

Part A: Portfolio

Fractured Flowers

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By

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Introduction

This portfolio contains extracts of my reflective journals that I wrote throughout the course of the year. My poetics essay, four book reviews, community engagement report and my reflection regarding the reader report is also attached.

Reflective Journals

7 February

This was our first official week in the Masters Creative Writing. I say “our” because although my classmates are on separate journeys, it felt as though we were connected by sharing our personal experiences through writing, which is very exposing. Kerry Hammerton taught us about repetition and how it emphasises points, meanings and instils emotional responses within readers.

For our assignment, I wrote: “The foxglove of Denghoog is anchored by her old roots and frozen in time. At this moment, foxglove’s carcass hovers above me. Foxglove is a lady flower that looks like a stern and skinny librarian. Foxglove sees me and glares her petals back into a snarl.” Everyone thought my writing was a blur between realism and surrealism, like painting a picture and turning language into an “art”, this made me happy because this is exactly what I want in my writing. Fortunate said that my writing always forces her to be confronted with things that she isn’t used to.

I find giving feedback very difficult because I feel very inexperienced so what qualifies me to even give my opinion? The feedback process is a very “raw” experience because it makes me feel vulnerable. After all, you physically see how people react to your creative work, and my creative work is always very personal and emotional.

Jo-Ann Bekker’s *Asleep Awake Asleep: Stories* and found the incorporation of African animals refreshingly because Bekker named all the animals by their common names. This was very powerful because, as an animal lover, I could identify those animals, thus making the writing feel more realistic and complete, which is what I think I want in my writing.

Taisia Kitaiskaia’s *Ask Baba Yaga: Otherworldly Advice For Everyday Troubles* felt like it existed for me: “In childhood, you rode a white horse out of the forest; in youth, a red horse through the market (everyone cheered); now you ride a black horseback into the woods. : No one heralds you. . You are alone with what you always had but barely knew: a strange horse. ; What is the nature of this dark one’s mane, trot & mind? You have nothing left but the great adventure of the horse.” The earthy, magical tone and uniquely giving advice was a tincture for my soul. I am unsure about my writing yet, but I definitely want to read more of this style.

Although it’s only the beginning of the course, I noticed that I don’t respond to writing focused on war, politics, protest and discrimination. The reason being is because I’m surrounded by these topics every day to such an extent that I’ve become desensitised, drained and bored by them. I read to escape reality – not to be constantly reminded of it.

14 February

Stacy Hardy introduced us to punctuation which was interesting and unsettling because I've never noticed the power of punctuation before. Now, I've become consciously aware of punctuation like never before. It's a secret superpower because the writer is able to set the pace, control time and instil emotions.

Marguerite Duras's *L'Amour* used short sentences with full stops that increased intensity and lingered longer in my mind: "A man. Standing, watching: the beach, the sea. The sea is calm, flat; season indefinite, moment lingering." I noticed that when she wrote about nature she used longer sentences with commas to create 'flow'. Duras's piece inspired my assignment with "The sound. Like dolphins and whales speaking in the sea, like a stone skipping across frozen water, like the pressure of oxygen in a space station."

21 February

Mxolisi Nyezwa taught us about writing plainly which makes writing more powerful and emotionally sincere in its simplicity because it demonstrates our exact thoughts and aids in explaining things that are difficult to explain.

Mxolisi gave very insightful advice where he told me that I've excessive colour and description in my writing, making it flat. Therefore, I should create a balance between the dry writing and colour. I realised that this is true, with writing, painting and quilting, and I'm grateful for this comment. Sibongakonke wrote something so beautiful and she is definitely a huge source of inspiration in my writing: ". . . a river will sing you a balm, and a lake will sit in your gut." & "She'll wash your bleeding feet in marshmallow root and elderflower...and call your lost laugh with blackberry baths-."

The feedback groups are becoming more relaxed as we understand how to respond to everyone's pieces. I find it a little bit easier to tell people what I don't like about their pieces. For example, I told Stoffel that I didn't like what he wrote because it was academic instead of creative. This was a very big step for me because I struggle with assertiveness but I thought that it was important to be honest so that he and I can improve.

28 February

Nathan Trantraal taught us that anything that applies to reading applies to writing. For instance, the more you read, it results in expansion of frame of reference and exercises your reading muscle. Therefore, writers should be professional readers, and we should read correctly by pay attention to every detail. Characters must be realistic for the reader to relate to them, because in reality nobody is perfect or says the perfect comeback.

I wrote: “A moss green carpet slithered like a snake before her.” Nathan said that I could simply say: “A moss green carpet slithered *snake like* before her.” Nathan also said that in my piece I sounded too apologetic, which is also known as, the cult of the reader. He told me that I’m not serving the reader and that as writers it’s good to cause trouble in our writing. Nathan also said that I should make my character more realistic and create a resistance to her being in the bookshop. Nathan said that when we finish writing, we should always go back to our first paragraph and ask ourselves whether it’s necessary, because we only get into our writing after the first paragraph.

I read *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* and although I enjoyed the fairy tales, it made me realise that fairy tale writing is not for me anymore. Perhaps it was an overflow of fairy tales or it was how they were written, but for some reason I don’t like them anymore. It was life altering to tell myself this because I used to love fairy tales, but they aren’t enough for me anymore because somehow they lack “fullness” in the form of psychological and emotional depth.

7 March

Paul Mason’s “writing conventionally and working against it” was a form of writing that didn’t benefit my writing because it was anti-story writing which I don’t like as it frustrates me because I cannot express myself, I feel constrained, and I feel unsatisfied because it I can’t meet my personal needs. The assignment was challenging because it felt uncomfortable to go against the norm in storytelling, and consciously rebelling against it which irritated me. This has been the most challenging assignment in the course so far, and because I didn’t like this technique, I didn’t write well. It’s just not me.

WereWere Liking’s *The Amputated Memory* was incredible because the writer used nature as the perpetrator in a rape scene. Writing violence is very difficult and I used this technique to write my thesis’s rape scene through a mountain and a naked mole rat (October reflection).

14 March

Mishka Hoosen taught us about desire and derangement. Hozier’s *Cherry Wine* had a lovely line: “The blood is rare and sweet as cherry wine.” It inspired me because it was a line of tension as blood isn’t rare and cherries are sour. Thereby, desire is both pain and pleasure. Desire can be brought alive by using lyrical language, making people particular (this makes them more alive), and by describing their scent as this only belongs to them. For example, in *Confessions of the Fox* by Jordy Rosenburg, “He breathed in, catching an edge of the scents that belonged to her. Powdered amber. Juniper. Warm smoke” – these smells make the character more particular. This inspired my entire thesis as I aimed to captivate all the senses (October reflection).

For our assignment incorporating contradictions was difficult, but this made me realize that there is a very thin line between love and hate, where both are very overwhelming emotions. In the feedback session Mishka said that if I add dialogue and grounding language my characters will be more concrete. I grounded my writing more by adding plain language and cutting my descriptive language and imagery. I wrote: “our love was carved into ponds of grass” and “at night I daydreamed about him.”

Delia Owens’s *Where the Crawdads Sing* was incredible because it combined nature writing with romance and mystery. It has inspired me to incorporate these themes in my writing. I’ve gained insight about myself over the past weeks, where I’ve noticed that I love personification and nature writing.

21 March

Mangaliso Buzani’s seminar was cancelled so I did my own assignment which entailed focusing on an object and describing it creatively like a child. I practiced by painting pomegranates, to sharpen my focus to detail and to increase my observation skills which is vital for writers. I wrote about a reed basket: “The dog has chewed it so much that the ribs show. Other trees would think it’s anorexic, but I bet that it doesn’t feel skinny enough.”

Lidia Yuknavitch’s *Daguerrotype of a Girl* disturbed me because the character refused to help free a trapped wolf. I understand that Yuknavitch wanted me to feel disturbed and frustrated and created this scene to cause tension but also for the reader to glimpse the internal world of the character. This confirmed my extreme passion for animals, mental health and the wild beauty of strange girls. Therefore, I think that I’ll channel my passion for these topics into my writing.

Micah Dean Hicks’s *Crawfish Noon* was a very enjoyable because I couldn’t determine if the characters were crawfish or humans, due to the many references to crawfish-like elements, such as “tails thumping”, “crawlers”, but was confused with man made fishing boats. This inspired me, because with the correct terminologies a writer can create confusion by making a reader question the species of the protagonist.

11 April

We wrote our Poetics Essay and I was nervous because the readings were very confusing and unpleasant because they were opinionated, overly political, and none were on topics that I was passionate about. I’m the type of person that likes to have facts to be scientifically researched in order to be reliable, because that separates professional writers from laymen, or else any person can just say anything leading to biased results. I took Paul’s advice as constructive criticism and tried to become less cautious, less boring, and attempted to deconstruct my list by adding a miniature symbolic story of a zebra between the paragraphs.

I wrote my first poem: *It was snowing and you weren't here* about me missing my sister and experiencing what she always wanted to experience – snow. Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood* was wonderful because it was personal and it unearthed my passion for feminism and stimulated me to write about periods, unwanted pregnancies and romantic relationships in my thesis.

18 April

Chwayita Ngamlana introduced us to experimenting with sex. We learnt that sex is an uncomfortable topic, yet if everything leads up to it, then it's necessary. Writers cannot avoid intimacy because all couples have an intimate moment, and it makes their relationship more authentic. I've felt that when I read a sex scene I like and the writing more as opposed to those who skip over sex. When writing sex, it should always add to the character.

Although I'm comfortable with the topic, I've never written a sex scene because I'm scared my parents or other people judge me. However, I've decided to be more assertive, to stop being a people-pleaser, and to find my own identity, which is why I now write a substantial amount of sex scenes, because sex is emotional, and I'm a very emotional person.

For our assignment, we chose a paraphilia/fetish and I experimented with coulrophilia. Chwayita said that I had the strongest characters out of the whole class and said that, style-wise my piece looked to daunting without paragraphs, and I should link the sex scene to the protagonist's personality more. Sabrina said that this was the best piece that I wrote. This seminar inspired me to continue writing set in the contemporary era.

Marguerite Milks's *Slug* was enjoyable because of the confusion of whether slug was a human, "a slug", or a sexual fantasy about a burglar. The interesting use of capital letters described the imagined dialogue between Patty and her sexual conquests was very intriguing and I attempted this technique in my assignment: "I'm Frightened and squeak, It Looks Like There Could Be A Burglar. Won't You Please Check? I'm So Scared. He will play along, say It Would Be My Pleasure To Check For A Burglar. Stay Behind Me. Stay Close."

Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* was a disturbing film about the fragile relationship between man and nature. It filled my inner void of my longing for wild uncontaminated nature, and the film was superb because the suspense was overbearing. Although we knew that Timothy and his girlfriend died in the beginning already, we only found out at the end, how they died, thus this non-linear approach made it more shocking and disturbing.

It reminded me of Akweake Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*, as it followed the exact format, and somehow made me feel more emotional about the cause of death, because it made me extra emotionally invested from the start when I knew the character died. Emezi's dialogue is incredible because they don't articulate *how* the character said something, but *what* they did while they spoke. I specifically thought it incredible that there were different characters narrating

the story. I want to attempt this in my thesis but I'm always worried about making sure the voices sound different.

25 April

Carol Leff presented a seminar about death. In class, we discussed that writing about death doesn't have to be pessimistic, but optimistic, because things won't remain pessimistic forever – many move on, accept death and lead fulfilling lives.

I used nature to connect the reader with their primitive beings, because nature is sensual and emotional. I used repetition and punctuation strategically to create a sense of overwhelming chaos and regret. Everyone agreed that it was “a very Nelia piece”. I was happy to see that I might've found my writing voice? For some reason, I didn't like what I wrote, because I don't think I've accepted their deaths yet, therefore this assignment was excruciatingly painful.

I loved Thobeka's assignment: “We took baths. We were naked bodies in front of each other. We ate white porridge with sugar in it. And we stood about, minding our own business.” – Because of how she was able to transform mundane events into magic.

2 May

Jo-Ann Bekker taught us about oblique writing, which is when authors explain things in a slanted manner by writing a story about a relationship, emotion or fight, by focusing on an object or event. For our assignment, I experimented with flash fiction because I've never done it before.

My other piece, *Leg of Lamb*, was heavily inspired by Lydia Davis's *The Outing*. Like Davis, I wrote my story in one sentence. Davis's piece was about an argument taking place during a hike, where mine was about the joy of making food, and the satisfaction when finally eating it. I was very worried about being so influenced by her piece, lest it be plagiarism, but also because writing like that was Davis's idea and not mine. I asked Jo-Ann if we are allowed to get inspired by pieces and write in a similar rhythm. She said yes, as the course is about opening ourselves to other writers and experimentation. However, we must take caution not to become too infected by the voices of other writers, which is what happened to me. Nevertheless, she also said that in future, I should just become inspired by a line or two, instead of using the entire rhythm or melody of a piece. Jo-Ann provided wonderful advice about me possibly incorporating politics, as it could add a deeper layer to my work.

I enjoyed Sabrina's piece because she weaved her knowledge about being an educator into her writing. This motivated me to also weave my education about psychology into my future pieces. However, I'm worried that it will become too academic, and also because in the past, I've

included some psychology and it was not received well. I'll try again and see if I can improve on this.

Nnedi Okorafor's *The Palm Tree Bandit*, was refreshing because it was a nested story (a-story-within-a-story). It had folktale and feminist themes which are topics that intrigue me. This inspired me to write a scene of climbing a tree while talking about painful pasts in my thesis (October reflection). The story ended with the end of a conversation, and the end of braiding the girl's hair – "My story is done, and so is your hair. . . Of this story, there's no more. Run along now." which was a light-hearted way to end both stories.

I didn't like the playwright scenes in Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, because it broke the narrative and I didn't like jumping between each line. I wouldn't use this technique in my writing. I enjoyed the drawings because it allowed for more reflection.

9 May

Paul Mason introduced us to the art of writing monologues and rants. For my assignment, I ranted about the stigma against mental illness. I was fuelled with energy and anger, where Paul said that I was able to achieve the rant, which made me realise that with passion, energy and motivation writers can write what is really bothering them and can reach an audience that feels the same way.

I really enjoyed Gaireyah's because it was hilarious in it's honesty: "Wat makee die blerrie djong! Die blerrie papbek, uittanne, dom dôner, slipdisk, gangerine voet vrot villis! Ve my sê hoeveel stukke hoene my kleinkinnes kan iet!"

Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* was extraordinary because it was cosmopolitan, youthful, personal and fast paced, which intrigued me and made it feel as though Ada and I were friends due to the raw honesty that swept through the pages. *Freshwater* inspired me so much, and now I am not sure whether I should write a collection of short stories or a novel for my thesis because this has changed my mind set.

Lily Hoang's *Invisible Woman* was fascinating because I enjoyed that the narrator was in the form of "we", the exquisite imagery and fresh language "-she packed her entire apartment into one small handbag and walked away." The snippets of conversation between Sigmund Freud and Lou Andreas were very educational, and showed me that adding academic writing into creative writing makes it exciting because you move from fantasy to reality, to dreaming to awake, which was exhilarating.

16 May

Jonathan Keats's *Ardour* consumed me because of how Keats incorporated nature and the female body: "On her bare skin she wore at most a coat of snow, often only a glass of frost.", "breasts as steep as snow peaks beneath a blizzard of hair." This was ethereal and inspired me to describe my characters in my thesis by comparing them to nature.

Chwayita Ngamlana's *If I Stay Right Here* was fantastic and was the book that was the turning point in order for me to decide on a novel for my thesis. The writing was youthful, incredible dialogue, and each chapter was a standalone piece blazing with energy. I liked how the name of *The Rat and Parrot* was changed to *The Fat and Carrot*, which inspired me to change *Boho's* to *Hobo's* in my thesis (October reflection).

Cristina Rivera Garza's *The Taiga Syndrome* was exquisite due to the unwavering descriptions of the Taiga's flora and fauna, the earthy colours, the suspense, eeriness the linkage of fairy tales, which inspired my thesis, but I used my own fairytales (October reflection). There was a magical quality to this realistically written story, which stimulated a way for me to include nature in a way that becomes ethereal.

Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* was so captivating and written so sensitively and opened an entire new world to me that I was oblivious of, that being the lives of those in the French colonised Vietnam. I liked that Duras related nature to human organs, "It flows quietly, without a sound, like blood in the body." Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* was unsatisfactory because it was complicated, repetitive and too surrealistic for me. I felt frustrated and annoyed, because I realised that I'm not a surrealist writer.

I always write female protagonists, and therefore I've realised that I'm fascinated about the lives of women. I've therefore discovered what I'm passionate about, and I now know what I want to do for my thesis. In the beginning of the course, I was frightened about writing a novella because I thought my story would die before it ends, however, over the past months I've gained insight into this, and would really like to challenge myself as a writer.

23 May

Henali Kuit explained the value of writing simply, whether it be simple structure-wise and by using uncomplicated writing, as this can ignite an in-depth response within a reader. I wrote a about what it's like to be a farmer and about premenstrual dysphoric disorder, which was received well due to the sassy young voice: "it's biology bitch.", and the contrast of positive emotions about negative things, "After that, I'll get hysteric, suicidal and manic, but I love it." Moreover, I never mentioned "period" so they liked the mystery. This made me realise that in my writing I should just be myself and not care whether others will think my writing is weird or not, because with that containment, I cannot express myself appropriately.

I read Claire-Louise Bennett's *Pond: Stories*, where I enjoyed the detailed description of mundane events and how she felt in certain outfits, which heavily inspired my thesis. Bennett wrote: "This is being written with green ink.", which was very creative and displaced me from the text. This inspired me to write "So I wrote this story with my blood" for my assignment. However, sometimes I lost interest as there was no storyline. Reflecting on this, I've realised that I'm the type of person that needs a storyline/plot in order to become fully committed and for the psychological pleasure of escapism.

Xiaolu Guo's *20 Fragments of Ravenous Youth* was much loved because it was amusing (personification of cockroaches and noodles), contemporary, and relatable. It's fast-paced writing made it never boring and it was educational about Chinese culture. I liked how the meals were described: "eight dragons soya sauce with rice, eight dragons soya sauce with noodles, eight dragons soya sauce with dumplings."

6 June

Masande Ntshanga lectured us on finding our writing voices. We learnt that our voice never changes, it only grows. Masande said something amazing, where he said that our voice is something that no one can ever take away from us – it makes us unique. In trying to find our voices, we need to discover what we like in other people's writing, and then we should try and create that characteristic in our writing.

I discovered that the reason I like certain writers more than others are due to these defining features: nature, youthful, accessible, unpretentious and light-hearted while simultaneously touching on traumatic topics. I want this in my writing as well, however I feel as though I've two voices: one voice is sweet, innocent, neat and nature focused. While the latter has plenty of swearing, contemporary language and feistiness.

I've always had this thorn in my side when it comes to writing. That is that I feel all this pressure from society and my community on how a girl and a writer should behave. Many presume that writing ought to be like classical literature such as Shakespeare and Dickens for example. When I write in the feisty voice of mine, people in my life say that it's crude and improper. I feel this pressure to be a perfect girl who does perfect things. This makes me feel stuck and I want to rebel from these ideals. Now I write as though these people would never read my work and I feel happier.

J.M. Coetzee's *In the heart of the country* captured desert-farm-life fantastically and prepared me to write my desert-farm-life scenes. I enjoyed the simple explanations of farm chores, Magda's love for insects and the original descriptions. Joanna Walsh's *Vertigo* was stimulating because I loved the details about fashion. There were a few striking sentences that made my heart drop: "To appear for the first time is magnificent.", "Time, when it's limited, is more beautiful." Each

chapter was a life on its own, and that nothing seemed to flow linearly so it felt like memories, which is inspiring because in writing you can be anything.

Veronique Tadjo's *In the Company of Men* was exquisite because it was told from different narrators, had extensive knowledge and an underlying theme of sadness and nature which suited the content. This mix of human and nature is incredible in writing and is what I want to convey in my writing.

13 June

Carol Leff introduced us to re-imagining place, and showed me that describing a setting entails so much because it ranges from geography to transportation and helps situate the reader.

I've been suffering as my aunt and parents are ill with Covid-19. This has dampened my creativity and motivation, especially since I need to take care of my parents and the farm all by myself. But when Carol wrote "Be original, be daring, be creative as you write about a place from a unique perspective." – although it is so simple, it inspired me to continue writing, fuelling the hope I've for my aunt and parents in my assignment. I usually always have female protagonists but this time I wrote about a man and it was refreshing. I used to think that I could only write what I know, but I now see that is poppycock – a character can be anything you want them to be. Since this course, I only write in bite-sized paragraphs because I find it accessible, uncomplicated and less discouraging.

Rose Lemberg's *Seven Losses of na Re* and liked that it was separated by numbering the losses. I also like how her parents chose the name na Re as seen here, "In addition to Roza, my parents rejected Regina (pretentious), Renata (pretentious), Rimma (low-brow), Rita (un-cultured), Raisa (worse than Rita), Rina (too Jewish), Roxana (too Ukrainian), Rotislava (too Russian) and Raya ("I just don't like it)." I thought it was fun that the names and their rejecting reasons were put in brackets.

My classmates really enjoyed my piece where Gaireyah said that she loves my character and it's so refreshing to see me write in this contemporary manner and that it was a "Nelia painting on the wall". Something that touched me was that Xolani said that he also really liked it (he doesn't comment on my pieces so this is why I appreciated this so much) where he said that he can see how much I've developed as a writer throughout this course.

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* was amazing because it was dark, mysterious, educational about South Korea, and told from three different narrators. These different perspectives kept it interesting, as it's refreshing to hear different characters and their views on the overall situation of Yeong-he becoming vegetarian. In my thesis, I also want to write from different perspectives, because there is always more than one side to a story, making it more authentic. Kang described things interestingly: "The kiss was a palimpsest of memories.", and "...jade necklace clacking at

her neck.” – in which I realise that this mixture of touch, sight and sound in a small sentence is awakening.

