guilty had been tried, sentenced, and executed by a jury of their peers.

My father, Abraham Strijdom, had been avenged.

Louis

not once looking back

happy to be done with us

he left in silence

32

I understand death now—it's harmless.

11:59 PM

On the day the old me died I woke up unexpectedly refreshed considering my chronic insomnia caused by an unhealthy obsession with my father's murder a year ago, a condition further fueled by profound resentment. I can also say with a measure of certainty, just like my father found out, that on the day of your death, something just feels different. A little off. The kind of thing you can't put your finger on but know its there, like a tell-tale tingle before a pushy zoster appears.

I woke up with the knowledge that finally, I was out of fucks to give, which, truth be told, knocked me for six having grown fatigued from living in a state of outrage for so long. There was a finality in the air, a sense that nothing much matters and that in some way this thing—this unknowable, unambiguous but inescapable thing—was an irrefutable final act. But, frustratingly, that it wasn't something I was taught or prepared for, and that I, like everyone before me who had faced the same inconvenient fact, will connect the final dots of this situation that I find myself in, as I go. And that in the absence of evidence or standards of best practice, there was no right or wrong way to proceed, nor a preferred method of going about the final day in this place. Eventually, I'll be unremembered. Most of us will be. And all traces of us erased quickly.

I was anxious to leave behind the house that had seen too much and forgiven too little. I stepped over the bloodied panga, walking over to Barefoot Bill, who was waiting for me at the end of the driveway on a new Harley. I could't help but wonder how long he had been there. I noticed

an oversized golden teddy bear with a derpy grin and a giant red ribbon was wedged behind him on the bike. The bear was destined to be our contribution to the 1989 Johannesburg Toy Run, an event which, each year, saw hundreds of bikes ride the city's freeways taking soft toys to underprivileged kids. I smiled, happy to see Bill and our new fuzzy—temporary—friend. The bear kind of looked like Max, I thought, and it seemed like he was waiting for me, thoughtfully saving me a seat. Without as much as a moment's hesitation, I mounted the bike and squeezed myself between Bill and the golden Teddy, grabbing the bulky bear by its fluffy shoulders. I clenched my gnarly hands into tight, round balls and released them, surprised at how much lighter they felt.

Give it up. Just give it all up.

I unfurrowed my brow.

Don't overthink.

Riding the muggy late-summer evening breeze and intoxicated by the sweet smell of ripe fruit coming from neighborhood gardens, I closed my eyes and taking a deep breath—almost involuntarily—my arms reached up. I was free. Magnificently, magically—mostly—free.

Go on. Hit reset.

A light ignited somewhere in the back of my skull and flashed across reaching my still half-closed eyelids, exploding like Catherine wheels. Surrounded by shooting sparks followed by myriad blazing slipstreams, each reaching out and inviting me to live a thousand times over while seducing me with their golden warmth, I let the moment wash through me. I closed my eyes again. I was entirely constructed of light.

Let go.

I did.