Michelle Sacks’s *You Were Made For This* gripped me because the protagonists were very unlikable and did terrible things and this kept me reading. I realised that “really-nice” characters are boring and unrealistic. It was also divided into the perspectives of the three characters which I liked because then you are not only inside one specific character.

20 June

Last week I received my supervisor, Chwayita Ngamlana. I was so glad about this because I’m an absolute fan of her writing, voice and style. She sent me an email saying that she is very happy that she will be supervising me because she is sure that nothing short of remarkable will come from me. This warmed my heart so much and I’m so excited to learn from her and to share the writing journey.

What helped me manage my anxiety regarding my ill parents, was to read and write as much as possible. Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* was therapeutic, because of her wisdom and sincerity: “Being an artist means: not numbering and counting but ripening like a tree, which doesn’t force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come.”

Sibongakonke sent Marosa Di Giorgio’s *Diadem* to me and I loved it due to the poetic descriptions of nature, personification and magic: “Moon, you’re shining again; your allure falls from you like a river...” which is what I crave in my writing.

I became nervous when I contemplated if I could even accomplish a novel. Yet I kept on seeing signs like “If you weren’t ready you wouldn’t have the opportunity.”, and “May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.” So I think this means that I should write a novel, no matter how intimidating it seems.

27 June

Stacy Hardy taught us about memoir-fiction and epistolary and I was amazed to discover that auto-fiction has exploded because people are craving reality. Apparently, some think memoir-fiction is self-indulgent – I disagree because I think we should celebrate our interesting lives and maybe it will become somebody else’s survival guide, just as Martinique Stilwell’s *Thinking Up A Hurricane* was mine. Carmen Gimenez Smith’s *Milk and Filth* inspired me to write my first list because of its natural simplicity:

“9. I saw my cervix during a Pap smear.

10. The whole world had a new layer of grime for me to pick at: misogyny.

11. I decided my eggs were my own commodity.”

I wrote:

1. “I slipped out of bed before dawn on New Year’s day, saddled up Isi and galloped towards Sunrise Mountain.

2. Rain scrubbed the desert clean and awakened tearful rivers. Two red lambs were born on the stream bank. I carried them home with their umbilical cords wrapped tightly around my thighs.”

Epistolary is an intimate technique because it’s voyeuristic and vulnerable. Jennifer S. Cheng’s *Letters to Mao* was exquisite because of the nature writing which made it more sensitive: “Dear Mao, I’m thinking of what it would mean for you to know the span of the coastline here on the Western edge, where I’ve migrated after thunderstorms and tree blossoms.” Which inspired me to write: “My Darling, It has been a while since we last spoke. It might have only been a few days but they feel so far away. As far away as when mammoths and small horses trotted along the ridges of our homelands. As far as a time when earth was blanketed in soft faux fur, a time where the burning planet didn’t strike so furiously.”

Nature ignites my true feelings and sets the mood. I found epistolary easier than memoir-fiction because my boyfriend and I write love letters constantly, making me more comfortable with epistolary. This made me realise that with experience and experimentation, writing becomes easier. I’ve noticed that with writing, you shouldn’t resist, but allow the writing to take you where it wants to go. Write as if nobody’s watching – which is something that I’m currently consciously practising. I loved Sabrina’s imagery – she compared a tongue to a bull in a white kraal.

Elif Batuman’s *The Idiot* was educational because it gave an in-depth account of University-life which was vital for my thesis. The fragmented writing was stimulating, because each was unrelated therefore my interest remained. However, I thought that Batuman dwelled too long on the linguistics of languages, making me bored. Selin (protagonist) didn’t seem realistic because she was flawless and that irritated me.

I had my first meeting with my supervisor, Chwayita and it was touching to get to know each other, plan our feedback sessions, talk about her novel, our writing experiences, our writing fears/struggles and my thesis plan. She gave me amazing tips: I should aim to write each piece as a standalone piece because this helps to keep each chapter fresh, prevent repetition and it can be rearranged at a later time. She also said that I should write about my personal experiences because this will make my novel unique, because every person has unique life-experiences. We are video-calling every week and I will submit work every Friday.

I submitted a short story, *Mussel Pot* (recommended by a lecturer because it was environmentally, politically and psychologically rich) to *Doek!* - a Namibian literary magazine. It was rejected because they said “it didn’t resonate with us”. I was devastated, but I know that rejection is normal for writers but I just never knew that it would affect me so deeply.

4 July

Henali Kuit presented a seminar on how not to overwrite, which is avoidable by being confident and not worrying whether the reader will understand. A writer shouldn’t care so much about their target audience, because in doing that the writer unknowingly excludes other readers – I don’t have a target audience so I liked that I don’t exclude different readers. The assignment was challenging because I felt shackled as I couldn’t be myself, as I couldn’t write wild descriptions, therefore this technique of not overwriting is not for me.

I had a meeting with Chwayita where I was nervous to see what she thought of my first batch of writing that I sent to her. We read my fragments where Chwayita thought that my characters are strong and she praised me for being able to make them both different, yet equally interesting. Chwayita noticed that I don’t know how to use commas properly where I’m happy that she informed me so that I can relearn the rules.

We spoke of ellipses, challenges of naming cities, unnecessary separating of sentences, and the use of italics in my writing and how to use it properly. I told her that I want to change the name Diascia to Freesia, because that name disturbs me. Chwayita said that it’s important to like the name because I will be writing in first-person, so it will be as though I’m writing myself. It was an amazing first feedback session where it felt more personal than a normal class feedback session.

I felt fulfilled when receiving positive feedback, especially when she said that she enjoyed my pieces. This filled me with joy because I’m still so worried that I won’t be able to accomplish a novel. Chwayita is so supportive and I’m lucky to have her, an amazing writer, to watch over me.

Helen Oyeyemi’s *Boy, Snow, Bird* was curious to read as each voice was very different which aided my thesis. I was disappointed about the cliff-hanger ending because I felt that the pace was slow and then quickened towards the end making me feel like the writer lost control and rushed to finish the novel.

Qiu Miaojin’s *Last Words from Montmartre* had an outstanding portrayal of emotional devastation. It felt as though I was in the writer’s brain where these anxious thoughts never stopped attacking me. The writing was infused with raw honesty that made me empathise severely with the protagonist, which I relished. My favourite sentence was: “And Tokyo is the cherry blossoms, the sunset at dusk, dawn sunlight through her windows, the cry of the crow, the

cityscape of darkened rooms on a rainy evening, the depth of feeling in her eyes.”, because she was able to capture an entire city in one delicate sentence.

11 July

We had our last seminar where we discussed fragments with Jo-Ann Bekker. It felt unreal that this was our last chance to learn, communicate and discuss writing with each other. We discussed that our lives are fragmented tatters that can be anything ranging from quotes, fairy tales, snaps of conversations and dreams.

Jo-Ann compared fragments to being islands, where each stands alone and are independent, yet some islands can come together to form countries, thus they may add up to something bigger or share a common theme. Writing down fragments, which are brief in itself, has the ability to evoke various feelings and sometimes more so than an average text. I'm very interested in fragments as I find their form striking and each is different which makes them always interesting.

Prenesa Naidoo's *Kaleidoscope* was incredible because she wrote small stories under various colours: “Grey. The in-between. I don't belong in this world, neither do I belong in the next. The wolf sleeping next to me, his paw beneath my shoulder. He radiates the warmth that I've been searching for all along.” Mangaliso Buzani's *A naked bone* had wonderful personification which made it more innocent: “I remind her about bananas, their weary yellow shoes, apples with red-green-golden shirts, pears with huge hips, pomegranates with bloody seeds.” Naidoo's and Buzani's writing inspired my assignment and was one of the most incredible pieces that I've ever read as it was so airy and magical which I want in my writing.

I wrote in first-person to practise for my thesis. I researched ways to avoid starting with “I” as it can become monotonous. There was a haunting quality to my assignment which I loved: “Everything around me sparkles in promised galaxies – my diary, my phone, my clothes, my eye shadow, my body lotion. I sparkle, because I don't.”

I received positive feedback and I'm glad my hard work paid off. My classmates enjoyed the difference in structure and tone, as well as creating this theme of a sweet girl that shouldn't be messed with. Fortune said that she appreciates my unique voice around earthy things, which she thinks is my niche – I'm glad that my voice is filtering through like that.

I received a negative comment where someone said that I neglect the most important thing in life – humankind (which I disagree with), and put people in the background, while foregrounding nature. I feel that my writing-voice was attacked, which annoyed me because writing is supposed to be enjoyable where we ought to connect via humanity, not via race or what colour gaze I have. This has made me painfully reflect on my colour, which I feel very uncomfortable about and I'm worried that this might affect my writing.

18 July

This was the first week where I was able to witness what it's truly like to be a writer. In that, it entails living inside your imagination most of the time. Which I love, but I think it could be very lonely if you didn't have a social network.

I felt very nervous about solely writing and focusing on my thesis. I think it may have been the natural nerves that people experience when they tackle something huge like writing a novel. I realised that telling myself "I have to write a novel", isn't a beneficial thing to say because it's extremely daunting. I decided that I should just focus on one fragment specifically and think of that as an entire "short story" so to say, to make it feel easier to execute.

I created my own Tuesday reading group, where I read from *My Mother She Killed Me. My Father He Ate Me*, because of the eerie writing which I'm trying to incorporate in my thesis. In my writing I want to incorporate this mixture of good, absurdity and bad, while at the same time creating an eerie atmosphere.

Joy Williams's *Baba Iaga and the Pelican Child* had mesmerizing tension: "He shouted up to them as before, proclaiming his devotion to the pelican child's strangeness and beauty and promising to make her immortal. My name is synonymous with beautiful birds, he said, waving his portfolio at the windows." – it was fascinating to see how verbal force was written, as I craved pressure release because it was overbearing, yet the suspense and mystery further attracted me. This inspired me to incorporate peer pressure in my thesis between my characters (October reflection).

This week I did lots of planning for my novel – I created a character sketch for both my characters, where I wrote their: personality, problems, background, evolution, how they act around other people and how they impact those around them. I prepared an outline on all the topics/themes that female university students face, where I divided each theme under the separate characters. With each topic, I ask myself: What is the overarching question? What am I trying to portray? Are my topics answering my question? I had emotional problems so I couldn't start a new fragment. Therefore, I chose a piece that I wrote during the course and reworked it to incorporate physical space (to situate the reader) and contextualized it to my novel and character.

J.H. Rosny Aine's *Helgvor Of The Blue River*, had a very captivating and controlled pace throughout the novel and the imagery was extremely poetic: "He was the age of whitened crows . . . that he had been born with the stars, the river and the forest." Peg Alford Pursell's *A Girl Goes Into The Forest* ended strongly after each story in either mystery or sadness. It inspired my thesis because it was contemporary, scandalous, tackled engaging themes and the characters felt relatable (due to their flaws).

25 July

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's *I'm Here* had original imagery: "The fresh watermelon smell of winter appeared." Watermelon was an innovative word to describe winter, because it took me aback and I tried to implement something like this into my latest fragment for my thesis, where I wrote: "His was autumn spices, wooden cabins in the Drakensberg, woollen jerseys, hot chocolate and roasted lamb." I wrote "roasted lamb" because I thought it was unusual.

I used to read as a reader – purely for pleasure, but this course has changed the way I read forever, where I read as a writer – for education. Chwayita said that my fragment's dialogue was too preachy and political. I wrote about a guy sexually assaulting a girl in the club, where Chwayita pointed out that it didn't feel natural because normally a girl wouldn't try to educate a man while in the club with very loud music. Chwayita also pointed out that I switch tenses often and that my characters don't seem different enough. Chwayita is so wise and has given me amazing tips, which I'm very grateful for. One of my favourite new- tips was that with each fragment, I need to think about what I'm revealing and what layer I will be peeling back.

Sara Veglahn's *The Mayflies*, where Veglahn wrote, "Ghost: a wisp of fog who opens cupboards or rearranges objects on a table, or makes a loud racket upstairs. . ." I was gobsmacked by this because I was unaware how the use of a colon describing something could be so effective. The ghost paragraph was also very long and dense, which added to the overwhelming tone. I used this technique: "Load shedding: that thing that happens when all you want is a warm cup of tea."

Sjón's *The Blue Fox* was amazing because it was extremely poetic, and otherworldly and written backwards regarding time. As a reader this made me contemplate the direction regularly, thus this novel was frequently in my thoughts. The beginning is intriguing because it covers a lengthy part about a man hunting a fox, where each only has a small paragraph describing the hunting process, which was so exciting that I attempted it in my thesis.

I used this idea of repetition in my fragment, where I described a boy as a bunch of smells in the beginning, where at the end of my fragment I included the exact sentence of the boy again. This was to give a reader a hint but also to quicken their reading and increase shock.

8 August

Karen Russell's *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves: Stories* writing was captivating because it was extremely fast-paced and the suspense was incredible (focusing on small objects before answering) inspired my thesis. However, there was a cliffhanger pattern throughout the novel, which left me frustrated and unsatisfied, as I personally need questions answered.

Angela Woodward's *Natural Wonders*, incorporated prehistoric findings, and the student descriptions which inspired me to incorporate a prehistoric snippet and lecture hall scene in my thesis because it made things more vibrant (October reflection).

Manuela Draeger's *Eleven Sooty Dreams* was interesting in its strangeness, however I didn't like how most of the book was written because the repetition of sentences was too overwhelming and surreal. However, one sentence did inspire me: "And, of course, I thought about you, Rita Mirvrakis.". The directness took me aback and inspired me to write: "And, I thought about you, Dylan, and whether you would one day remember me."

I struggled severely with menstruation which affected my writing, but inspired me to write about menstruation in my thesis. I was glad that I could transform my unpleasant experience into a fruitful writing one, once again indicating that writing is therapeutic. I was finally able to make Freesia's voice distinct from Nemesia. I've become fully aware of what a stand-alone piece entails and what is expected of me – that it should basically be a short-story. Chwayita pointed out that dialogue shouldn't be too long because dialogue is there to convey something. Chwayita gave helpful advice on how to improve sexual tension, because if it's insufficient it's unconvincing.

We also spoke about how not to make characters as crazy as possible and to still keep them realistic. We saw that I justify my characters actions, too much which takes away the mystery, in that they are too aware.

22 August

During my time as a novice writer, I've realised a few things, which only occurred to me since I started my thesis. This may sound stupid, but I realised that unlike my assignments, each fragment needs to be planned. Whenever I do recreational activities I'm constantly mulling over my fragments, which I never used to do. Writing and planning is difficult under stressful times. My dad was in a car crash this week and this had a butterfly effect adding more stress everywhere. Although I wrote, it was difficult to stay focused and I couldn't read as much as I wanted to.

Francine Prose's *Hansel and Gretel* was enjoyable because of its direct prose, fast pace and unpredictability, "felt like we'd left our problems in Cambridge, along with my toothbrush and contact-lens fluid and everything else I needed." This is the type of witty writing that I try to convey through Nemesia. Kevin Brockmeier's *A Day in the Life of Half of Rumpelstiltskin* appealed to me because of how the text was separated under time and third person (06:00 She wakes up). I tried this in my thesis but it didn't suit Nemesia, because she wouldn't refer to herself in third person.

Kate Zambreno's *Green Girl* fuelled my writing because of the imagery. She compared a penis to "a large flaring grey mushroom" or "raw and dangling like a piece of red meat." These vivid descriptions are what I always remember in a novel. The novel focused on things that I found extremely interesting and I thought the scene where Ruth and Agnes were high on ecstasy was written so appropriately (incomplete sentences, capitalised letters and odd behaviour). Through this, I've noticed that with each theme or topic, writing styles or forms can be altered, in order to suit and enhance scenes. Zambreno's style inspired me with my latest fragment but my voice became too infected with Zambreno's.

Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* was exquisite because it was fast paced, erotic and contained hints of magical realism. I could tell that Machado wasn't shy when she wrote sex and this made it enjoyable to read. Thus, writers shouldn't be ashamed when writing "uncomfortable topics" otherwise it won't work. "In the beginning, I know I want him before he does." – this unwavering confidence gob smacked me, so I tried something similar: "When I saw him, I knew that I wanted him. And sure as hell, when he saw me, he would want me too."

There were snippets of mini-stories in this short story – I implemented this technique to display denial when Freesia is unable to admit that Dylan raped her: "It was not a nightmare; I really did get drunk on that disgusting farmer's drink, high on weed, and . . . There is a story that I once knew, about a girl who set herself on fire, to keep the one she loved warm."

Machado wrote subheadings throughout a story and although I didn't like the content, the style excited me so I attempted it in my writing: "REGRESSION: I shaved my underarms, shave, shave, shave, done.". However, the technique didn't work or suit my content because I incorporated it in the middle of a fragment. We discussed removing it and implementing it in another fragment.

Chwayita also said that I need to take care about character attitudes and mood fluctuations, where they should stay moderate throughout unless a situation occurs for them to act otherwise. We also discussed that I could explore more with writing, so I re-looked at Chwayita's novel and made notes on innovative styles that she used to see how I could apply it to my writing.

Sandra Cisnero's *The House on Mango Street* had outstanding innocence and escapism. This along with *The Blue Fox* by Sjón, inspired me to write my latest fragment, containing one paragraph per page, to display loneliness and time. It felt like fragmented memories, so in my piece, I wrote of Freesia being on the farm and how not much happens, it wasn't linear so it was also fragmented memories.

5 September

Guadalupe Nettel's *Natural Histories: Stories*, the first sentence was bold: "Our last red fish, Oblomov, died yesterday afternoon." Which inspired me to be bold: "I missed my period."

Nettle's sentence was bold and drew me in as a reader. This is something that I fear as a writer, that the first sentence is boring or that nobody will read it. Nettel aided me in Freesia's abortion process because her character also had an unplanned pregnancy.

Nettle's novel was written in first person and I needed insight into how I could improve my first-person writing. Through these short stories, I realised that first person comes naturally when the writer truly becomes the character. This is sometimes difficult for me to do because I need to distinguish between Freesia's and Nemesia's voices. Every time I write a fragment I alternate between the two, so just when I'm deeply in one of the characters I need to switch to the next, in order to make sure that they have an equal amount of fragments. The switching is very difficult, I struggle with it every week. Therefore, I decided to write the same character twice in a row, to truly delve into them.

J.H. Rosny Aine's *The Giant Feline*, where Rosny's writing is so well paced and controlled. Rosny's work is a great inspiration for my character, Freesia, as I want her to be more connected to nature. Rosny's sentence: "The moor was covered with pale grey shadows." sets the atmosphere sublimely and encourages me to deepen my nature writing. I wrote: "A wind picked up and blew the peppery scent of the Eucalyptus trees over the surface of the water."

I read my first science fiction novel – J.H. Rosny Aine's *The End of the Earth* which motivated me to write more narrative. I've never been interested in science fiction but Rosny's novel broadened my horizons. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* has extreme nature writing but at times I felt that it was too much and I couldn't see the nature for what it was, showing me that everything in moderation is vital.

I had a feedback session with Chwayita and she thought that my Freesia flash fiction pieces that were placed in the middle of each page felt very natural and good. However, the form with the short paragraphs would work better if they weren't placed on one page, but separated with stars. We discussed that putting one paragraph in the middle of a page might work better if it focused only on one thing as it did in Sjó's *The Blue Fox*, where he focused only on hunting. This form is so inspiring and I want to try it again, where next time I will only use it while focusing on one topic.

We spoke of my other piece on Nemesia where she said that the friendship between Rebecca and Nemesia was confusing, Rebecca didn't have enough identity, the Instagram dialogue dragged and there wasn't enough build-up to the sex scene. Moreover, my pacing was too fast and I didn't prepare the reader enough time-wise. I think this edit will be one of my most challenging edits. But, this will only improve my piece and make me a better writer. The editing is the hardest part of writing. It's fascinating to see how a reader reads a piece and what problems jump out at them. As a writer, I can never see these problems or things that don't match, so I'm very happy that my writing gets reviewed by Chwayita.

This week I struggled with writing. It might have been because I was placed in a new environment (Windhoek) where the rat race made me overwhelmingly nervous and I didn't feel good about myself or my writing. When I'm on the farm with my parents, there is nobody else to compare myself to and I cannot feel any competition, and then writing and ideas come easier to me.

I remember from class that Sabrina did something very impressive: "1. My bedroom mirror is shattered. I suspect the cuts and bruises on my face can offer an explanation for that. 2. Last night or the night before, I don't quite know, I let daddy touch my vulva for the last time. I don't think he liked that. 3. I know he didn't because then my mirror would still be in one piece." This inspired me to write: "1. This party was boring. 2. Roomie's friends were boring. 3. The second point offers a substantial reason for why the party was boring." Chwayita advised me that the only thing that I can justify is background history as a reason for my character's behaviour. I implemented this, where I wrote about Nemesia's unresolved issues with family, in order to make her behaviour more understandable.

19 September

I've been extremely stressed, because of the looming draft due date. I realised that I might've spent too much time building the separate lives of my characters, as opposed to building their time together. I'm very worried that I haven't managed my time properly because of my fixation of choosing a project too big for the available time, and by focusing on their personal lives before their meeting.

These two weeks have definitely been a turning point in my writing, because I officially wrote how Nemesia and Freesia met. Last week during my session with Chwayita, I asked her if she ever felt bored during my writing. This was something that I just needed to do and Chwayita said yes when I wrote fluff. Her comment helped me to become more focused and to avoid fluff on whatever the cost. Now whenever I write, Chwayita's words "if it's not creative or symbolic or doesn't add to the bigger picture in general, is it necessary?"

Chwayita suggested that I try writing in paragraphs where each should focus on a new topic. I did this for my most recent piece, where I once again tried the technique from Sjón's *The Blue Fox*. What I didn't know was that although I wasn't able to pull off this technique for the second time, it helped me tremendously in tightening my writing. This was a revelation because now I always write like this. Here is an example of what I wrote with the new technique: "Suncatchers lined every window in my apartment. Opalescent in nature, they were the optical illusions of my fluctuating bitch moods. But one thing that never fluctuated, never changed, and never seemed to alter was my art inspiration. It was like E that constantly coursed through my synapses."

I wished we discovered this beneficial method sooner and not two weeks before the draft thesis was due. Nevertheless, when I arrange and re-edit everything for my draft, I'm going to apply

this technique to ensure good quality work when my draft is sent to the chosen reader. This may be an incredible amount of extra work, but I'm going to have to do it for my own good, because I want to do well and because I want to be a writer one day.

I read Cora Carmack's *Losing It*, and I was because it was too far-fetched, which made me realise how distasteful it is. An example, of my work being unrealistic was when last week I wrote a scene where Nem has sex with her roommate's boyfriend, but never knew it was him because he wore a mask, didn't join the roommates 21st party and had a fake American accent. Chwayita let me know that he would be caught out through subtle things like his odour, movements, and tone of voice, so no matter how much I liked the twist and surprise, I let the whole scene with the roommates boyfriend go, because I want a reader to connect to my writing.

One style that I enjoyed in Carmack's writing was: "1. I wasn't wearing shoes. A. Or a shirt. 2. I didn't bring my keys. A. Or anything really. 3. I'd just left a complete stranger in my apartment. A. Naked." I thought this was exciting which inspired me to write: "Two. That's the number of minutes that I waited before I looked over the wall to see if they were finished. Which they weren't. Thirteen."

Florence Welch's *Useless Magic* was excellent because her words are extremely unique: "The internet gets us all in the end/ Staring dead-eyed into my hand/ Self-harm for the new gen/ But there is no blood now/ Only blue light/ beckoning." Social media is an important part of my thesis, and for me personally, having struggled and deleted social media due to mental health issues.

Robyn Harding's *the swap* was the exact novel I needed because it was in first person and narrated from different characters, which was extremely helpful for me in sharpening different voices. The prose wasn't poetic, but it was captivating in its carefully constructed suspense. I noticed no fluff and everything was relevant, thus taking nothing away from my concentration. Harding also justified background information to understand the character more which heavily inspired me to write my character's background.

Poetics Essay

Let me start by explaining something. For you to understand this essay, there are some facts about me that you should know. Fact number one – Taban lo Liyong’s, *Tombe’ Gworong’s Own Story* (“To understand this story there are three things you must know.”) and Kathy Acker (“Let me start . . . by telling you a story”) inspired me to write the first sentence of this essay. Although this isn’t a direct fact about me, it’s indirect about how I started writing, always fueled by reading.

As reading ignites me to start writing, let me share the reason I read to you. I read to escape life, imagine a world beyond this one, become mentally stimulated, learn about different cultures, and feel deep connections with characters. Still, most importantly, I read myself better. Reading is my way of managing my mental health difficulties that I’ve struggled with for years. Sometimes knowing why you write/read, you should reflect on why you continued reading or writing in the first place. bell hooks ignited a spark in me when she said she chose to be a writer in her girlhood because books rescued her. Books were a place of refuge for me, where I go in times of struggle.

Books enabled me to forget, to accept and to imagine that I was in a different world. During school, I read books constantly under my desk because school was excruciatingly painful. Like Dambudzo Marechera, my first contact with English Literature was in school. Although I enjoyed reading it, I also despised learning it because I always saw something else that didn’t agree with the teachers’ notes. They made my teenage years more bearable and educated me in a far more valuable way than maths and science ever could.

Now, since I’m a Masters in Creative Writing student, let me tell you which book stirred the writer within me – Martinique Stilwell’s *Thinking Up A Hurricane*. This non-fiction book covered Stilwell’s time while she circumnavigated the world on a yacht, and while I read this book, I was in the midst of a six-month depressive episode. After reading this, I felt desire again, I wanted to run away, I wanted to unleash myself from the shackles of society, I wanted to go on a wild adventure because I knew that was what would heal me.

And so I went on my adventure and met my true love. I became motivated to write about my volunteering and backpacking experiences in Latin America and Europe. Although I wrote short scary stories as a child and told my parents that I wanted to become a writer one day, my life went in a different academic direction, but my heart has brought me back to writing. Seeing that you know my reasons for reading and writing, let’s get back to the essay and discuss which readings interested me. Kathy Acker and Taban lo Liyong’s opening lines jumped at me because of how unfamiliar they are. It isn’t your usual start to any story. It’s quite like seeing a zebra in the European snow instead of seeing a zebra wandering the African grasslands. It comes off as a shock. And leaves you wondering, “What is that zebra really doing out there in the

snow?” Then, like the naturally inquisitive creatures we are, we cannot help but follow the black and white stripes out into the blistering cold.

Acker writes that she had a dream, but for the reader to understand her dream, they need to know her background and family history, which she briefly describes. It’s tragic and traumatising, yet although her history is infected with pain, it’s an intriguing story, which automatically makes her so much more interesting. Not only interesting due to her history, but because she plays the role of a survivor instead of the victim. Acker’s history is part of her identity and is a platform for her writing identity.

Sharing personal details with readers makes them empathise with you, or perhaps they are left with the feeling that they understand you more. But also, readers realise that the writer was someone who had a life, had dreams, desires, plans, heartbreaks, or someone who was also once young. Many reminisce on their childhoods and are nostalgic for a life that seemed more straightforward. Yet, Acker completely dismisses any thought of entertaining her childhood, which as a writer, indicates that by saying nothing about a topic, you actually say it all. Therefore, listening to what people say/write is vital, but it’s just as important to listen closely to what they don’t say.

bell hooks writes that reading made her realise that the imagination is the only area for resistance, where the imagination is the first step in transforming reality. hooks states that what we cannot imagine will never come alive – this statement is so simple yet undoubtedly true. If you want to be somewhere, feel something or become your ideal self, you need to imagine it. hooks quotes Anton Shammas where he responds to Nuruddin Farah’s declaration that we are “driven from paradise”, where Shammas replies playfully, along the lines of, who would want to stay in the boring Garden of Eden? Exile is far more interesting. Sometimes, the best stories emerge during days of hardship and suffering, making our lives more attractive than those who stay in the same place and experience only their comfort zones and sedentary lifestyles. When I endure frustration and pain, to find the process more bearable, I say to myself, “Well, if someone was reading my life, they wouldn’t find this book boring.” Thus, we can transform bad experiences into something good, and we can teach our readers this.

Regarding writing, I believe that creating psychological depth within a character is essential – as it makes the character genuinely human and relatable.

Barbara Guest states “Never ‘negotiate’ with the reader by projecting the reader’s aims into the poem, such as a ‘desirable subject’.” I agree with this because a character that is “perfect” is an uninteresting character that makes me suspicious. I like writing characters with problems because it’s more realistic, mature, relatable, and less annoying. Tiff Holland stated that “the stronger the character, the less likely I was to need more than one story strand.” For me, Acker was just someone with a name that had a nice ring to it, but now she is so much more. Many

people believe that others have no story to tell. Everyone has a story. The trick is just to weave it out of them. I found it excellent that Acker included her life journey because, like writing/reading/or doing life, it's more about the experiences along the journey than the actual destination.

Acker asks a rhetorical question - when she asks whether she has told us a story or a narrative. She explains that she wrote a narrative containing actual events. Yet a story is about something, and she states that her narrative was about nothing because humans try to find meaning when telling a tale. Writing then is linked to your identity because even though you write fiction, it does contain secret truths. For example, fiction may reveal the truth about the writer's personality, likes/dislikes and imagination. Tiff Holland shared that her mother called fiction writing "partly-trues". Therefore, all fiction really is non-fiction. So the next time you write/read a fiction piece, remember that there are truths harboured in the text and that all fiction is unbalanced. When I write fiction, I've noticed that I only write what interests me (very often about the environment, animals, mental disorders, travelling, psychology, and people). Therefore this fictional text reveals truths about my nature as a writer.

Acker writes about time, where she said that writing a story is linked to time. This is true because it takes time to write, where through this process of time, the writer's moods fluctuate; they are exposed to new ideas, people and experiences, which influences the brain and, therefore, our writing process. Equal to the time it takes to write a book, it also takes time to read. Therefore writers play with time, and readers play with their reading time. I've never thought deeply about the element of time when it comes to clocks – just a socially constructed way to make life easier, I once thought. Yet, I've experienced precisely what Acker said. For instance, while I was writing my travel memoir – due to time and new experiences, my voice changed throughout my chapters, and I was left with having many different voices with different moods and tones. This didn't work for me, and I haven't worked on my memoir since this problem. But maybe the fluctuation and its side effects is a good thing? People may benefit from knowing that a writer is never stagnant but always moving, sometimes faster and more feral than others.

We are stalking the zebra through the snow. It hasn't spotted us.

Fact two – as writing is linked to identity, I, too, have *A Voice Within A Voice* like Raymond Federman. Federman is bilingual in French and English, and I'm multilingual in English, Afrikaans and German, yet only bicultural in English and Afrikaans. I identify with Federman because we both have languages mating inside of us – sometimes they're flirting, then coupling. My dominant language is English, where I sprinkle my writing and talking with Afrikaans and German. However, there are some words or sentences that I can only speak in German, Afrikaans or English.

Like Federman, we have both lived in different countries and, therefore, immersed into alien cultures. We reflect this socially and culturally during interaction and through writing. Although I'm South African, I lived in The United Arab Emirates and Namibia for many years; therefore, I consider myself a third-culture-kid. This is someone who has grown up in the early developmental period (which is the period that shapes your personality and identity) in a culture, which is foreign to me and both my parents. Living in a bilingual/bicultural space has been very difficult, as I've battled with "who I'm and where I belong". Federman also states that he is unsure whether this is a blessing or a curse. I had never pondered too much on my multilingualism until I returned to South Africa to attend university, where I felt out of place.

However, after reading a scientific article on third-culture-kids, I've realised that it's a blessing I'm proud of. It developed me into someone very culturally sensitive, can live anywhere in the world, and is flexible. Taiye Selasi states that she never thinks of herself as a classification because literature doesn't have a country – this fascinated me because I agree that we shouldn't classify ourselves according to one specific country. After all, that yields to stereotypes, and like writing, we are also malleable with blurred boundaries. Selasi contends that "We need more writers from more countries, representing more class backgrounds. We need more names."

Federman states that language is a valuable tool for communication, yet it may also prevent us from receiving what we want. Thus, communication is key, where humans can speak 7139 languages, yet why is there so much miscommunication globally? We need to work on our communication skills, where language can aid us in this process. I don't have a specific audience when I write. Therefore I'm not writing for those who understand Afrikaans/German; I merely write this way because it's who I'm. Federman states that bilingual writers step in and out of one language and culture continuously. Therefore, we can never step outside these languages as they are entwined within us. I don't feel a sense of partialness when I only write in English. However, when I'm writing about Namibia/South Africa, my writing seems 'fuller' when Afrikaans is incorporated.

Nevertheless, Federman's essay has opened my linguistic world in a way that no matter how many people can speak both languages, the text will still often remain half-heard because not all are bilingual or multilingual. Like Federman, I don't feel negatively affected by being bilingual or bicultural; I feel empowered by it. This should be explored in writing, as many third-culture kids suffer the "who am I?" question and suffer dearly from this uncertainty. Where really that is who they are – a citizen of the world.

The zebra stops and nibbles a snowdrop. Blissfully unaware of the predator.

Tamiko Beyer explores that language is an instigator in sustaining racism, and yet, language may dismantle racism. I'm not an expert on this topic, but no language is better than any other

language. Mxolisi Nyezwa writes that “languages are neither rich nor poor”, where some become forgotten/extinct due to deliberate efforts not to use them. This reminds me of something my Grandma likes to say about Afrikaans: “If you don’t use it, you lose it”.

Language can be one of three things to a person:

1. A symbol of the oppressor.
2. The best language in the world because it’s your mother tongue.
3. A means to communicate.

It all depends on how you look at a language and your own psychological projections. For me, language is communication, an easier way to resolve issues and to connect with people. Dambudzo Marechera states that “literature is a unique universe that has no internal divisions”, where like me, he never divides it according to race or culture. I don’t think that a language should be hammered as sustaining racism because it’s not the language’s fault, only the fault of those who attach meanings to a particular language. Writing takes the writer on the journey, so writers shouldn’t feel forced to do anything that the writing doesn’t want to do. South Africa is the rainbow nation, and this could make South African literature more attractive due to the various languages. Ann Lauterbach states that difference/otherness/the unknown should awaken curiosity instead of fear, where problems would encourage the search for solutions. You see, differences shouldn’t be seen as a threat. They should be seen as something valuable that can enrich our societies, where we should use these differences to our advantage.

Beyer concludes that racial discussions narrow down to ‘black and white’. Therefore, only talking about ‘black and white’ dismisses the other races, contributing to racism. As a writer, I don’t write about racial or political issues because I believe that to heal a wound, you need to stop touching it. Yes, an injury needs to be cleaned – with Savlon and plasters, but once it has been cleaned, let it dry out, become a scab and move on. Only then will we heal. Otherwise, a wound will continue to fester.

Beyer is Japanese and white. Beyer says that she identifies herself as a woman of colour who takes her light skin privilege seriously. It was fascinating to read that Beyer appreciates her fair skin privilege by taking it seriously. I’ve experienced feelings of frustration due to being confronted with the long-lasting side effects of Apartheid. Camille Roy writes, “For me writing grinds itself into what’s familiar yet unbearable” – which I agree with because I often register about Namibia, being female, being white because I know it well. Yet, the harsh landscape, pain and guilt it brings is, at times, unbearable and unearths itself in my writing and my chosen reading. Yet I realise that we need to appreciate ourselves, and therefore our colour.

Zebra spies horses in a paddock. Realises it’s same-same but different.

Fact three - the first large, hardcover book I read as a child was my father's hand-me-down fairy tale book. This brings me to Kate Bernheimer. I was shocked to read that although many writers have read fairy tales, their techniques are under-identified and under-appreciated. Bernheimer comments on four elements of traditional fairy tales: "normalised magic, flatness, intuitive logic and abstraction". Before being exposed to Bernheimer's essay, I was oblivious to these elements. I had always thought that a fairy tale was simply written by someone with an exciting imagination. Now I know better. After reading *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* as part of my reading research for the course, I've noticed "flatness" and "normalised magic" more. Bernheimer contends that fairy tales are a story's skeleton and thus ignites a feeling of familiarity and the supernatural awareness of living inside a story. One classical start to every fairy tale was "Once upon a time, or, There was once..." where Bernheimer asserts that this allows the reader to really fall into the fairy tale while enabling it to proclaim its form.

For some reason, I always thought that the characters in fairy tales were somewhat very rich in my imagination. Yet, Bernheimer states that the characters are flat, where they are only labelled with a few emotions (such as happiness) and never with psychological depth. This is why a fairy tale functions properly because the flatness initiates a depth response within the reader, although I've not felt this way with all fairy tales. Bernheimer states that fairy tales rely on abstraction, meaning that they have limited illustrative details. While doing my reading research, I noticed this didn't resonate well with me. I greatly appreciate illustrative detail as it places me into the writer's imagination and stimulates my mind. As a writer, I enjoy writing long-handed descriptions because I want to situate the readers perfectly.

During the course, I realised that I should tone my images down, as too much colour creates flatness, but can we explore a book called colour, where readers are warned of a paint party? Bernheimer contends that intuitive logic is present in fairy tales, where there is no explanation for why certain events occur, as this lyrical disconnection haunts the readers. I've also felt haunted by this, as I feel annoyed when there are no explanations on why characters do certain things. Yes, it's up to me to assume or interpret the reason, yet I feel uncomfortable by this as I prefer to know the truth and not rely on my own assumptions as they may be wrong. And through my life experiences, I've learnt to NEVER assume because that creates endless problems. This assumption technique perhaps works in a fairy tale, but I wouldn't do the same for my own writing.

Zebra feels comfortable seeing the horse-herd. Lies down. Rolls.

Like Amina Cain, I too appreciate creative works that are unhurried. Whether that be films, books, painting, gardening, yoga, slow-cooked food or an evening stroll. The modern world is driven by speed and constant exposure to information at our fingertips in contemporary society. It's crucial to be able to keep up with this new speed because what did

Darwin say? Adapt or die. Therefore, I find writing that is conquered in the space of peace and tranquillity – appealing. The mind and body are deeply connected and cannot function without the other. Therefore quiet writing pieces may have the ability to relax the reader and ignite a sense of harmony. Cain states that she is drawn to both novels and films that are slow-paced.

My favourite film, *Legends of the Fall* (directed by Edward Zwick), is governed by an element of slowness, making the story itself more romantic and enabling me to have a stronger connection with something that starts out slowly. It feels as though I'm having a beautiful love affair with life when I indulge in creative works similar to that. I can relate to Cain because I think we have the same interests, where she states that she went to a Zen monastery and realised that she wants literature to make her feel grounded. As someone who practices yoga and meditation regularly, Cain's essay has made me realise that we both want literature to create a similar response. Cain explains the ceremony that meditation entails. This is the same with yoga, where there is a ceremony of rolling your mat out, obtaining the appropriate mental state and positive self-talk. Therefore, like yoga or meditation, slow texts also usher into a 'sacred' space that offers shelter from the falling Smartphones on our heads.

Cain states that when she starts to write, she only follows the mind of the text and believes that the suitable elements or aspects will find their way in naturally. I use a similar method when I write, where I often think of nature and write whatever comes to mind, without relying on what fiction or literature should or shouldn't do. Cain notes that her imagination governs and determines her writing, which is precisely the same as my writing process. I'm primarily influenced by my current setting, emotions and nature. Like Cain's writing, my writing wants to have a conversation with me too. It usually wants me to feel a certain way, with something or understand a tragic situation. I think this is why I write about aspects that have made me very sad to realise what happened. There is also a sense of relief when you write down in words how you feel; something that was once blank becomes filled with words, in which we give meaning to those words.

Zebra sniffs the air. Enjoys view.

Craig Santos Perez interested me, because firstly, he immediately located the reader into his set, which is Guåhan island, in the Western Pacific Ocean. Locating a reader into the setting allows for the immersion of the appropriate environment, history and culture. Although Perez's scene drew me in, the island affected me the most because I had never heard about this island before. In my writing, I love to write about new things and to experience new things (such as food, travelling and different people and cultures. I do anything for my synapses to strengthen, whether trying out ping-pong or learning a musical instrument or new language. It's the same with writing! Writing about different things develops your brain (WARNING I'M A NERD). Neuropsychological research has shown that doing/writing new things increases your brain mass,

strengthens specific neural pathways and promotes brain plasticity (don't believe me? - Look it up, bookworm).

Ann Lauterbach articulates that the attention and pressure to experience lead to authentic experimentation. It's the writer's willingness to adapt to the environment to achieve new ways of interpreting the unpredictable instead of driving new meanings. I love reading non-fiction travel books because of this exposure to newness, where I feel enriched and more educated about the world. Perez especially values poems that ensure indigenous survival. I also love such poems and prose pieces because it is vital to ensure that cultures, languages, and traditions don't perish. This is what makes each culture unique, what makes humanity vibrant and what connects people. Mxolisi Nyezwa states that creative pieces all use strong feelings to stir the readers, whereas like Perez, every poet's heart wants to know themselves and find their meaning in life. I think that if we were all the same and followed the same culture and traditions, life would be so BORING.

Perez asserts that stories are malleable and change according to the seasons, the author, the audience, settings and moments. This is similar to what Kathy Acker stated in her essay, where I've noticed this change in writing, especially during the pandemic where I started to write 'i' in small letters. This confirms that everything is connected in our lives, though some have stronger ties than others, thus displaying themselves differently via writing. Perez argues that each person reads differently, where strangers access books via their own experience and awareness. In contrast, family and friends will read it differently depending on their relationship with the author. Adrienne Rich wrote, 'We go to poetry because we believe it has something to do with us.' – this was put so simply and is accurate. I only read poems or prose when I think it's meant for me. Therefore I appreciate that in the Master's course, we can choose whatever we want to read because that will bring us on the right path as a writer. This fascinated me because I always thought that all readers would access a specific reading in the same way if they chose the book voluntarily. This made me realise that a writer should always just write because you cannot please everyone. Fun fact – don't be a people-pleaser. You'll end up hating yourself – which is why, when you write, be unapologetically YOU, no matter how painful and weird you feel.

Horses trot over. Zebra feels overdressed.

Now that we are on this topic, we need to talk about Linh Dinh. Dinh states that writers should identify with works that they are in awe of, and we should read them as many times as possible. Write only what you are interested in because your passion and knowledge will make the writing more accessible, will be sensed by the reader and is something to look back at and be proud of. It's my passion for nature and animals that I exercise when I write. Although I'm still very interested in other topics, this is a common theme in my writing. I've noticed that one of the worst things that a writer can do is to write falsehoods, in which the reader picks this up. For example, I once read a book about someone travelling around Africa, and when he was

journeying through Namibia, he wrote many falsehoods about the geography and towns. This makes the reader question the validity of the other countries the writer passed through and is left with a sour aftertaste. Although the writer may have overlooked these facts, you would make sure that you are doing the country and its people justice if you were passionate.

Dinh explains that it's acceptable to write badly during experimentation. However, don't continue this new writing method if you are uninterested in it because it won't do any good for the writer or the reader. I can relate to this wherein our course, we experimented with an anti-story method and practised writing by not following a traditional story method. The challenge was interesting, but it was not something that I would continue to try as a future writer because I cannot express myself appropriately in this form. I don't receive any pleasure when reading this type of writing.

Nevertheless, Dinh states that writers shouldn't be afraid and they should be shameless. The best books that I've read are where readers expose their dark sides and their mistakes. For instance, Akweake Emezi's *Freshwater* was exquisite not only because it was semi-autobiographical but because the writing seems so uncomplicated yet complicated at the same time. It makes the writer/character more human, relatable and makes them rich in experience. I also think that a writer ought to be themselves where Dinh says you should be PECULIARLY YOU, and this will make your writing different because no one is like you. If you are not you, then who are you? There is only one you, and that is our power. Dambudzo Marechera states Sinyavsky: "A writer's life is a journey, it *has* to be a journey, it has a fate." – this is similar to what Acker states on writing as an identity. Therefore it's essential to remain true to who you are as a writer and a person. Tim Seible stated that cynicism is cancer of the human spirit, which believes that human action has roots of deceit, which is why Seible's believes there is a hunger for authenticity. I understood that writing is identity, and our writing improves when we are authentic. We should flaunt ourselves and paint and write this world beautifully, interestingly and wonderfully. We will definitely become professional readers if we don't succeed as brilliant storytellers, so the writing process will still be worthwhile. As writers, we ought to be proficient readers, and I don't think that reading as opposed to writing first is a waste of time because if you enjoy doing it, then it's never a waste of labour.

Zebra realises that different is good. She was born to stripe out.

Lara Glenum states that over-grooming and beautifying a writing piece makes it more hideous, just like when people undergo plastic surgery – they don't look any better. In fact, they look worse, and it's even noticeable to the untrained eye. I've experienced this with both writing and painting, where if you keep on fiddling with your piece, you'll ruin it. Glenum further argues that striving for beauty in a poem won't be successful and that one should leave it as natural as possible, as the natural way is the best. Not everything is meant to be beautiful, and only when

we see the ugly can we see the beautiful more clearly. Both Glenum and Dinh say that you need to go wild and crazy when you write because when you cannot even shock yourself, who else would? Ann Lauterbach states that our experiments may fail but that our willingness and bravery to make mistakes is essential. Therefore, experimenting with writing is vital, as it puts what we are familiar with at risk to what we don't know. I've experimented with many forms while conducting my thesis, and it's much more complex than a traditional way of writing. Most times, I was unsuccessful with experimentation, but I noticed that it aided in tightening my writing and making me focused on what I genuinely wanted to say.

Zebra and horses gallop across the field together.

Alan Finlay interviewed Philip Zhuwao and asked him why he likes Dambudzo Marechera. Zhuwao replies that Dambudzo tells the truth about everything, where I too appreciate hearing the truth because only with facts can you understand people and change. However, the truth isn't always easy to express. It was unexpected to hear that Zhuwao was shortsighted. Hence, he writes with powerful images because he used to imagine to compensate for his physical difficulty. Earlier I mentioned that struggling isn't only wrong and that good can evolve from it. It's the same here with Zhuwao's short-sightedness, which encouraged him to be very imaginative and probably the reason he was such a fantastic writer. Zhuwao states that according to the African family, success is determined by finishing university, getting a job, getting married and buying a house. However, he contends that not everyone can achieve these standards because not everyone is on the same path, headed for the same destination. I, too, believe that these are not things that all people need to do because not every person is the same. We all struggle differently and see success differently.

Zebra looks us in the eyes. She is an alien. Proud of it.

Fact: Aliens are real. Jackie Wang states that she sometimes gets a rush when she sits before a blank page that goes... ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. Yet, she contemplates that everything that she does write is entirely possible. Even aliens look similar to humans, although, realistically, they would look significantly different. WHY is that? Wang used to live her life according to WHY NOT, and everything was more exciting. I wrote a piece called *60 or GO* during the course about a magical/fantasy bookshop. I had so much fun when I wrote it, and I let my imagination go crazy! It made me realise that everything is possible, and like Wang, we should inhabit our alienness, not dodge who we are as writers and not be what others want us to be. Wang tells us that she used to think she was an alien when she was a child. My name (Nelvia) spelt backwards is "Alien". Joking, it's "Ailen". Nevertheless, I'm trying to say that sometimes a writer should look/write back (but don't stay there). Whether in spelling or in life, be authentic and unafraid when you write, and if writing and reading is your therapy, then let it be.

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Book Reviews

***20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, Xiaolu Guo. Vintage, 2008.**

Xiaolu Guo's *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* is definitely one of the funnest (not a word) novels that I read this year. Just saying, if I'm saying that it was one of the funnest books... then it sure is because what is even considered fun in 2021? Hello newsflash – we are in the middle of a pandemic and I don't know about you but I never smile anymore, but this book made me giggle, grin and feel happy.

Xiaolu Guo caught me by surprise because whoever wrote the blurb didn't do Guo any justice because I looked straight past it. The only reason why I investigated *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* was because it was set in China and I needed a break from all those other books set in banal locations that I was used to.

I needed to spice my life up a little bit, I needed to travel to a new world to escape the one that I was drowning in. It's quick sand out here but this beauty of a novel dragged me out of the quicksand and got me on my feet again. So much so that I keep on telling myself, *Listen Nelia, we need to go to China. This isn't a joke, we need to book the next direct flight to Beijing.*

Let me get straight to the point and stop twiddling my thumbs - I seriously could not stop thinking about this novel, nor could I prevent myself from pestering my Dad and Mom about everything that I just read in this gem of a novel.

I thought it was going to be about how ravenous and mad the youth are in China but rather it really was just about a peasant Chinese girl, Fengfang who is seriously ravenous for – yup you got it- food. Food glorious food... which is something we have in common because I'm an extreme foodie that chomps on anything that comes remotely close to my chompers (again not a word but this is exactly what I'm preparing y'all for when you start reading about Fengfang's adventures).

“If you think 21 sounds a bit late for youth to start, just think about the average dumb Chinese peasant, who leaps straight from childhood to middle age with nothing in between. If I was going to miss anything out, it was middle age. Be young or die. That was my plan.” This is what you are in for when you read this novel – witty, smart, contemporary writing featuring the much-loved, feisty, hustler of a girl Fengfang who comes from Ginger Hill Village in China's countryside.

Her parents are stern, quiet and hardworking sweet potato farmers. Obviously, she is a single child because of the one-child rule in China, where Fengfang often feels lonely and doesn't know how to pass time (except for scavenging for food). Guo is marvelous with transporting tedious

notions of history into something saucy and fun to situate the reader into the personal and political history of China. “That's the tradition in China. If we know each other's ages we can understand each other's past. We Chinese have been collective for so long, personal histories are not worth mentioning. Therefore as soon as Xiaolin and I knew how old the other was, we knew exactly what big shit had happened in our lives. The introduction of the One Child Policy shortly before our births, for instance, and the fact that, in 1985, two pandas were sent to the USA as a national gift and we had to sing a tearful panda song at school. 1989 was the Tiananmen Square student demonstration.”

I thought this was drop-dead-incredible because as someone who is unfamiliar with Chinese culture and history, I felt like this book was so educational, because it read in a way as though it were speaking to both local and foreign readers both familiar and unfamiliar with China. There was no sense of entitlement that went like *everyone knows everything about China, literally China is the most spoken country in the world. EVERYONE knows our history and what we have been through*. I've often experienced this with books, where they assume that you know everything about their country, so thank you Guo – you are one of the most interesting and humble authors that I've come across (I don't know Guo but I could detect this by analyzing her writing).

Now of course there is that question of *maybe the book was written for a global population and not for one single country*? Well if this is the case then I like Guo even more because she is exactly what this world needs. You are probably thinking, *what is this girl even saying*? Sure I'll answer that for you – Guo is bringing China to the world, she makes the reader understand why Chinese are the way they are. Humans really are so primitive, we are scared of what we don't know or what is different to us, which makes us treat people the way we do #wars #discrimination. Yet, at the end of reading this novel, I feel like I know Chinese people as though they grew up with me.

Now let me stop getting all emotional and let us get straight into the good stuff. One day seventeen year old Fengfang looks out of the window, stares at the sweet potato fields and decides that she can't stay cooped up in the countryside like a caged chicken. She needed to escape, find freedom, make it big in the city of Beijing and most of all to “get closer to the shiny things”.

If you are obsessed with food like me, then you are bound to drool when you eat spicy duck soup (her ultimate favorite), chive dumplings, Great Wall Red Wine, UFO Chinese noodles and eight dragons soy sauce with just about anything with Fengfang. Like I said, the Chinese culture or should I say cuisine is vigorously steeped into this novel. Before you think it's a cookbook, let me tell you that Fengfang is your modern day female heroine, she does whatever it takes to stay

afloat in the Chinese society, where her relevant work experience includes being a factory worker, a cleaner at Day to Day People's hostel and an usherette at Young Pioneers Cinema.

Lost and starving in Beijing she rents, or illegally stays in her first apartment after noticing the owner and her daughter being hit by a van. Nobody comes to the house, so she moves in. These kinds of encounters are not what get her in trouble though, it's her individualistic nature that causes raised eyebrows and suspicion in the communist China. Fengfang fills out an application form to become an extra at Beijing Film Studio which changes her life. She meets a boyfriend at the Film Studio whose unrelenting aim is to bring her cell phone to life whenever he isn't with her. They share the love of eight dragons soy sauce and sleep on the floor in his family's house.

This isn't her only boyfriend – Fengfang is so quirky and preppy she also goes international when it comes to the opposite sex. We travel with Fengfang through her different extra roles such as woman walking over the bridge, woman looking bored and women brushing hair, until the day comes where she gets a nude role in a film, which really improves her resume. Some of Fengfang's skills are English level two and typing, in which Fengfang writes a screenplay about a simple man annoyed with his neighbours. This writing is what fuels her soul and saves her from the dumps.

Guo has that unique ability to convert Beijing, a city of frequent dust storms into a city that has its own personality and moods and, turns out to feel like a character too. The characters are moody youths who all share one thing: they love Beijing. Fengfang's closest friends are Xiaolin (who sleeps next to dog shit every night), Ben (an American whose favorite film is *Betty Blue*), Huizi (her most intellectual/philosophical friend who has a weakness for Revolution Beer and Gold Tequila).

Fengfang's story was written with subtle humour, raw honesty and in a very playful nonchalant way. Never once did I feel bored while reading, where to be honest I wished that Fengfang was real because I wanted to be her best friend – that's how flashy she is. The themes that are briefly touched upon are poverty, big city life, hunger and most of all the level of competition that faces the youths of China.

Guo's novel displays her extraordinary wisdom and her knowledge of modern day China and the youths that eat, sleep and try to survive in Beijing. Guo's prose is lyrical and each separate fragment is a new story on its own. I read this novel in one day and I cried when it ended – this is a Bildungsroman at its best. This is a book for all of those going through an existential vacuum or a mid-life crisis. This novel was so unpretentious, which is the main reason why I'm an absolute fan. Watch out something life changing is about to happen – this book is my number one in my top 10 books of 2021. My number one.

***Freshwater*, Akwaeke Emezi. Grove Press, 2018.**

Freshwater, a New York Times bestseller and rated best book of the year, immediately made it to my top 10 best books of 2021. Now, I'm not that friendly when it comes to my top 10 (ain't nobody messing with my top 10!), but with *Freshwater* I didn't need to be anything. All I knew was that THIS book, THIS book is something that I will never forget (warning things are gonna get wild so tighten your seatbelts).

Before I read *Freshwater*, I felt as though I was drowning in grey. Lots that I was reading was un-stimulating, boring and pretentious. I opened *Freshwater* with the same dull look in my eyes, and slurped on my rotten orange juice, but then with the first sentence "The first time our mother came for us, we screamed." – it was love at first sight, my orange juice tasted real good and I knew that I was about to go on a whirlwind of a ride.

This is it I thought. This is the book that I'm going to worship, when you know you know and there is no turning back. I knew that from this point onwards I was possessed, bewitched and a slave to *Freshwater*. Picture this – puffy Gandalf the Grey bags under eyes, red veins bursting out of my sockets, parched lips, grey hair and stacks of homework – yup that's me during and after *Freshwater*. I think you guys get the picture, I couldn't put it down.

Freshwater is Akwaeke Emezi's debut novel, which falls under semi-autobiographical fiction, as Akwaeke draws on her own life experiences of growing up in Nigeria and moving to the USA. A novel like this needs to have colourful characters and that it does. There is the sassy, feisty and innocent protagonist called Ada. Born in Aba, Nigeria from a Malaysian nurse Saachi and a Nigerian doctor, Saul.

Ada is of Igbo and Tamil descent who is haunted by a Godly parasite – the ogbaje. Early on in the novel, Ada has a dangerous encounter with a serpent, which is the python goddess Ala, which deeply influences her life. The ogbaje believe that she was born to torture her mother by dying. Her parents are unable to function due to her wildness as a baby, constantly screaming and crying – but little did they know. As Ada grows mentally, emotionally and physically, that isn't all that grows.

There are many voices in Ada's head, and thus there are many voices narrating the novel along with Ada herself. If you are interested in psychology and traditional African perspectives (especially Igbo cosmology) on mental health, this book is for you. Coming from a Western upbringing the novel explores the role of the extremely rare Dissociative Identity Disorder very uniquely, as well as cleverly interweaving the traditional African perspective of bewitchment from the ogbaje. It's said that only 1% to 3% have Dissociative Identity Disorder, where most cases occur in the USA.

This novel is an unflinching example of mental health issues at its best and how they affect contemporary youth of today, along with the inappropriate and inadequate treatment of these

disorders. Due to mental health issues, Ada mutilates herself in the form of cutting, in which the “mother colour” feeds the identities or fractured selves within her, thus severely affecting her mental health and functioning.

Her inner identities grow slowly but, when Ada is sexually assaulted by an emotionally unstable boyfriend along with each episode of cutting, these identities erupt and grow larger and more powerful. The first to explode is Asughara who induces Ada to shave off her hair, wax her eyebrows off and restrict her eating whilst engaging in excessive exercise, in the hope that she may appear to look more like Asughara herself. There is a saying that goes “genetic predisposition to a mental disorder, loads the gun, but the environment pulls the trigger” – which is undoubtedly what happened to Ada. This novel not only explores mental illness, but also how youth are the weak link in society on developing mental illnesses.

The novel only really starts when Ada moves to the USA for school, where her cutting compulsion becomes increasingly severe, giving rise to her multiple identities. It’s here where she feels more at home with other foreign classmates regardless of race, language or culture. This is cosmopolitan fiction at it’s best and would be especially interesting for all those who identify as being a Third-Culture-Kid (don’t know what that is? – look it up bookworm).

There are Asughara and St Vincent, where Asughara is the conniving, mean-spirited and evil female. St Vincent, a male is the younger, gentler, less developed and only comes out to play when Asughara takes a break. I was completely fascinated by these ulterior identities feasting on Ada’s flesh, swarming inside her bodily juices, manipulating her and forcing her to turn down all the wrong possible paths that you could think of, whether that be in life decisions and breaking the hearts of your loved ones. I hated Asughara. I absolutely hated her. That’s the truth I wish, but in fact Akweake has an amazing way to make the bad characters so likeable and seductive that I loved every episode with Asughara.

We follow Ada through her journey of self-discovery, mental illness, bewitchment, growth and get to meet all of her boyfriends and flings up close and personal. Get ready for some steamy dorm romances, violent meaningless sex and true love’s kiss. Ada meets ‘the one’ but Asughara ruins her marriage and leaves Ada depressed, which eventually allows St. Vincent to seep out. Sometimes we witness this through the eyes of Ada herself, other times through the all sexed up Asughara and finally through St. Vincent who compels Ada to undergo a breast reduction, to as a from of suicide and to date females, among a list of other things.

Asughara’s unrelenting aim is to kill Ada and to die with her. She tries to make Ada so depressed that she wishes to end her life. Asughara thinks she is doing Ada a favour and thus pours pills down her throat, but a Ada calls a friend and is saved from committing suicide, which makes Asughara furious.

Akweake is a master at writing compelling and gripping page-turners with an enormous focus on contemporary life experiences, family disputes, romantic relationship fallouts, and challenges

that the youth of today suffer from. But mostly, it questions what it's to be other and to have fractured selves inhabiting one body. *Freshwater*'s characters are youthful, playful, fun and snazzy individuals with fascinating dark sides. They have come from all over the world and share a world of partying, drinking, experimenting with substances and sex.

Ada meets her close friends while in College in Virginia, where her friend that accepts her unconditionally is the Dominican, Malena. All of Akweake's characters feel like real people with complete identities, personalities and histories, showcasing Akweake's incredible skill and her vivid out of this world imagination.

Akweake is skilled in bringing two separate entities, that being Nigeria and the USA together in the form of her characters. Her prose is lyrical and delves into young adult turmoil delicately and confidently – you wouldn't think that this is her first novel. Through *Freshwater* you get a glimpse of how mental disorders not only affect the protagonist, but also how it affects those close to her.

Akweake, like Ada was born in Aba, where she started writing stories when they were as young as five years old to escape the numerous dangers faced in Nigeria such as the riots, dictatorships all which affected the stability and security of her childhood life. Akweake has recognised and accepted the more than one identity within her and therefore is referred to as the plural they/them/theirs.

Once you have read Akweake Emezi, you'll recognise their unwavering voice, style and the swift drama and suspense. This is a novel that will break your heart as it did mine, for all those she lost and hurt along the way, but also because of what she became. Akweake Emezi's novel isn't like any regular psychological thriller or fiction, oh no it's so much more than just that. It's an electric novel showcasing the truth of mental disorders as being not any more dangerous than that of normal 'healthy' humans. This is a book designed to reduce the stigma associated with mental disorders and to place readers inside the bodies who suffer mentally.

Akweake Emezi is young talent at its best which isn't only evident in *Freshwater* but also in *The Death of Vivek Oji* (about two male cousins being sexually attracted to one another set in riot infused Nigeria), *Pet* (about a girl who falls into her mother's painting where her blood awakens a monster called Pet) *Dear Senthuram: A Black Spirit Memoir* (a memoir) and more that are currently being marinated inside Akweake's head.

I read *Freshwater* as a PDF document on my laptop, but it's a book that can't simply stay a document amongst millions in cyberspace. Oh hell no – I bought this book as a physical copy where it will lie amongst all my other starry books, where it will be a book that I'll recommend, but never lend to my friends, where it will one day be handed down in my family. It has been said that a book not worth reading twice, is a book not worth reading at all – damn straight! Akweake Emezi's award winning novel proves this.

***Green Girl*, Kate Zambreno. Emergency Press, 2011.**

Green Girl was the kind of novel that made me want to chop my hair into a severe bob, down vodka and cranberry by the dozen, flirt with mysterious men, have a crazy love-hate relationship with my roommate, and become a fashion designer just so that I could have my own perfume label to spray on all the bodies that stumble through the streets.

I've been craving to travel to the wet and wonderful London for a while now and thought that *Green Girl* would be the perfect jet to take me there. Kate Zambreno transformed a dire, much-ado-about-nothing, soaking London into an extravagant emotional turmoil of what it's like to be foreign, unsure and girl, in an urban jungle beset with consumerism, bodies, bodies, bodies and superficial pleasantries. Zambreno's novel features Ruth, an American girl who ran away from home, from HIM, who works at the perfume department at an expensive shop who she names, Horrids. "Would you like to sample Desire?" – is the line that she rehearses everyday to uninterested customers who swat her away like an obsessive fly.

Ruth's life is watched and narrated by a maternal voice that is at times pitying, loving, hateful and lustful; monitoring her every move and sympathising, as well as judging her struggles and choices. This isn't the only part of her tedious days, she gets bullied by her colleagues, continuously finger-snapped from her boss with the hideous head, harassed by beggars, and every day she comes home to her unpredictable-and-wild roommate, Agnes. Zambreno's poetic prose is crystalline and the non-traditional form offers a fresh fragrance to the ever-evolving London, trends and millennials, where this fragmented structure mirrors the overwhelming and unbearable, almost frantically insane sensations that Ruth endures and the unpredictability of the fast moving world. *Green Girl* is separated by quotes from sources such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Good Morning, Midnight* where each fragment is a standalone piece that contains a mixture of different tones and length, making each read as exciting as it's novel.

When reading *Green Girl*, I felt empathetic towards Ruth, who is naive and still in the process of forming herself, of experiencing excruciating growth pains, the growth pains of being; who more often than not finds herself in strange situations, unable to know how to leave. Ruth is haunted by the memory of HIM, "I need to forget you. I need you to release me. We'll be shadows to each other from now on, shadows of a former life. A shadow bears no scars.", where she entertains the idea of other men to fill the void that HE left. This void is difficult to fill as Ruth experiences disappointing interactions with the Londoners, however this doesn't stop her from doing what she has to, "She decided that he was arrogant. She decided that she couldn't stand him. She decided that she would probably sleep with him anyway."

Watching movies, clapping along to the Hare Krishna's, sampling Desire, and train ride after train ride never gets boring with Ruth. She is obsessed with reflections, and continually watches

her's in the ever changing windows of the train, so close to the edge . . . Being young, Ruth doesn't understand the motives for her actions, nor does she consider the consequences.

Alas, what a joy it's to witness the youth and how they over-indulge in clothes, hard drugs, self-mutilation, one-night-stands and the never-ending exploration of who am I? What is the point of everything? – questions. This anxiety, existential crisis provoking Ruth feels numb, floating through London's shopping district, finding comfort in clothes that she cannot afford, laced under perfume promising euphoria, getting lost in various versions of who she could and ought to be. Ruth has a desire to live, to be something, but she doesn't know what, and she doesn't know how.

Green Girl took me back to the good-old undergraduate days where Ruth and Agnes get ready for a night out – putting on makeup, trying to look like celebrities, flipping through Vogue, dressing up in clothes that always look ridiculous the next morning and trying to make a stone more glossy than it's. Zambreno's London was as wet as the soggy rain and had the ability to spit the vile rain right into my face. Her characters glitter in consumerism, regret, bad mistakes and in dreams that don't come true.

Kate Zambreno, all I can say is that I'm your newest fan – thank you for injecting Desire into the life of a perfume sampler, you have opened a world full of smells, scents and sensations that I was oblivious to. Ruth and Agnes – we need to party together, bottled poison on me. Sequel, please!

***The Vegetarian*, Han Kang. Portobello Books, 2015.**

Han Kang's novel is astonishing in every possible way. If you dream of escaping to big city lights, taking the next available flight to Seoul, South Korea – then fasten your seatbelts, get down in hands clasped over head brace position, and get ready for the flight of your life. You are about to depart into new territory, about to live a new life, about to fall completely head over plane in love with Seoul and its inhabitants.

The Vegetarian features exactly that – a South Korean woman Yeong-hye who abruptly turns vegetarian after having a mysterious dream. The novel is divided into three parts and told from different perspectives. That being Mr Cheong (Yeong-hye's husband), Yeong-hye's brother in law and In-hye (her sister). One night, Yeong-hye throws out all of the meat that she can find in the house, which angers her husband, Mr Cheong greatly. The love between Mr Cheong and Yeong-hye isn't a romantic kind of love at all. Their union is one of convenience, where Mr Cheong marries Yeong-hye because she is unremarkable, which is what he thought that he needed in a wife.

After Yeong-hye becomes vegetarian, something which is scandalous and taboo in South Korean culture, she becomes more remarkable, but not in the way Mr Cheong likes. As you can imagine, their relationship is toxic, he feels that she embarrasses him and reduces his credibility. Mr Cheong, an abusive, dominating man by nature beats and rapes Yeong-hye. After he informs her family, they are outraged that she would dishonour her husband in such a way that they make a meat feast, pork, oysters and beef everywhere and try to force it down Yeong-hye's throat. To which she slices her wrists with a knife that sends her straight into a psychiatric ward.

From there Yeong-hye's brother in law (the husband of In-hye) narrates the story. He finds Yeong-hye more interesting and beautiful than her sister, his wife. He describes Yeong-hye's increasingly skinny body and protruding cheek bones as otherworldly. However, his desire only really begins when he hears that Yeong-hye has a blue Mongolian mark, which is a blue birthmark commonly found in Asian people, that goes away when they reach adolescence. In Yeong-hye's case her blue Mongolian mark didn't disappear, and this sexually intrigued her brother in law. I won't tell you the rest that happens here as it would be an extreme spoiler, but just know that this is going to disturb you on an eerie kind of level.

In-hye is the last to narrate the story, where we gain insight into how becoming vegetarian in South Korea deeply affects the family sphere and status in their community. In-hye is the mother of Ji-woo, a Korean beauty as she has double eyelids (while Yeong-he only has one eye lid) and is a successful cosmetic store owner. She is motherly and hard working, where she doesn't know that Mr Cheong (Yeong-he's husband) is in love with her. Moreover, as Yeong-hye progresses she becomes diagnosed with anorexia nervosa as she completely stops eating, which of course severely affects her physical and mental health. For all those who cannot fathom or understand

mental disorders, this novel paints one of the most difficult mental disorders to cure, anorexia. However, there is much more to Yeong-he's condition than just that.

Kang's characters are deeply hued in tones of smoke, burnt umber and dark as night blues. Kang writes with fierce confidence and talent as she narrates a difficult story to tell. She is a master of interweaving the emotions, psyche, married life, family disputes and South Korean culture into her novel.

An entirely new world was curtained open like an opera after I read this novel. It brought tears to my eyes and made my heart quake with each beautifully refined sentence. This is most definitely a novel that will stay with me for my life. I will indeed need to buy a physical copy for my future library and I've already recommended it to all the special people in my life. Kang's novel displays her unwavering dedication to bring something like this alive, even though it weeps death and morbidity with every newly turned page. Written in modern day prose, it reflected contemporary society excruciatingly well, and there was never a moment when I dozed off.

A glum cloud engulfed me while reading this, and it was exactly what I wanted while reading something deeply disturbing, saddening and complex. One may say that these are issues of our contemporary lifestyle, and that our ancestors would have never dwelled on such trivial aspects. But we have changed so much from those before us, we are not them. Flames don't alight my stomach that often, but *The Vegetarian* was able to ignite an entire wildfire within me.

Community Engagement Report

There isn't a thing more that I love than meeting new people from different cultures, backgrounds and worlds. They are human, of course, but there is something entirely different about them. It's as though I'm meeting humans for the first time – this rush of possibility and new worldviews is what I undoubtedly yearn for.

We collaborated with second-year creative writing students from LaGuardia Community College in New York City in May. We had a month of preparations, where our lecturer, vangile gantshe, explained the program to us. We got into groups of three, so Sibongakonke, Gaireyah and I chose to be together.

We had to discover what we struggle with or like in our writing, create a lecture (45 minutes to one hour), collect readings from African writers, design assignments and host feedback groups for the LaGuardia students. We created a WhatsApp group, #Fangirls (because we are fans of each other's work). Sibongakonke told us that she wants her writing to instil a quality of silence, where she finds silence in all our work. Gaireyah's silence is evident between her characters and emotions. Sibongakonke's silence manifests in energy, protest and the (un)spoken, whereas mine occurs in setting a scene and using nature.

With an abundance of planning, we decided upon investigating the notions of silence in writing and named our seminar *Quiet. Silence. Stillness*. We met Dr Allia Abdullah-Matta virtually through Zoom, where I had no Wi-Fi connection. This stressed me because the only restaurant with suitable Wi-Fi sufficient for Zoom was costly. I rushed over and bought endless cups of Red Latte's so that they wouldn't kick me out once they figured I was a Wi-Fi-thief.

Since our theme was on silence, I recommended that it be interesting to make the students feel peaceful through yoga techniques such as deep breathing and grounding (releasing your feet from shoes and placing both soles flatly on the earth, as though you were a root).

I love creating seminars and often fantasise about making the learning process more enjoyable, as it can often be dire without enough mental stimulation. Therefore, I thought we could all introduce ourselves personally, where I would ask the class: "If you could physically be in any book, which book would it be?" This would be an icebreaker designed to make them feel comfortable and create a good working relationship, as the relationship between will bring about change and fuel their writing.

We made Flip-grid videos of introducing ourselves and talking about writing. The American students seemed friendly and excited to meet us. Fortunately, Sabrina and Stoffel presented their seminar, *Writing Against Harsh Conditions*, where they showed a video on Apartheid South Africa, gave background information and discussed readings. This was very interesting for me as having gone to school in the Emirates and Namibia, I didn't learn the intricate details of

Apartheid. Their assignment was to write about a time where we experienced discrimination – I wrote about sexism. I fuelled my anger into this, where I realised that writing is a powerful tool to express your anger and to tackle issues of oppression. This assignment changed my thesis (from short stories to a novel focusing on women's lives) because I saw how deeply my piece affected the readers.

Sibongakonke, Gaireyah and I prepared our seminar, where I made the PowerPoint presentation. I absolutely love making PowerPoint and searching the internet for beautiful photos relating to Africa and to our concepts of silence. I cannot look at bland things, which is why I put a tremendous amount of effort into making something enjoyable. Sibongakonke loved it so much that she asked if she could pay me to make PowerPoint's for her. Sibongakonke made our PDF document containing our descriptions and reading list. At the time, Sibongakonke and Gaireyah had Covid-19, where Gaireyah suffered severely.

When I was searching for my appropriate readings regarding nature as a form of silence, I chose: *West with the Night* Beryl Markham's *West with the Night*, Alexandra Fuller's *Don't let's go to the dogs tonight*, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Bernadette Le Roux and Marianne Palmer's *Prickly Pears and Pomegranates*, Ibrahim Al Koni's *Anubis* and my *Viral Love*. Wilbur Smith's *When the Lion Feeds* was going to be an included reading, but when I shared it with my Master's class, none of them liked it, so I discarded it, and Stacy Hardy gave me some recommendations of which *Anubis* was one of them.

These chosen readings were similar to my writing-voice, in that I've an earthy tone in my writing. I hoped that these readings would make the African nature more appealing for the students, where I'm a firm believer that what we don't know, we fear – where I hoped that in some sense, I was acting as an activist for nature by making it not seem so foreign.

My group had a Zoom meeting to plan our seminar. Due to time constraints, we decided to exclude the deep breathing and grounding icebreaker question. Instead, we decided that Gaireyah share a nature-sound video as the students log on to Zoom, to create the feeling of tranquillity, which was vital for our seminar's topic.

When we logged onto Zoom for our presentation, Gaireyah couldn't play the nature video as Dr A was already playing a video on her side. When it was time to present, Sibongakonke shared her screen so that everyone could witness the beautiful PowerPoint, but her screen froze, so there was a delay with our speaking and the PowerPoint. I've always been terrible at orals where it felt like my tongue ran away from me. My heart literally pounded in my throat. And my body shook like a baby's rattle. But once I got into presenting, I became less anxious, and it got me thinking: darn, this is so fun I want to do this again! I asked volunteers to read the readings, where Jareth and Imani volunteered.

We discussed the assignment where the students were to write a minimum of two pages for prose and one page for poetry. Creating the assignment was difficult, where Sibongakonke mentioned that we could each choose images and create our assignment around them. They could choose between integrating all three images and all three silences at once or choosing one silence and one image.

After our presentation, we had our first assignment-feedback group on *Writing against Harsh Conditions*. I was in a group with Fortunate, Thobeka, Alex Palomo, Imani DeBerry and Delwar Hassin. Due to time constraints, we could only discuss the LaGuardia students' work. It was exciting to see their writing regarding discrimination. I loved Imani's raw honesty about being bullied, Alex's unique imagery and Delwar's feminist poems. The feedback groups were my highlight because it wasn't awkward. One student, Diamond, contacted me on WhatsApp to clarify the Silence assignment – for some unknown reason, this touched my heart. I spent the whole evening waiting for any potential messages from other students whilst staring at Google Drive to read their assignments.

Regarding the assignments, I thought that the level of work was equal from both institutions, where the line was blurred between second-year and Master's Students. However, I noticed a difference in feedback where the Master students offered both positive and negative feedback. The second-year students seemed more reluctant to give negative feedback, but this didn't affect the group interaction. I appreciated all my feedback from my breakout group. However, I wished that I could've interacted or received input from Aiden Ling, as he does lots of nature writing and is a visual artist like me, so seeing how he reacted would've been beneficial for my improvement.

The last seminar, *surrealism*, was hosted by Thobeka and Xolani. Their presentation was interesting, but I wished there was some visual input. Sadly, due to Load shedding, they were cut. Nevertheless, their assignment was to write surrealism in first-person under 407 words.

I hosted our *Quiet. Silence. Stillness* feedback group, where I delved straight in, to ensure that everyone had a chance to read. After each person read, I opened the floor for comments, where I would be the last to comment. I was highly impressed by how Alex could create such an intricate piece during such a short time. Imani informed me that she was having trouble with the assignment where I told her that it's ok because it's hard to come up with creative pieces in a short time and that she can set her piece aside and come back to it in the future, where exposure to new experiences may help her. Fortunate's piece was great where I particularly liked how she included Zulu into it. Delwar and Thobeka were unable to attend, which is why we had some free time left, where I asked the LaGuardia students how New York is, and then we got into a pleasant conversation.

Our last feedback group, *surrealism*, was hosted by Thobeka, where I've never seen her smile so much before! I read my piece, *Teacups like bubble baths*, where while I was reading, I could hear Dr A humming in agreement, and I loved that. When it was time to comment, I think I could've basked in their comments forever. It was so fascinating to see how people from a different continent responded to my work. I might be wrong, but I had a feeling that we tried harder to write during the community engagement than in our Master's classes.

I was sad after our community engagement ended – it was my absolute highlight this year. Our collaboration project entailed that we were all to choose one of our pieces, where this would be placed into a non-sellable chapbook designed for memorabilia. The only way the programme could've been improved was to have it run longer over two months, have more than one class per week, and have the opportunity to interact with each student.

The chapbook needed a book cover, so I volunteered to design one. I sat and painted from dawn to dusk for a whole week to capture what the community engagement meant for me. The overarching theme of my painting was how different worlds come together, where our differences are not a threat, but rather an advantage, in which together we can achieve greatness in writing. Aiden and Gaireyah also designed book covers, where the most appropriate one will be chosen.

We had a social event to say goodbye to each other, but many weren't there. On 08 June, there was a COIL participation day where all the different groups displayed what they achieved in the exchange program – it was so heart-warming to see how different countries collaborated and learnt from each other.

Reader Report Reflection

It is strange to look back and see how different my writing was before I started this course compared to now. Before I learnt all these writing techniques and was exposed to alternative styles, I used to only write scary short stories and non-fiction travel memoirs, where I read novels ranging from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* to Jean M. Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear*. Besides my sister, nobody else set eyes on my writing. I am glad about that because it is incredible how much I developed as a writer, how I experimented with my creativity and how I found my writing voice.

When our course commenced, I was anxious because I did not know anyone who studied Master's in Creative Writing, so it was uncharted territory for me. Therefore, I had no idea what to expect. I knew that I needed to do something different from my family, not only because I have always loved writing and reading, but because I struggle with enmeshment, meaning I lose my identity to please others to such an extent that I do not know who I am anymore and I am left feeling empty. Applying for this course and being accepted was a huge step for me in becoming more assertive, breaking free from the set expectations from others, and choosing to follow my own life journey. Because I did not know who I was as a person, I did not know who I was as a writer. Therefore, I felt confused and inexperienced during the first few months and decided to keep to what I grew up with: fairy tales.

I read *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* and Taisia Kitaiskaia's *Ask Baba Yaga: Otherworldly Advice for Everyday Troubles* as they were in my comfort zone, and was what I needed to survive at the time. From this, my first assignment was successful with the help of fairy tale reading because it was a blur between realism and surrealism. I thought that was who I was as a writer, and I was okay with that, but later I realised that it was not enough, and that was when I ventured towards other genres. As I have trouble voicing my opinion, it was a big step for me to admit what I do not like in writing. When I could overcome this need not to be a people-pleaser and say what I feel, I was able to finally progress and understand what I do like, which is when I discovered that fairy tale writing and I are incompatible and that I only enjoyed the incorporation of nature, women's lives and ethereal tones.

I started writing about nature before I read nature writing, where I noticed that when I wrote about nature, it felt natural and easy, making me feel more confident as a writer. I did not know that incorporating earthy, natural tones was my niche until a classmate pointed this out, and from her objective approach, I was able to see what she meant, which gave me a sense of who I was as a writer and person. Writing about nature helped me get by for a while, but I still felt as though something was missing. I craved something infused with overbearing emotion, passion and heartbreak, and therefore I continued searching. Only when I came across Akweake Emezi's *Freshwater* did I find something that filled my inner void. *Freshwater* gave me

everything I wanted in a novel – nature, pain, identity confusion. It was written in a youthful, fast-paced manner that I found intoxicating, accessible and relatable. Finding out what I truly liked was progress to finding out what I wanted to write.

My writing is very geographically orientated. For example, when I visited my boyfriend in the winter of Europe, it was a learning experience where I had to teach myself the names of birds and plants in order to write reliable material. This made me concentrate on my writing more, as opposed to when I write about the nature I know. When I returned to Namibia, my writing swapped over to desert scenes and vast vistas, and since I knew this nature, it was easier for me to write. While in Europe, I was mentally stimulated by the differences that I thought my writing was more innovative and ethereal compared to my writing when in Namibia. This made me realise that geographical location is vital for my brain stimulation and improves my writing. I assume there is a biological reason for this in that my synapses and neural pathways are more active when in new territory. But also a psychological reason because when I am with my parents in Namibia, I become uncomfortable because they are prone to analyzing my work towards uncomfortable feelings where I felt that I could not be as wild as I wanted to.

Writing is a very internal process where it was not so much reading to find out what kind of writer I was, but instead, through reading and writing, it was about discovering who I was as a person. The writing revealed things that I avoided or confirmed aspects about me that I only partially knew. This course has changed the way I will read forever. Now, I am aware of every detail and question why and how writers wrote specific things. Now I read to learn, where during this year I read fifty novels in total. Thus, I learnt from fifty writers, and they shaped the writer I am today.

Han Kang's *Vegetarian* and Xiaolu Guo's *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* were huge inspirations, as their writing is dark, disturbing, and mysterious in the way they painted their characters and cities to such an extent that they felt more than real. The novel that turned my entire thesis into what it is today was Chwayita Ngamlana's *If I Stay Right Here* because not only did it cover themes that fascinated me, but it was written with aching honesty, heartbreak, talent and had dark hues that awakened me.

This novel inspired me to decide upon writing a novel instead of short stories, even though it would entail a huge amount of work, as I had to write the entire novel within three months. I could only include three of my class assignments into my thesis and the others are on standby because they do not add to the story. I wanted a challenge as a writer, and I wanted to be a novelist, and although writing a novel is extremely daunting I would have regretted it if I did not take this opportunity to try. I enjoyed reading novels more than short stories because I feel more satisfied and I love witnessing the character development which I do not receive in the short stories.

That Chwayita was my supervisor was the best experience for a novice writer because she is an incredible lecturer regarding writing and English (she made me aware of punctuation errors that I was oblivious to). She has an uncanny talent of awareness concerning abstract and logical components of novels, which broadened my mind to view the novel as a whole (especially regarding pace, dialogue and development). Chwayita was patient, listened to my concerns without judgement and always encouraged me to continue writing. As I wanted to make her proud as a supervisor, I worked harder in my thesis compared to my class assignments. The supervision helped me more than the classes because I felt that everything was scrutinized more intensely and questioned regarding the overarching aim of my thesis. This helped me ensure that whatever I wrote added to my thesis. Chwayita is assertive, so when I did not listen, she would tell me that she had told me this before. These moments were great wake-up calls for me to continue staying focused and never fear asking Chwayita when I do not understand something. For example, I struggled with grasping the concept of “fluff”, and because of her patience and encouraging me to experiment, I was able to finally see fluff in my writing and discovered how to avoid this and tighten my work (inspired by Sjón’s *The Blue Fox*).

My overarching aim was to show the impact mental illness has on relationships and the struggles women students face in South Africa regarding career competition, University stress, peer pressure, identity confusion, questioning sexuality, and family expectations. I chose to write this as I haven’t read this before, and I have experienced them as well, therefore I wanted to express myself in these areas and hope to gain consolation. I learnt that South African students experience more stress and trauma than other nations and many result in self-harm and destructive behavior leading to “non-flowering” as people – this was the experience and insight that I hoped the reader would gain into this difficult period of discovering who you are and preparing your future. It is also about how the characters become “deflowered” resulting from their mental illness where they do not regard the world like a virgin does, making them more aware of life’s challenges and not to view everything under a fog of pink mist, as virgins do before they become deflowered.

I chose to name my characters after flowers because I wanted the reader to slightly question whether they are reading about flowers or humans, because these characters are deeply focused on their body as a being, but also their surrounding nature. *Freshwater*, Veronique Tadjo’s *In the Company of Men*, and *The Vegetarian* inspired me to write alternating chapters between characters as it keeps it more interesting, you get a glimpse into more than one character, I wanted characters to face different struggles, I wanted to portray the differences of those yielding from farms and cities and how it influences you mentally. As in life there are always two sides to a story, which I tried to portray through Nemesia’s and Freesia’s connection after they met.

Creating the title was easy because I knew I wanted “flowers” in the title as women are flowers. I searched for an appropriate adjective that suited the characters and the story, where I chose “fractured” because I liked the alliteration and fractured is not completely broken, but fixable with treatment and time, just as they are.

Receiving the reader's response was extremely nerve-racking, but I could not believe how positive it was! The reader was so observant, and I could see from how they wrote that they liked my writing, story and effort that I put in. I read it repeatedly straight after each other, and it was one of the happiest moments of my life because it confirmed so much for me, writer and personal wise. I was so surprised that the reader said, “*Fractured Flowers* is an evocative, unsettling, and ultimately, tragic novella” because this is precisely what I tried to portray. “The writer has an exceptional ability to immerse the reader into the microscopic details of a scene, igniting all layers of the senses with fluidity throughout the novella.” I learnt this from Kerry Hammerton, and since she noted that we should activate every sense I have continued this religiously throughout the year and into my thesis. The only other time I heard that I am very good at drawing a reader in was from one of the American students, and ever since his comment, I have tried to continue this technique.

“What is intensely evocative about this detail is the writer’s uncanny way of describing the body in all its messy glory” – I am so glad that the reader thought my descriptions were unique as it is precisely the descriptions that keep me obsessed with a novel. I always had this ability, but I saw it in practice in Kate Zambreno’s *Green Girl*, which motivated me to continue working on them. That my imagery could “traverses into fantastical planes” was exhilarating as this has been my aim throughout my writing, to instil an eerie, ethereal feeling. “No matter how seemingly light and “fun”, a dark humour is always present” “This continuous and precarious overlapping of light and dark ensures that the reader never gets too comfortable in any one emotion, a brilliant thing.” – this was the hardest for me to write which was inspired by *Freshwater* and *If I Stay Right Here*. I am amazed to see that it worked! One aspect that I am particularly proud of was that the reader thought I could write an anxious train of thoughts appropriately when Freesia was raped because this was very difficult for me. Chwayita was a tremendous help in guiding me into writing that appropriately and what was best was that I was able to make the reader feel pain in these moments. I found it interesting that the reader said my males were hollow because that was how they made my characters feel – that was exactly what I wanted to show without saying it, whereby I wanted to subtly entwine how women are viewed as sex objects and entertainment without saying it lest it will lose its power.

The comments were all very beneficial, where one was that I should find different ways to write “like a”. I agree with this as it can become too monotonous and easy, so I will correct these parts in my novella by saying “such as”, “matching”, “as if” “similar to” or “resembling” for example. The reader also suggested that I re-read all the dialogue aloud and make sure that they suit my

characters – Chwayita and I are going through my entire thesis together and will address this. This is not a surprise because I struggled with dialogue throughout my thesis. It will help to see how my characters sound from somebody else’s perspective because they sound different in my head, therefore this ought to be clarified. The diary entries and farm fragments were received very well, where the reader suggested that I create more if I have time. Unfortunately, I will not add more material at this stage because I do not have enough time, I have to focus on editing and making my thesis more cohesive. I am well over the minimum word count, so at the moment I am going to focus on quality versus quantity.

There was a proposal that I title my fragments more interestingly to add conceptual value – I will not do this because I think it will make my fragments too excessive, because they are already very intense and full, and I fear that it will become too confusing. The title of each fragment helps situate and guide the reader into which respective characters they are reading about. Freesia and Nemesia are both flower names and since the title is *Fractured Flowers* the titles of each fragment suits the novel’s title, which I believe adds a flow when reading. I was shocked that the reader did not notice a change or improvement in my writing from my first and last fragments, because Chwayita and I noticed a massive advancement, to such an extent that we will remove my first couple of fragments, as they do not add to the story and they will not be missed.

My work developed because it was shaped by the story, I started focusing on quality more (in the beginning I just created content because of the minimum word count), and my themes became deeper and darker once I discovered what I wanted to write, when I made a character sketch, story outline and when I integrated myself into the characters. The first 20 pages ought to be removed because I wrote what I thought others would like to read, and not so much about me. When I wrote what I wanted to read, my entire thesis became more rounded and I personally felt that it became more interesting.

“Sex, and the anticipation of sex, pulses consistently throughout this novella.” It was incredible that the sexual tension was picked up because I was torn between how obvious it should be, so I decided for the suggestive route and I am ecstatic that it worked because it was difficult to create because there is a fine line between too nuanced that the readers do not notice the sexual tension and it becoming too overt that the novel loses its mysteriousness and suspense. I incorporated social media into my thesis because it is part of our lives and because I also wanted to show how information is misinterpreted and how boundaries are broken and how it influences people. When the reader noted that it was a strong point of how I weaved these elements consistently into my thesis. Through this I wanted to display how social media has become “real life” and where many people, especially students, live.

I am glad the reader thought that I captured the “tunnel-vision lives” of the characters, where they are unaware of the South Africa that they live in, which made the reader feel sucked into their lives. This was comforting because I aimed to show that when you have personal problems in your life, nothing else besides you and your problems matter, mirroring the egocentric nature of those under 25 years.

I was also surprised to see that there were not that many negative comments because that was what I expected. It felt as though I received a gift when the reader offered future reading by Raven Leilani, Lidia Yuknavitch, Karrie Higgins and Tao Lin, which I am keen to investigate. I am beyond grateful for my positive review and the readers' enthusiasm. I am very content that my hermit lifestyle and back-breaking (literally) work paid off so that I could conjure up this thesis. I learnt things that I never could have without this course and guidance especially from Chwayita. I feel as though writing has helped me discover who I am and who I ought to be.

Part B: Thesis

Fractured Flowers

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Student Number: 20C6447

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Thesis Abstract

My novella follows the lives of two students who meet in group therapy at a University Counselling Centre. One is a farm girl from Namibia, the other is a town girl from South Africa. The story follows their growing friendship and portrays the daily impact of mental illness on their individual lives such that it ultimately threatens to destroy their relationship. I write in fragments so as to foreground different yet coherent perspectives from different worlds and states of mind. I have been directly influenced in this regard by Chwayita Ngamlana's *If I Stay Right Here*, Xiaolu Guo's *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, for their ability to write seemingly self-contained fragments that nonetheless cohere into an organic whole. I am also inspired by the almost frenetic pace of writing in Akweake Emezi's *Freshwater* as it charts the interior fragmentation of its protagonist.

*

I used to laugh at the gaping holes of Neanderthals and at their screeching grunts when they saw me rise, like a sabre-toothed tiger over the mountains. Every full moon was the same, and every full moon I laughed. I was proud to see how they developed from the long-limbed apes that swung from tree to tree. I saw how some clattered down the trunks to sink their jaws into overripe fermented fruit, while others hovered in the safety of the branches. And that was when everything changed. The fermentation enlarged their brains, they started thinking differently, they started devouring meat, they discovered fire. This explosion of protein transformed them into what they currently are, an animal unlike any other that I have ever seen.

When the prehistoric humans raised their eyes, there was something different that glinted back at me. They grew suspicious of my ever-changing form. They wondered where my hearth partner was. They thought that I illuminated the darkness so that they could search for my mate and bring him to me. They were flooded with awe. I saw how this new form of humans grew irritated by the Neanderthals. I saw how they plundered, tortured, raped, and murdered them. I shone on their doings like a spotlight, but they were not bothered at all. Right then and there, I decided that humans were the most dangerous creatures to inhabit Earth, a good friend of mine. And I was right, and I will still be right at the end of time. Humans killed not for food but out of rage, greed, fear, jealousy, and treachery. Earth and I decided to cover them with avalanches, tsunamis, earthquakes, and blistering frost. Many died, and they still continue to perish under the forces of nature. Yet, the strongest survived, and strong they were. They reproduced like jackals that were aware that they were being hunted, they populated dear Earth.

As I look down at them now; I spill their cosy beds with my asphalt rays. They wake up from their escapist dreams, close the curtains and slam the shutters on me. And all the while, I create more lunar dust to suffocate any dammed spaceship planning on colonising me. Suddenly, movement catches my attention; two curtains are drawn at the exact same time. I look, they peer up at me; I can tell they are very different, but human all the same. According to my calculations, they are from Africa. Disregarding human-made borders, one is from the Cape peninsula, the other near the Namib Desert. My, my, this will be interesting; this doesn't often happen, especially not at this hour. I blew my moon dust towards Earth; she shivered, the tides changed direction, the wind came to a halt, the night flowers turned their heads towards me, and I, I have intertwined their paths together now.

*

Freesia

There is a jewellery box in my room. Inside, a brown bear in a pink tutu, twirls to the kind of tune paedophiles like. It holds plastic treasures of animated diamonds, wingless butterflies, pearl balls and colourless rainbows. They were supposed to make me pretty so that friends would think I was a proper girl. They were supposed to reflect the gleam of a boy's manhood. When I wrapped the sparkling things around my pointy limbs, I felt like a precious porcelain doll. But when I looked into the mirror, I saw a collared dog staring back at me. There is a jewellery box in my room. It is filled with everything that I'm supposed to be.

*

It was a full moon. I stared up at the floating lantern in the ultramarine blue and knew that I had to make the night special. It was the last night before the wind would take me south towards my future. I needed to christen this new beginning, I needed to burn sage, I needed to make a sacrifice. The house was quiet. The back door creaked when I opened and closed it. I wore nothing but my short frilly pyjama shorts and a fallow deer shirt that said: "Deer to my heart". The stables were silent, but the horses nickered when I entered. I grabbed a bridle and decided to ride Escape – the huge charcoal gelding. As I fingered the worn leather, I wondered if I should really do this, go out into the night alone? Won't my parents be angry? What if I encounter another human? What if Escape steps into an aardvark hole and breaks his leg? I thought for a while and decided to do it, we would stick to the gravel plains guided by the moonlight. I don't want to be the same anymore, I want to be fearless, I won't let my thoughts have power over me anymore.

I didn't take a saddle. I wanted to ride bareback. I wanted to be wild and free, free and wild. They are two different beings, aren't they?

"Hey boy," I whispered to Escape as I opened his stable door, "want to go for a ride?"

He nickered softly and peered at me with wide eyes that were so black they were blue. I put the bridle over his head, clutched hold of his mane and threw myself on. He trudged slowly out of his stable and turned right towards the open doors of the barn. His hooves echoed on the cement floor. I cringed and hoped that the hounds wouldn't bark. We moved at a steady pace through the night and slipped around the farmhouse.

I released a deep breath that I didn't even know that I was holding. As we ventured farther away, Escape galloped straight out into the moonlight, his mane whipping my cheeks. There was no wind; it was a night of stillness, not even the jackals were lurking about, and not even the porcupine chewed on the water pipes. The desert shone like spilt milk, the sand sparkled like diamonds with our every move, and it smelt like the old smell of broken dunes. We came to a halt on a gravel plain. The scorpions scattered at our abrupt arrival and hid beneath the stones. We just stood there like the last two beings left on earth, with only the wind teasing our hair.

Clouds of puffs evaporated out from Escape's nostrils. He felt warm like freshly baked millie bread between my thighs. I drew my legs up towards my belly button and curled my toes into his

mane as I rested my feet on his neck. I let go of the reins and surrendered to the moon. I let her watch over me and paint me in blue light as she contaminated me with fables from space. I wondered . . . Does she see me? Does she even know I exist? What does she see from up there? I wish I could tell her, I wish I could tell her about me, about who I really am deep inside. But how? If someone or something knew or even suspected . . . I wouldn't know what to do. I could've stayed there forever, with the moon's reflection in my eyes, but Escape became restless – he knew that upon his return to the homestead, he would get a handful of oats to say thank you for this late-night stroll.

“Come on then. Let's go home,” I said as I untangled my feet from his mane. Escape didn't need any ushering, but I felt like I needed to say something to fill the empty silence, to put an end to my obsession with the moon and with myself, to finally sleep, and in that sleep, I hope I don't wake up, sometimes the truth is just too painful to bear.

The smell of cinnamon, star anise, cloves and honey-baked apples woke me up. I brushed my hair, washed my face, slipped on some clothes and smothered myself with body lotion. As I walked into the kitchen, my mom poured the apple fusion into our bowls of full cream Greek yoghurt. I leaned against the wall as I watched dad pour the coffee in and fumble for the buttermilk rusks. I have never liked rusks. These twice-hardened-baked-breads always had a way of bringing out the worst in me – pimples, an extra layer of lard, oily skin, and they made me constipated. Worse though, every time I dunked them into coffee or tea, they dive-bombed like submarines and turned my whole coffee into mushy crème Brule.

“Morning Freesia, are you ready for today? Are all your things packed? Why do you look so tired?” asked dad as he dipped his rusk into his coffee.

“Morning mommy and daddy. I think I've packed everything. I couldn't sleep because the moon kept on waking me up. Did you see it last night?”

“Yes, we saw it last night. Listen, we know that we aren't allowed to ask you important life questions before you drink your morning coffee, but there are a few things we need to . . . clarify.” Mom handed my steaming bowl of yoghurt to me. This was the perfect kind of farm breakfast. I nodded for them to continue. Last night's endeavours left me exhausted.

“What your Dad and I were discussing was that we are paying a shocking amount of money so that you can study psychology at University and stay in a nice apartment.”

Dad cleared his throat a little too loudly.

Mom glanced at him and continued while she stirred the apples, “We've always said that you don't need to study, you could marry a good farmer from the community and become a housewife. And you don't need to go to a psychologist for help, the reverend is the only person we need to help us with our problems.”

“I know.” I stuffed the soaked apples into my mouth so that they would prevent me from saying anything that would rile them up.

“Now I know what you are thinking, ‘what’s out there?’ well all you need is right here in Namibia. And if you got pregnant you would have plenty of work to do, not to mention joining the quilting club and taking part in church-”

Dad cleared his throat even louder this time, and the room was filled with tension. He doesn’t like having this kind of talk around him. That made two of us.

Mom sighed, “All that we ask is that you do your part, study hard, go to class and make us proud. You can’t come back here without achieving anything and don’t bring back average marks, and most importantly don’t do anything to dishonour our family.”

I nodded and said yes. It’s easier that way. If I tried to say anything I would be labelled disrespectful, cheeky, a bad and ungrateful daughter.

“Good. Always remember, ‘what would the family say? What would the neighbours think?’ And on top of that – you are going to be unsupervised for the first time in your life, you will need to buy and make your own food, and . . . you might come into contact with . . . the opposite sex.” This time dad slammed his farmer’s magazine onto the table and walked out of the kitchen. Mom watched him leave, walked over to the window and with an exhale said, “Today’s young men aren’t like they were in the olden days where they displayed respect, integrity, and compassion. The young men of today are only looking for ONE thing. Do you hear me?” There was no more yoghurt to slurp down, and I already burnt my tongue into a crisp from hiding my face behind the tipped coffee cup. I nodded in agreement with her. I learned at a young age that agreeing with what everyone said prevented people from disliking or getting angry with you.

After breakfast, we drove to the nearest petrol station and waited for the Intercape bus to arrive. We were the only ones waiting for the bus, nobody else was leaving Namibia, their lives were put and happy. My parents assured me that the farm and the horses were in good hands. When the bus crunched on the gravel and came to a halt before us, we embraced and said our goodbyes. I felt happy when I sat on my assigned seat. I was ready to leave Namibia, and I was prepared to welcome South Africa as my new home. Now I could officially start my life and become the person I was always supposed to be and to discard of the shadow that I have been living so long underneath.

Nemesia

Everything around me sparkles in promised galaxies – my diary, my phone, my clothes, my eye shadow, my body lotion, my nail polish. I sparkle, because I don't.

*

How was the sun shining already? I hardly slept!

With a grunt, I rolled over in bed and searched for my phone with my eyes closed. Something woke me up, but I couldn't tell what it was partly because my brain was fogged in a mixture of restless sleep and gin and tonic from the night before. I didn't want to open my eyes lest they think it's time to search for a breakfast bowl and a coffee mug. *It ain't breakfast yet, you little fish-eyed fuckers.*

What time was it? My phone wasn't on the bedside table and, when I opened up the door, all of my diaries tumbled out. Ugh. Then, aware of me being awake, Kitty Purry (named after Katy Perry's cat) started purring as though she were a generator going off for the first time in years.

"Shhh, Kitty . . . you know that we have spoken about volume!"

She started purring rhythmically and even started to mimic a phone whose vibrate was in the heartbeat format.

"Wow, Kitty, people would mistake you for being a dildo." I threw the dove up, and Kitty actually turned out to be my phone vibrating itself to life. The screen was sticky from alcohol and wine gums. I looked at the caller ID – it was Leo. What the fuck did this star-sign-guy want? Did he think I was open 24/7 like a petrol station? Like a whorehouse?

I pressed the green button and mumbled, "What?"

"Hey, Nem. It's Leo."

"You know I'm not a morning person Leo."

"Complaining already? Look outside your window."

I moaned, "Are you serious? Please don't tell me that you're gonna pull a Romeo and Juliet on me."

"Well, at least I didn't throw a stone against your window – that would be too romantic. And I know that you don't do romance."

I rolled my eyes, this guy had a way of making my blood boil, "Yup, you got that right."

"Ok, look down already."

I rolled out of bed, jogged to the window, opened the curtains and was slapped in the face by the massive moon. Her craters were refined, her dried rivers formed depressions like wrinkles all over her face, she was brighter than the walls in a psych ward, and fuller than a pregnant bitch. I couldn't stop staring at the wrinkled face in the night sky.

"Helllllloooooo? Nem? I'm right down here."

I looked down, and Leo stared up at me. I repelled at the sight of his head bobbing on those scrawny shoulders. He's not a man yet, but he tried to look like one by wearing those help-me-look-strong-please tank tops. I looked back at the moon. I had never seen it this huge before.

"Like I'm right down here . . . on the ground. Not on the moon."

"Shhh! You are breaking my concentration. I've never seen the moon this big before."

"Yeah . . . looks pretty average to me. We need to talk."

I rolled my eyes again. Couldn't he have waited for daylight at least?

"What do you wanna talk about? Did you have another wet dream?" I sighed and leaned against the window.

"Haha. You've got lots of jokes, Nem. The thing is you have too many jokes for me. I mean, jokes are good and all, but I'm starting to think our relationship is a joke to you."

I gazed down at his slight form, a silhouette on the glimmering moonlight street, and tried not to squirm in excitement, because from the looks of this conversation, it seemed to be heading in the perfect direction. I thought for a moment, trying to find the words that would feed his anger.

"Sigh. Leo, I told you, we aren't in a relationship. I just used you."

"You just *used* me?"

"You hit the nail right on the head," I said as I glared at him as though he were a maggot.

He laughed that laugh guys do when their ego is bruised, "I knew you were going to say something catty like that."

I didn't reply, but waited for him to steer the conversation into the heart of his bruised ego, "You know what though, Nem? It didn't seem like you used me when you screamed my name when I was deep inside your cunt. It didn't seem like you used me when you needed someone to forget all the mess in your fucked up family. It didn't seem like you used me when you told me all the fucked-up shit you did with your mom's boyfriend. It didn't seem like you used me when you cried over your dead dad and sis-"

"Just shut up! Shut up!" I screamed at him into the crisp night. The breeze held its breath, and Leo's wide mouth rippled into a smile. I ran into my room and wanted to shut the window and end the conversation with him. But then I thought of something better. As I paced around my room, I saw my phone light up, and Leo's name flashed on the screen. I moved towards my desk angrily and grabbed the gifts he gave me during our short time together – a tacky Valentine's Day cup, a stuffed cat, and a self-portrait that he made of me, which was a stickman drawing. When I reached the window, I threw them one by one towards where he stood. They all fluttered down like hail, splintering as they hit the street, and awakening the breeze. My aim was bad when I threw the cup, which fell into the Spekboom pot plant, by our front gate. It didn't break but dented the soil the way a spaceship dents outer space.

Leo chuckled and ran his hands through his hair, "You have always been such a bad throw." I leaned on the window frame and considered throwing myself at him. I wouldn't die if I landed on his meek body, and pushed the idea of physical assault aside, he wasn't worth doing time for.

"Nem, you are so . . . so . . . so immature. Throwing all these things like a little, angry spoilt

baby! You seriously need help. I was just here trying to talk to you and then you freaked out on me. Seems like your guilt for everything you've done is translating into anger."

I looked back up at the moon. I wanted to fuck with his brain, "Oooh, somebody swallowed a copy of Sigmund Freud." I smirked and was glad that I could remember one psycho's name, "you are such a clever boy, Leo. Top marks. Give yourself a pat on the back." I started the slow clap and then sped it up, just to annoy him further. He always thought he was smart when he tried to analyse me, but if he was smart at all, he should've known that there is no way that he could analyse me, I am a million different colours of rage, and he only knew blue, red, yellow, and green.

"Ok, Nem cut the shit. Look, I'm going to give you two options. One – we figure this out, as *in*, we decide if we are going to do a long-distance relationship while we are both in our different Universities. Or two – we break up and call it a night."

I think I almost died of laughter inside. It was such a struggle to hold my wildness in my throat. I think I might've even punctured my delicate gullet.

"Leo . . .the thing is, I wanted to break up with you looong ago. Like looong ago, but I didn't want to hurt your feelings, so I let you do the dirty work. So yeah, thanks for coming here because that means that I don't have to walk all the way to your place, in which you would've probably ended up cornering me. So Leo, option two sounds excellent."

Leo looked like he was about to have a fit outside on the street. He stepped back, moonlight slipped over his face. He put his hands on his head and started shaking vigorously, "Fuck you, Nem. Fuck you, Nem. I'm going to tell everyone how sick you are. I hope you enjoy fucking all those okes at Uni! And good luck with your art career, everyone knows art is a joke, you'll never have any money, and I'm not going to take you in again."

"*Fuck you, Nem. I'm going to tell everyone how sick you are.*" I imitated his squeaky voice and scrunched up my face like Quasimodo. "I'm sure all those okes would love to contact me when they hear what you have to say. And thanks, yeah, I'll be sure to keep you posted regarding the Uni guys. Have fun being a boring-ass accountant, the only pussy that you're going to get is your laptop. *Night night. Sleep tight.*"

I slammed the window closed, looked up at the gorgeous moon once more, and climbed into bed. Kitty protruded out from beneath the covers and curled herself into a ball on my chest. She was there beside me after all. The last thought that raced through my mind was, *imagine all the new guys that I'm about to meet, all that meat.*

Freesia

My dreams are velveteen draperies that smother me. They hold me captive against my will. They ignite Stockholm syndrome within me. Their bodies are heavy, dressed in cobalt satin and crimson silk evening dresses. Before I close my eyes, I see them standing in the corners of my room, looking at themselves in compact mirrors, dashing themselves with extra faces. I feel them when I slip into oblivion, dropping my lavender tea onto the floor. Their wintry gowns wrap around my ankles and brush against my thighs. They kiss my earlobes in nude lip gloss, marking me with the cloak of invisibility. They smell of suffocation and lunar dust. I'm scared to fall asleep. I'm afraid to relinquish control.

*

When I glided into a slumber, the smell of bubble gum was stuck in my nostrils. I tried to pick the goo out, but it drove further into my brain, and before I was conscious of what happened, I dreamt of carrot cake iced with cream cheese, funfetti cupcakes, Oreo cheesecake, chocolate mousse and pecan nut pie with whipped cream. Then I dreamt of cheeseburgers, pasta puttanesca, buttered bread and tangy potato salad. I stuffed each of these deep into my oesophagus and swallowed them whole, choking on my definition of paradise. I wanted all those things, but I couldn't because my fear of becoming fat is larger than my love for sugared bread. I woke up with a gnawing sensation in my gut. I cracked my eyes open, crumbling the crusty sleep off my cheeks. The sight must've looked like a dragon's eye-opening underneath mounds of gold. It was blurry, but my flat was dark when I regained my vision, my cushion damp and soaked in drool. I rose and walked towards the plastic kettle and put it on. It steamed to life, the sound comforting me in the stillness of my apartment. I had been here for a while, and still, nobody else but me came into my room. I hadn't made any friends at university yet, and I thought I might've been the only friendless person on campus. Do our pasts repeat themselves? In school, I was alone. On the farm, I am alone. Or perhaps I was a solitary animal in my past life, and therefore I am bound to be alone in my human life. I wished that I could make a friend, and be beautiful and skinny, that's all that I wanted.

Last night I heard my neighbours screeching down the hallway. They had come back from a night out partying. According to my calculations, there seemed to be seven individuals walking through the hallways and waking the building's inhabitants. After a series of inside jokes, their footprints echoed off either side of my front door, growing fainter the further, the closer they got to their caves. All but two stayed put, conversing outside my door. I listened to their soft voices, hoping to turn their words into a lullaby to put me back to sleep, but then I thought that someone tried to break into my room because the door handle rattled, I heard my welcome mat skid down the hallway, and there was a loud thumping that grew louder with each whack against my door. I heard it all last night: the unbuckling of his belt, the tear in her skirt, the drop of his keys, the smash of her phone on the floor. I opened my door and inspected the damage, but there was nothing. Was that my anxiety playing tricks on me? Was I so lonely that I made up stories like

that in my head? Were two people beyond my door really the only two people that I had company within some sort of weird way? The wind made my curtains shiver and wafted in the smell of dew and anticipation. I walked towards the window, took a deep breath and pulled them apart like the curtains of a stage, displaying myself to anyone who wanted to watch. But nobody was watching, nobody even knew that I was here.

I went onto WhatsApp.

No new messages.

It's been like that for a while now, perhaps my phone was broken? Maybe my number didn't work anymore? Or maybe, maybe nobody wants to talk to me. Because what would I even have to say?

A smudge of lilac and blackberry greeted me beyond the mountain - the sunrise. Before I'm ready to face the sun, there is a vital ritual that I need to attend to. Just the thought of it made my stomach swarm with feral horses.

I walked into the bathroom, and there she was – the scale. The mirror mirror on the floor. I looked at my phone, it was 05:59, and with an eerie silence, the mountain gave birth to the sun, and the Spotted Eagle-Owls flew home. It was time. I ripped my pyjamas off and climbed naked onto the scale. It said 50.8 kg's – that was 100 grams less than yesterday. A wave of happiness bounced over me - as the numbers on the scale dropped, the air smelt of lust, tasted like true love, felt like power.

Nemesia

Apparently, the Milky Way is effervescent tonight. Well, that's what everyone's posting on Instagram, at least. I saw these flashing night sky images speed past my eyes as I scrolled down my newsfeed, with captions like "Starry night got me starry-eyed", or "Looking for my starboy", or those lame cringe-worthy quotes "small stars shine the brightest", or just plain star emojis. I never look at the stars, and I don't even know why people obsess over them. They are just shining lights in the sky. What's the big deal?

I always liked to see what guys said when I asked them about the stars though. My theory is that they say anything to get into a girl's pants. I hate stars. I hate how they shimmer at night and act All So Happy. Don't they know that the worst things happen at night? Earthquakes, murders, house robberies, rapes, erupting volcanoes, collapsing buildings, car crashes, or me doing shit that I know I'm going to regret? When nightfall comes there is no telling what I'm about to do, especially a few days before my period. This is precisely why I went onto Tinder and messaged a guy that I matched with. From his photos, he had brown hair and hazel eyes. He described himself as a social smoker, gym junkie, and plant based for mother nature. We met up once before, but it was so brief, we didn't even catch each other's *real* names. I sent him a message.

you keen to do something? i'm so fuckin bored.

He replied quickly. He was on Tinder too.

keen. what did you have in mind?

My period answered that question.
ice cream?

He typed for a long time before he replied.

so you wanna lick something? ;)

depends on the ice cream.

i know a place on the beach.
you're still staying at the same place, right?

right.

cool. You ready?

i was born ready.

I only waited for a few minutes before his car arrived at my house. When I got in, I didn't even bother to say hi but grabbed his jaw and made out with him for a while, after all that's what Tinder is for. I wasn't on there prowling for a relationship, I was there to make very bad mistakes. It's what I seem to do with my life. As he drove, he kept glancing at me and winking. *Eww*, but I played along and turned up 5fm. The parking lot was packed, but soon the car was parked, and we headed towards the beach. The sidewalk was full of people that walked around, enjoying the windless air. The trees looked odd without the wind rustling through their leaves. Like an artwork without emotion, or too much, leaving you breathless, and consuming you into oblivion. It was like the whole world was on pause, waiting in suspense for the watcher to press play. We didn't talk because there was nothing to talk about, we were united for one reason only. We turned off the sidewalk, bought some ice cream and walked along the shore as we licked our different flavoured ice creams. His was oats and almond milk, mine was candyfloss.

"So yeah . . . guess who got into medical school?" he said when he was halfway with his ice cream.

"Your best friend?" I said as I licked mine.

"I'll give you a clue, Nira? Nina?"

"It's Nemesia, it's like nematode, you know that fish-lizard thing, but I'm just its fishier cousin." He coughed on his ice cream, "Did you seriously just say *fishier*? What a way to turn down the heat." He jeered.

"What heat? It's ice fuckin cold down here." I was a little taken aback by his sharp tone, but when I looked at his bulging muscles, I realized that his reaction was clearly a result of roid rage. There was a silence that separated us, and things got awkward, but I didn't give a fuck. I couldn't distinguish whether the air was infested with sexual tension or if it was just annoyance. After our brief time together, I could tell that we would never meet again. We weren't compatible physically or mentally, but that didn't bother me, because I just needed his body to distract me from my thoughts. We all have a way of punishing ourselves, some slice their wrists, others overeat, well I just get under guys. It's healthier and more interesting, in my opinion. As we walked, we resembled astronauts trudging through the sand and said nothing. Although I couldn't hear it, I felt him sigh.

I decided to strike up a cheerful conversation (to bring back the "heat"), "You gotta problem with fish?"

He took a while to answer, "Fish the animal is okay, but I hate people who support the fishing industry. I used to be that guy, because I used to and still love sushi."

Of course, he loves sushi. In this city, they all do, it's the 'in thing' to like, and that's exactly why I don't like it.

I took another lick of my ice cream only to realise that it had fallen on the sand a long time ago. I started to nibble on the sugar cone.

As I crunched away, he said, “So basically . . . I was the one who got into medical school.”

It was only then when I realised that that was what we were talking about, “Congrats, man.”

“Thanks, *Nematode*.”

I laughed, “Well, guess who did NOT get into medical school?”

“You, of course. Would’ve been surprised if you did.”

I rolled my eyes; this guy was boring and he was starting to give me toxic masculinity vibes.

“Excuse you?” I slapped him on the arm, which he specifically tensed up so that his muscles could bulge like an over-pumped bull on protein shakes, “Jokes, Jokes. Tell me what you’re studying.”

I ate some more and took a while to answer, “Art. Fine Art.”

“Oh, so you’re an art student. One of those.”

I turned my head towards him, and without closing my mouth as I ate, and said, “One of those?”

“Yeah, you know... one of those arty-farty types that paint with their period blood, or paint their naked boyfriends, or smoke weed all day, or wear no shoes, and who will definitely not make any money one day.”

“Yeah . . . sounds about right coming from a very intellectual medical student to be.”

“You’re basically doomed with art. You know that, right? It’s like studying BA, it doesn’t make any sense, that’s why it stands for Bugger All, or BA *mansoek* anyways.”

“Fuck off, loser. I’m not even going to delve into this conversation with you.”

With that, he changed the subject, apparently unaffected by my reaction, “Don’t you think the stars are so beautiful?”

Here we go, I thought, “Yeah.”

He walked with his face staring at the sky, “They are like glitter tossed up onto a velvet blanket. Don’t you think so?”

“Yeah.” I tried to hide my smile but couldn’t. My teeth wanted to come out and look at the stars too.

“Come on, let’s sit down.” We sat down on the sand. I sat in a lotus position, got sand up my ass and regretted that I wore booty shorts. He sat with his knees bent, which made his chinos ride up his calves (I made a mental note that he didn’t have cankles). He was close to me – I could smell that he was clean. His Dettol soap was potent in my head.

Once he was comfortable, he continued, “Or the stars are lights shining through a pin pricked canvas.”

“Yeah, wow.”

He moved closer to me, his arms rubbed against mine, the heat evaporated from his flesh. “You know what? What if the stars were a connect-the-dots game?”

“Never heard that one before. What would they say?”

He gave a sigh as he looked at me and said, “Nemesia and Dave.”

I didn't have time to cringe because he immediately wiped my hair out of my face, leaned in and kissed me. His hands pressed against the bottom of my jaw - my stomach was filled with jellyfish, a natural reaction that I get even from people that I don't vibe with. I'm pretty sure that I activate it consciously just to get the adrenaline rush that I need. He forced my mouth open with his lips and held the back of my neck. His mouth tasted like almond milk, his lips were seared in sea salt, his teeth were like frozen pebbles.

The wind whipped my hair around us like protective seaweed. I straddled him, and I could tell he was thirsty, but so was I - the drought had been long, too long. He rubbed his arms along my back and played with the edges of my shirt. His hand slipped down and squeezed my ass. They felt massive and had the potential of crushing my ribs, and I wouldn't mind if he did. I wanted to feel pain. I wanted to be crushed. If I felt pain, I couldn't feel my thoughts. We kissed until the first rains were enough. I released him from my grip, slid down between his legs, and leaned against his chest while we looked up into the darkest blue.

After a while, I prodded myself onto my elbows, "I have an idea."

"What?" He said and I could feel him getting a hardon.

I faced him but couldn't see his face, "Let's go skinny dipping."

"Skinny dipping? Sharks hunt at night, don't you know that?"

"All the more reason to do it then. What are you a boring doctor? Too good to do something reckless?"

"Nah, it's just . . . dangerous you know?" he touched my hair, "we can do other things though."

I jumped up, rubbed sand off my legs, "The last one in is a rotten egg!" I took off my shirt and unbuttoned my shorts. He stayed on the ground. "Come on don't be such a pussy!"

He got up reluctantly, threw all of his clothes off and ran towards the ocean. I tried to look at his ass and thighs, but he jumped into the waves before I had the chance.

I unclipped my bra when he crashed out of the waves headfirst. His mouth was open, his teeth pointed upwards, eyes wild, and he screamed. I thought he was pretending to be a shark, so I laughed and clapped my hands. He repeated this shark-jumping scene a couple more times until he yelled, "Phone the ambulance!"

"What? What happened? Don't fuck with me Tinder boy." He didn't answer but continued to jump in and out of the waves with that horrifying look on his face. Although it was dark, I could tell that he turned red and that something really was wrong, "Ok!" I had no idea what was going on but considered that it must be severe for a medical student to lose his cool in front of his Tinder date. The ocean rumbled loudly, and the waves grew wilder, trying to spit him out of the sea.

I took out my phone. I had no airtime. "Fuck!" I yanked his satchel and searched inside. When I found his phone, I didn't know what his password was. *If I were a medical student, what would my password be?* I tried 1, 2, 3, and 4 – didn't work. And then 4, 3, 2, 1 – that was a negative as well. "What's your password!?" I raised my voice over the sound of an annoyed ocean.

He stumbled out screaming something like, "Blue balls, blue balls!"

I sniggered, "You mean the Blue Bulls? Is that your password? How-"

He ran towards me and started screaming even louder, “Blue balls!”

“You have blue balls?” I asked calmly.

“No! Touch my balls. They are blue!”

“What, no.”

He jumped up and down with his one hand clasped around his balls, “Oh fuck off. Don’t act like you are some kind of saint! My balls aren’t fucking blue, man! There are fucking bluebottles on my balls!”

I tried to hold in my laugh but failed miserably, “Bluebottles?”

“JA FUCKING BLUEBOTTLES. Those stinging blue things! I have fucking bluebottles all over my dick and balls! Phone the ambulance, bitch!” He grabbed his crotch and continued to jump up and down like popcorn.

“Don’t call me bitch, you cunt.” I handed him his phone, he unlocked it, then sat down and started moaning. I dialled 10177. It rang, and somebody answered.

“We need an ambulance! My friend got stung by blue balls. I mean blue bottles! We are on Camps Bay.”

An ambulance must’ve been nearby because I heard the sirens screeching through the misty road. I sprinted over the sand, ran out onto the street and waved the ambulance down. The paramedics followed me onto the beach to where Dave was shuddering in the sand. They brought a stretcher and put him on, carried him and placed him in the back of the ambulance. I handed them his clothes and satchel. Dave looked at me with a flushed choking expression on his face, but before I could say goodbye, they closed the doors and sped off.

I don’t know for how long I stood alone on the beach, but I was comparable to a pillar standing in the wind. It must’ve been for a long time because I had goose bumps all over my body, and my bones felt frozen inside my meat. The sirens of the ambulance reminded me too much of a night that I’ve always wanted to forget. With their sounds, old memories tried to breach the surface like whales. There was only one thing to do to stop me from thinking, to prevent them from slicing through my protective film. Now that my Tinder date was gone, I couldn’t use him as a distraction, so I turned around and faced the sea. I stripped my underwear and bra off and walked slowly into the waves until my head was underwater, and until the ocean drowned me in its noise. I exhaled and sank onto the floor, watching all the blue bottles swim around me and feeling their icy sting. I didn’t know this then, but while I was underwater, Dave joined the stars. It was only when I woke up the next morning that I found out what happened. As I ate my bowl of muesli, I scrolled down News24, when an article caught my attention.

Medical-student-to-be dies from a severe allergic reaction to bluebottles in Cape Town.

While I stood pillar-like on the white beach, or when I was submerged underwater, Dave Cowley died on route to the hospital. Although I never knew him, nor liked him, my heart shattered, and I wept into my bowl of muesli. I swear, that I’m bad luck.

Freesia

Nothing makes sense. That is why it makes sense. I am just too stupid to get it.

*

“Hey, Dyl, are you going out tonight?” Yelled a freckled-faced boy standing outside my window. I’ve seen him plenty of times before since he lived in my building. He often lurked near the building’s dustbins while he smoked cigarettes with an attractive friend.

From the apartment above me, footsteps thumped towards the window, and a deep voice said, “Standard, bru!”

The freckled boy smiled and said, “Shot, see you at ten!” He walked away and passed my window but caught me looking at him. We made eye contact, and then he waved at me. Was he trying to be friendly? Or was he trying to catch me out? I blushed, my hand went up and involuntarily I waved back. Soon after that, I quickly closed the curtains and felt safe in the blanket of darkness.

I wondered what it was like having all these social connections, being invited out for a night of partying, and knowing what it feels like to be part of a group and to be actually wanted. I tried talking to girls in class, but they didn’t seem interested. Maybe it was how I spoke; maybe they could detect my nervousness, maybe I embarrassed myself when I stumbled over my words, maybe I didn’t say the right thing. They all had their own friendship groups anyways, so why would they reach out to someone like me? And if I reached out to them, I would probably disturb their perfect social lives, or come to terms with how awkward, shy and uncool I am. I don’t know. . . The truth is that I don’t know anything anymore. I don’t understand why I am even here. Why am I studying? What am I trying to prove? Why do I even exist? What is the point of everything? What am I supposed to do? Why do people even socialise with each other? I just do not understand anything anymore. Nothing makes sense.

I switched on the lights only to find that they didn’t turn on. Did I finish my electricity already? I put the kettle on, but its buzzing sound refused to replace the barren silence. “Oh no . . . come on . . . please do not tell me that it’s load shedding again . . .” I groaned, but after a few moments, my entire apartment flickered with warm orange glows.

Load shedding: that thing that happens when all you want is a warm cup of tea. That thing that knocks your heater out and expects you to become acclimated to temperatures equivalent to Antarctica. That thing that has a schedule, but it is written in an extinct language. That thing that wipes entire cities off the earth’s map at night. That thing that happens when all the streetlights die while you are walking home alone in darkness. That thing that makes you wish that you charged your laptop and phone, how else are you supposed to study? And above all, that thing that makes you dream that you bought stacks of matchboxes and lighters because all you have is candles.

I was about to start crying when I heard something at the door. It sounded as though someone knocked. It must've been my imagination because who would knock at my door? I didn't know anyone on a personal level, and I had never invited anyone over for tea. But I didn't imagine it because I heard it again.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

It was a quiet kind of striking, akin to a slight bird tapping on the door, unsure of itself and secretly hoping that no one noticed. I smoothed out my face, took a deep breath and opened the door to see two smiling boys standing outside in the hallway looking at me.

"Hey, I'm Dylan, and this here is, Rob." Rob was the freckled-faced boy who stood outside. He struck out his hand for me to shake. So, I shook it and said, "Oh, hi. Freesia, nice to meet you." Dylan turned to Rob and started chuckling, "Are you seriously giving your hand out to this beautiful lady? It's the 21st-century bru . . ." He leaned in, hugged me and said, "Nice to meet you, Freesia. So, we were just wondering if you were busy tonight?" Dylan was very handsome, with a mop of honey blonde hair, warm amber eyes and a Heath Ledger smile.

"Uhm. . . yes, I am busy tonight."

"Oh really? What are you up to?" Dylan's smile quivered, but his eyes stayed set on me.

"I have to study. . . I have this psychology test next week, and I need to do well."

Dylan covered his mouth, "Don't tell me that you're going to spend your whole Friday night studying?"

Rob leaned his hand against the doorframe. He had been quiet for a while, but then he spoke up, "You should come out with us. There is this sick digs jol happening tonight. But we are all going to have prees outside by the braai area before we go."

I didn't know what to say. How do I say, no, nicely? I hate saying no. Dylan looked expectantly at me, and I realised that I couldn't breathe properly when I looked at him. "That sounds so fun, but I just really need to study, I . . . need to do well because . . . otherwise. . . I will not be selected for Honours in Psychology one day. It is so competitive."

"Ag, come on, one night is not going to affect your entire future. You can't study when it's load shedding anyways." Maybe Dylan was right. Surely one night would not determine the rest of my future. And it was load shedding . . .

Rob surveyed my room behind me. "Yeah, you need proper light to study. Not this witchy candle vibe you've got going on in here."

"The whole building is invited, and the people are super sick. You should meet them; they've all wondered about what that beautiful girl on the ground floor does." Dylan smiled, and I noticed that his teeth looked well-kept and clean. A dental hygienist was not a stranger. My heart shuddered; my knees grew weak.

"Really?" I was stunned that he called me beautiful for the second time already. He must really think that I am pretty. . .

“For sure. Look, just come for one drink and then you can go back to your books and candles.” He smiled a corner kind of smile and bit his lips.

“Uhm. . .”

“Come on, Freesh, it will be fun.”

Did he just call me Freesh? “Okay then. What time does it start? I won’t be able to stay for too long, though, because I really have to study.”

Rob scrolled on his phone, “It starts in an hour. So, we’ll see you there?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t believe that I was invited to a party by these boys who seemed so popular and sure of themselves. I sincerely hoped that this wasn’t one of those velveteen dreams, because if it was, I didn’t want to wake up.

“Shot, see you there.” Rob walked away.

“See you later, Freesh.” Dylan held eye contact with me as he walked away. He held my gaze. Our eyes lingered. We saw each other’s souls. His was autumn spices, wooden cabins in the Drakensberg, woollen jerseys, hot chocolate and roasted lamb. All I could think was, “Oh my word. . . he remembered my name, nobody ever remembers my name.”

I put jeans that tightened around my horse-riding bum, a long-sleeved top with buttons darting down the middle and a fluffy sheepskin jacket. I didn’t have fancy, trendy or sexy clothes, but less is more, right? I kept my hair, as it was when he first laid eyes on me. Was it the first time that he saw me? Or had he seen me around before? I wondered if he saw me the same way that I saw myself – socially awkward, shy, and skittish. I dashed a fresh coat of mascara on and intensified my lips with nude lip-gloss. I was blessed with full luscious lips and a heavily defined cupid’s bow; it was my most treasured feature, although some bullies from school said that I had “blowjob” lips. So disgusting . . . how could they be so rude? When I looked into my compact mirror, it was hard to see my entire face in the dim candlelight, but I actually thought I looked pretty when I did eventually lock eyes with those eyes in the reflection.

I opened the door a squeak and smelt the frosty air. It twirled around my body and dressed me in its magic, condemned me in its ethereal spell and transformed me into a glacier princess. A western wind carried the smell of techno music and shrilly voices. That was where I was headed. What if it was all a joke? What if they were dared to invite me? Maybe I shouldn’t go. . . what would I even say? Footsteps sounded around the corner; it was Rob. I think he saw the look in my eyes, my uncertainty, so he dragged me with him towards the music in the sky before I had the chance to lock myself in my room.

There were around twenty people that sat at the cold cement tables outside. Most of them were girls who wore very short shorts, stockings, crop tops, leather jackets and white sneakers. How were they not cold? I realised that I was the only girl wearing jeans. They were all fabulously pretty, skinny and looked rich with their iPhones encased under their fingers that jingled with rings. And then I saw him, Dylan. He was sitting next to a girl who hung onto every word he said, and she clutched his bicep every time he said something funny. There was something unexplainable that came over me. I had never felt this way before. It was as if my body had a

thousand shards of jarred ice needles poking beneath my skin, like lava rolling inside my stomach, like hair growing on my back and forcing me to howl at the moon.

Rob pushed me forward towards the table and shouted over the music, “Everybody! This here is –” he paused and in a low tone said, “uh sorry I’m horrible with names . . .”

“Freesia,” I whispered. At the mention of my name, or the waft of my perfume, Dylan looked up and smiled at me. It must’ve been our interweaving destinies that made him look in my direction. Noticing his change of direction, the girl that sat next to him looked at me with a gaze that I couldn’t decipher, but it looked equivalent to a hungry cat.

Rob continued speaking, but I kept my eyes on Dylan. I just couldn’t look away; his beauty was intoxicating. “Hey! Shhhh! Everybody, can I please have your attention! Turn the music down!” “Make it quick, Rob. We are about to start Kings.” Said a girl who barely acknowledged my existence. I knew what was coming – an introduction. I took deep breaths and pushed my heart down towards my legs.

“Everybody, this is Freesia; she lives on the ground floor.”

I said hi in a voice that I hoped sounded confident. I smiled to prove it. “Fake it ‘till you make it” was one of the quotes that I read in my diary this morning. Some people mumbled hello, some smiled, some just looked at me, some didn’t look at me, but Dylan waved at me and said, “Freesh, come over and sit here.” I didn’t need to think twice; I rushed over to his big and aggressively masculine frame. He scooted up, and I sat beside him. Rob handed me a foul-smelling drink that reminded me of the farmers I grew up with – brandy and coke. I squished the plastic cup in a vice-like grip, which resulted in my drink spilling all over my jeans. I prayed that nobody saw. Thankfully, Dylan was on his phone and scrolled through his playlist for a new song to play. While I sat there, I pulled out my phone and pretended to listen to a voice note and I suddenly found the table very captivating. The stain-spattered table had a jug in the middle, which was surrounded by cards, cigarette boxes, phones, cups, and alcohol bottles. I looked up at Dylan, but he was listening to a voice note as well. I was about to turn away, but I felt somebody’s eyes burning holes into me. It was that girl on the other side of Dylan, I smiled at her, but she didn’t return the favour. With a pang, I turned away and tried to forget what just happened. What was wrong with her? Why would Dylan be hanging out with someone who had no manners? Dylan’s firm bicep brushed against my shoulder. He felt almost identical to an all-bran muffin fresh from the oven and because of his intensely masculine body, my body melted. A new song started, and it had the kind of notes that made you believe in life after death and true love’s kiss. Dylan looked at me. “Freesh, I’m so glad you came. I didn’t expect that you would.” “I said I would,” I answered.

“Yeah, lots of people say, ‘yes’ but they don’t mean it.” He smiled softly and started rolling a cigarette. I didn’t know what to say, and I couldn’t bear an awkward silence, not right now, not here, and not with him. Finally, I found something to say, “Thanks for inviting me.”

“No problem. I’ve seen you in the building before and always wondered about you.”

I gasped and a butterfly left my stomach, “Really? I have seen you around too.”

“So where are you fro-?”

Suddenly a nasal voice stopped Dylan right in the middle of his sentence. It was that girl that sat on the other side of him, the one with the unsmiling face.

“Dyl, I LOVE this song! It played the night we met, remember?” That girl shrieked and cracked our conversation as though it were an egg. Her question was directed at Dylan, but she only looked at me.

“Yeah, it’s a sick track,” Dylan said as he lit his cigarette.

“Oh, hello! I’m Emma. I haven’t seen you around before?” That girl had a name, and I did not like it.

“Hi, I’m Freesia.”

“What are you studying?” She asked with a gleam in her eyes.

“Psy -” before I could finish, she cut me off and screamed, “Guys! It’s time for Kings!”

I was taken aback; I was not used to her behaviour. Did she have attention problems? Or a lack of social skills? Or was she just plain mean? How could Dylan be around someone like that? I sat back and glowered in feelings that I was not used to and considered the possibility of going back to my flat.

Then a chubby girl with an open, friendly face came out of the building and held a steaming tray in her hands, “The brownies are here!” Everyone cheered and I was happy to see that I was around people who loved food as much as I did.

Dylan turned his body towards me, “That’s Meg; she’s a culinary student and she makes the best brownies. You gotta try them.” I couldn’t help but notice this intense current that happened when he spoke to me. It was as if this energy pulled me towards him.

“I love brownies; I make them all the time for my parents back home.”

“Sweet. But you are definitely gonna love these.” He looked down at my plastic cup, “You haven’t drunk anything, come on Freesh, drink up.”

I fidgeted uncomfortably, “I don’t really like alcohol.”

Dylan spat his drink out, “What! Why not?”

“It’s bad for you, and I do not want to become an alcoholic.”

Dylan laughed and doubled over, “Freesh, you don’t just become an alcoholic like that! Come on, a little party never killed nobody.”

I wanted him to think that I was cool, so I drank the brandy and coke. The brownie girl sat next to me, “You. Are. Gorgeous. Guys, how gorgeous is this girl here! I’m Meg, here’s a brownie.” The brownie was sludgy and sprinkled with icing sugar.

“Thank you.” I didn’t want to offend her, so of course I ate it. Besides, this situation gave me a reason to eat a brownie now. I dug into it and relished its healing balm and felt the endorphins exploding on my tongue. They tasted like bitter butterflies. Dylan ravished his brownie in what must have been only a handful of moments. We smiled at each other, showing our rotten brown pirate teeth. The music became louder with each refilled cup and with each stuffing of brownies (I was on brownie number five now).

“You know, Freesh, you’re full of surprises – you eat a lot for a girl.” I smiled and wondered if that was a good or bad thing. I noticed that Emma didn’t indulge in any brownies and removed

herself into a corner with another girl. They looked like they were having a deep meaningful conversation, but she continuously looked in my direction. What was her problem with me? I knew she wasn't Dylan's girlfriend because he wouldn't have invited me if he had one, right? I noticed that everyone around me laughed and watched me with faces of approval. It felt so good to be liked by such cool people, this was rare for me. I didn't even get along with any of the farmers that were in my school. They were all too crass.

Meg came over and hugged me, "I see that you love the brownies! They're my grandma's recipe."

She leaned in, a little tipsy, "Fuck, you smell so good! Dyl, smell her neck."

Dylan bent towards me, put his hand on my hip to stabilise himself, and smelt my neck. His lips brushed against my skin, and this sent an avalanche down my spine. My body responded in goosebumps.

He whispered half to my neck, "Yeah, you smell amazing. What is it?"

"Taylor Swift."

Meg jumped in, "Which one! I love that bitch." Then she started singing along to one of Taylor's most recent top hit.

Dylan sparkled like the aurora borealis; his eyes were more vivid than before, his hand burnt on my hip. I've always had a keen sense of smell, that's what growing up on a farm does to you. I never knew that I could feel so euphoric with someone. Is this what falling in love feels like? I didn't care about my psychology test anymore, nor did I care about that Emma girl, I just wanted to laugh and laugh and laugh. And I wanted to laugh with Dylan. Suddenly I became nauseous, sweat beaded my forehead, and I felt anxious, even moderately paranoid – what if my parents watched me? What if my lecturer saw me? Was there somebody in my room? Why was that girl staring at me? Was somebody videoing me? Was my phone ringing? What if my dad calls me? Wait, where is my phone? What is happening to me? Am I drunk? Do I have food poisoning? I couldn't breathe. Why could I not breathe!? A hand rested on my shoulder, and Dylan's soothing voice came, "Hey, hey, shhh, it's okay. Is this your first time getting drunk or something?"

I nodded. Meg cut in, "Dyl, she's got greenies . . . she ate a shit load of brownies, remember?"

Dylan whistled under his breath, "Oh shit. Fresh, is this your first time getting high?"

"High?" I felt so paranoid and confused, I had no idea what he was talking about. All that I could think was that Meg must have put way too much oil in those brownies, because my stomach felt unbearably queasy.

"Yeah, high? Like from weed?" Dylan tightened his grip on my shoulder.

"Weed?"

He held my face in his hands and I could feel his fingertips burning on my jaw, "Cannabis, marijuana, ganja?"

"That stuff that hippies smoke?" It hurt to talk, my nausea rose flash flood-like, threatening to cause havoc. But then I realised why everyone laughed and looked at me so approvingly like I was the cool kid on the block . . . weed brownies.

Dylan confirmed exactly what I thought, "It was in the brownies. . . I thought you knew."

“Fuck off, Dyl. We all knew it was her first time. We just didn’t think she would take it this badly.” Meg said while she patted my back, “Dyl, we are all going to the digs jol now. Just walk her to her room so she can sleep it off.”

Shame washed over me. This was so embarrassing; how did they all know that this was my first time? I felt stupid that my naivety was so overt, but, then I felt betrayal seep into my skin. A feeling that I knew all too well. How could they let me eat five weed brownies? Have they no remorse? I was torn between making them like me and controlling my open-book-face that I had. Suddenly, the music stopped, the wind left the earth, the people faded away, the seasons changed until it was neither summer nor winter. The last thing I remembered was that I looked into Dylan’s eyes before I vomited and blacked out.

A searing pain. A burning sensation. A racking of my insides. A mountain sat on top of me. In the dim candlelight, everything was blurred, but my eyes focused on one thing – my jeans lying on the floor, toppled with my panty, like a cherry on top of a cupcake. There was shoving, a shing, grunting and something tunnelling itself deeper in between my legs. Was it a naked mole rat trying to find a burrow? I was paralysed. I lay on my bed that had a pegasus print on it. My legs ached; they were split apart at an unnatural angle. I whispered, no, stop, get off, please. But we spoke in different languages, we were lost in translation. A sparkle caught my eye, the purple perfume bottle, “Wonderstruck”, glinted in the flickering light. Wonderstruck. What struck me? Wonderstruck. I wonder. Wonderstruck. What do I wonder? I vomited onto my bed as the dull pain became harder and thumped matching a knife that intended to carve me inside out. I lay in my vomit, and it got stuck in my hair. The mountain placed his one hand over my mouth, the other hand covered my eyes and rigidly pressed his fingers against my eyelids. I drifted in and out of consciousness. Sometimes it was a mountain, sometimes it was a man. Once, it was a mountain and a man. Then, a man on a mountain. And then it was just a man. Wonderstruck. Something hot splashed against my private part and the mountain shuddered and groaned as he lay on top of me and crushed every bone in my body. When I drifted into consciousness, I saw that he sat on the corner of my bed and smoked a cigarette. The ash fell onto the pegasus’s on my bed sheet. He smoked his cigarette until it reached the filter, got up and closed the door behind him as he left. I smelt him, he smelt of autumn spices, wooden cabins in the Drakensberg, woollen jerseys, hot chocolate and roasted lamb.

Nemesia

I want to pluck a lustful pomegranate, wrap myself around its tree trunk and grate my skin along its bark. To nourish it with my dead skin cells, to tangle my hair in its branches, to bite at its thorns, to piss on its base. I want to pluck a lustful pomegranate, as red and as thick as oxblood. They say it's the fruit of fertility. Under a sickle moon, I cut my womb open and shove pomegranate seeds inside. They say it's the fruit of eternal youth, but all I want is to fill a syringe with its sap, attach a thin needle to it and plunge it into my chest so that it can inject me with some kind of life.

*

I contemplated long and hard about what to wear. It was a Friday night, the clubs pumped identically to a slit wrist. A series of screeching erupted from my neighbour's apartment – no doubt the roommates were getting ready together, downing vodka shots and singing along to The Chainsmokers. I looked towards my roommate's door. It was closed and locked. There was a quiet murmuring coming from the other side – she was all tangled and heated with her new boyfriend. Or they were jerking off together about the “amazing” marks that they used to get in high school.

I rolled my eyes and flashed my middle finger at her slab of wood. I walked outside onto the balcony, and hadedas flew up before me and unleashed their calls as they hurried to their roosts in the direction of Botmaskop Mountain. Botmaskop was smooched by the setting sun and blushed in fuchsia. Outside, flocks of guys walked wide-legged down the street, howling and laughing. They were on the prowl.

Botmaskop, with its pointed peak, was the kind of mountain that forbidden couples would seek sanctuary in or the type of mountain that would set fire to your loins once you reached the summit. This mountain was what I was trying to convey through my makeup. As I flipped through my eye shadow collection, they said beautiful things to me under each colour, like “jungle girl”, “kiss me hard”, “queen of the peaches”, “mermaid breath”, and “you can't tame me”. I opted for the latter.

I didn't want to put too much makeup on, lest people thought I tried too hard, and that's a turn-off. But, putting no makeup on was also a no-go for me because it sent the wrong message, which was “I'm taken and not looking for anything physical, hence that's why I'm ugly tonight.” Anyways, an average amount of makeup leads to increased confidence (well, that's what the Seventeen magazine lying next to the toilet said). After I finished applying my makeup, I looked into the mirror and saw someone as mysterious as an electrical storm. The girl in the mirror smiled at me, but I didn't feel myself smiling.

As I gathered my student card, ID, tic tacs, R100 (always my limit for a night out) and mascara, I almost forgot the most important thing – my pomegranate tinted lip-gloss. This lip gloss has the magical ability to transform my lips from cracked earth into a burst riverbank. Long ago, a random guy couldn't get enough of me because he said that I tasted like potent sex – let's hope that its scent would attract an eligible bachelor tonight. I grinned, thinking back to that moment

when we made out against an old church all night. God wouldn't be impressed, okay let's not be modest, he would be lit.

While I walked out of my apartment, I sprayed Britney Spears's *Circus* onto my wrists, neck and hair. My body was thrilled with life. My heart had a rabid animal inside of it. My feet pulled me towards my destination: a few concrete buildings charged with supernatural voltages of techno music.

Friday nights hold endless possibilities when you're single, especially when you live in a town swarming with students and people from faraway lands. A Friday night was equivalent to picking pomegranates. You could stroll through an orchard or through the streets and gaze at all the hanging fruit. Some of them hung low. Some of them were high up by the wings of birds. It's not that hard to grab a pomegranate, squeeze it and drink it if you worked hard for it.

My flyaway hair stuck to the back of my neck, and there were trickles of rivulets running down my chest. I perspired as though I were an overworked horse, so much so that my top became drenched in salty mist. It was an unintentional wet t-shirt situation, and it did its work by capturing unwanted and unwavering eyes. I didn't mind this, they can look, but I'd fuck them up if they tried to touch. There was a group of them sitting on a wall, spread out like uneaten beans on a plate, chugging beer and wolf-whistling as I trotted past. Annoyance tugged at my shoulders and boiled my brain into a rumbling stew – maybe it was because of Britney's perfume, or her words "It's Britney bitch" that kept repeating inside my head. Don't they know it's illegal to wolf-whistle in South Africa? I shot them the middle finger, and they wolf-whistled even harder, and one screamed, "You feisty little thang!". That made me smile, and this time I felt it in my cheeks.

I met up with a few girls from class. We had all just met each other this year and came from all around the whole of South Africa. They all seemed nice enough, but I couldn't tell if we were all together because we shared common ground or if we were destined to become friends for life. If I'm being honest, none of them was special, but then again, I don't find anyone special. I found them sitting on the curb, and when we saw each other, we screamed in delight as we hugged and kissed, mixing our perfumes and salt together.

We decided to go for pre-drinks at Hobo's, in which we ordered jam jars that came in rainbows and shared cheesy pizzas. We sat on the wooden benches outside the terrace and were greeted with a subtle breeze that made the night less sticky. The wolf-whistling guys were left unmentioned as I assumed they had all experienced something similar or worse.

The conversation was a blend of trivial things such as our art assignment (a study of historical buildings), which I had not yet started, our lecturer who reads from the slides and does not engage in any conversation whatsoever, students who were goodie-two-shoes and our useless roommates. As the night sky was coloured in darker shades, our tongues became looser with every drink, our normal-volume speech turned into shrieks, or friendship felt stronger, and the guys appeared hotter.

We made our way to the clubs yelling to each other about how sober we were and talking about what we would do if we saw our crushes. As we waited in the line outside a roaring club, we

gossiped. Our high-waisted shorts hugged us like a long-lost lover, our sparkly nails screamed “fun”, we wore chokers around our necks, and our sheer shirts were painted in sweat, making our nipples stand out proudly. When we finally arrived at the club’s entrance, the bouncer stamped us blue and red and waved us off like broodmares for sale. It was free for us, the mares, to get in, but the buyers needed to pay their entrance fees. Girls attract guys to clubs; we are nothing but bait to reel in the hungry ones looking for a horse to ride. Inside, I lost my classmates in a flurry of smoke, Jason Derulo, and bodies. I was alone with thousands of people, blinded by lights, deaf to blasting music.

A grab, a squeeze, a rub, and a slap – there was a full-grown hand on my ass. I turned around and recognised one of the bean-guys from the wall with a self-assured smirk on his face.

I slapped his hand away, “Don’t fucking touch me!” I yelled over the music.

He moved towards me, and smoke covered his face, “Huh? I thought you were horny because your nipples were hard.”

Shocked I stepped back and took a good look at his face. He had puffy cheeks, a red nose, pale skin, dark hair, and wore a rugby sweatshirt. So not my vibe.

“What the fuck, are you serious?” I said as I walked out into the courtyard, hoping to find my classmates there. It was quieter here, with couples grinding each other in the corners. Footsteps followed me, and the guy that grabbed my ass was right behind me with a cigarette in between his fingers as he held a drink.

“How can you expect to wear bootie shorts and crop tops and not think a guy is going to grab your ass? You’re literally asking for it. Besides, you’re even wearing a choker which is a universal sign for having a black belt in sucking dick.”

“Fuck off, stalker.” I couldn’t believe I was conversing with this drunken fool. I walked around the courtyard, still searching, and he kept following me.

“You also screamed when you saw your friends outside of the club. As though you wanted attention.”

When I turned around, he was so close behind me that I bumped into him. We stood facing each other, “You think my happy screaming was a mating call . . . ?” I was irritated knowing that he had been watching me way back when at Hobo’s and thinking that stalking me like that was a socially acceptable thing to do. I decided to head back into the club and continue my search there, but he grabbed my wrist, “You know, girls are supposed to be nice and friendly, and you’re just a rude bitch.”

“Stop fucking harassing me, you asshole. Can’t you see I’m not interested? I’m literally going to tell the bouncer that you are stalking me.”

“You know I would’ve gone for you . . .” he said as he took a sip of beer, indifferent to my comment, “you wouldn’t be able to resist this big dick. But now, at least I know that you are a lesbian cunt.”

“. . . what the fuck?” I yanked my wrist out from his talons and walked away, making sure to sway my ass as I did. He followed me, and I knew he was right behind me because I could smell

his sour beer breath through his scraggly breathing. I tightened my fist into a lump of coal, made my arm angry, swung myself around, and punched him in the face.

He stumbled back, his face turned crimson, his eyes needle pricked with tears.

“What the fuck . . . are you on your disgusting period, bitch?” He shouted as he held his face in his hands. Then he threw the beer bottle against the wall, and it smashed into millions of mirror shards. I hope he saw himself in their reflections. I left, and he didn’t come after me.

I woke up into a blazing midday, my fist a little swollen, but I felt oddly liberated. I didn’t like punching that loser. Well, maybe I did a little bit, but I know violence is not the answer.

I stumbled into the kitchen (the jam jars only taking their effect now), peeling a pomegranate along the way when I bumped into my roommate. “Hey, Roomie.” I walked over to make a cup of green tea while she stood in the corner and poured milk into her Coco Pops. “Did you go out last night? You seriously won’t believe what happened to me . . .”

“Nah, I didn’t go out and party with you, youngsters. Marvin and I stayed in and watched a movie, it was in French with English subtitles. But please go ahead and enlighten me with your night which I’m sure teemed with intellectual conversations.”

Roomie, commonly known as Michaela, was as young as I was but considered students’ little cretins, even though she was a student herself. We used to party, binge drink and stay out late flirting with all kinds of guys together. But ever since she met Marvin, a drama student, she changed overnight into something completely opposite of a student.

“Mmkay . . . Last night I punched a guy in the face because he grabbed my ass, wouldn’t leave me alone, and said weird-ass shit to me.”

Michaela swallowed milk into the wrong pipe and started coughing. When she finished, she wheezed, “What? Nem . . . you can’t hit a guy . . . What kind of girl hits guys? What were you wearing last night? If you wore those bootie shorts, then you pretty much asked for it.”

I gulped my green tea and finished it in one gulp, “What the fuck is up with everyone and clothes? I can wear whatever I want, Michaela. It doesn’t automatically make me a hoe.”

Michaela stirred her Coco Pops, popped some into her mouth and crunched them loudly, “Well, if you keep on acting so immature, you are never going to get a guy like Marvin.” She blushed as she said it.

Because I saw her blush, I wanted to make her stop, so I placed my teacup with a thud in the zinc, “Whoever said that I wanted someone like your boring-ass boyfriend?” With that, I grabbed my purse, slammed the front door in her face, and decided to head out onto the road. I was going to take myself out to a cafe for breakfast, but I didn’t have enough money. But I was sure that I would find someone who did.

Freesia

I am a virgin so I'd probably taste like a virgin cocktail, like a Bloody Mary without the vodka.
But I heard that boys only like alcohol.

*

If you could take back anything, what would it be? You probably do not have an answer, just like me. I used to think that I would go back in time and alter a few events, but if I did, would I be who I was right now? When I woke up, I knew it was morning. We all know when it is. It's not just the sound of the homeless opening the dustbins out on the street, or the stillness of the owls, or the crisp aroma of new beginnings, or the disintegrating reek of yesterday. Dawn has a way of igniting ideas of redemption, of offering solace, of rearranging events.

My room was murky, with secrets plastered onto the walls. The candles were masses of melted snow, the spiders were quiet, the bed sheet was crumpled in the corner. I didn't move all night; I lay there, in the same position as to how he, the mountain, left me. Covered in old vomit, I wished there was a reason. That's all that I wanted, just a reason. If you asked me what I felt, I do not think that I could've answered you. All night I watched the wall and stared at my family photos. They were something that I used to love, but now I hated them, I hated the photos, I hated the frozen smiles, I hated that they saw, I hated that they knew.

Tears spurted from my eyes, but I could not feel them. They flowed onto my vomit and turned it into mush, wetting my cakey grave that cracked as my body moved beneath the mound. My eyes didn't blink; they were frozen into a single moment, trying to make sense of something that they didn't understand. An uncontrollable gust of nausea threatened me, but I didn't care. Let me vomit all of my insides out; I didn't want them anymore. I stumbled into the bathroom and released my innards into the toilet. Everything was dark brown, almost black, lumpy and tasted acidic. In it, I saw Meg's brownies, a pack of cards, Rob's freckles, Doc Martens boots and Dylan's amber eyes. It wasn't the usual hydrochloric acid, it was a chlorine acid, a sulphuric acid, charring and dissolving me from inside out. I hope it takes my heart first. Then my head. After a string of retching, choking and repeatedly emptying my stomach, I leant against the wall next to the toilet, only to realise that the floor was biting cold; that was when I saw that I was completely naked from my waist down. Looking at my torso, I saw a sheepskin jacket and long sleeve top; this was exactly what I wore last night. There was no denying it; what happened last night happened. It was not a nightmare; I really did get drunk on that disgusting farmer's drink, high on weed, and . . .

There is a story that I once knew about a girl who set herself on fire to keep the one she loved warm. They lived on a desert salt pan, it never got cold there, but she warmed herself for him. When she set herself on fire, her hair shot up like blazing coral, like fire coral, like a bonfire of

expression. It swayed to the rhythm of the wind. As she sat there, she screamed within, while she warmed the cockles of his heart.

And . . .

The stinging, bruising, tearing pain in my private part confirmed that Dylan was inside of me. Inside of me. I might have been drunk and high, but some things are imprinted, some things are written in permanent marker. You can unfriend people on Facebook, but you can't delete them from your mind. I thought that we would've at least gone on a date, that we would've told each other how we felt, before . . . Maybe it was supposed to be like that? But why would he leave me naked like that? Why didn't he cover me with a blanket? Maybe I even told him that I wanted to have sex? But did I really say that? I was drunk and high . . . Even if I did, I wasn't in the right state to agree to anything. Surely, he knew that? But . . . But I like him. I knew what I felt when we locked eyes, when he touched my hip, when he called me Freesh, when he made me feel as though I were superior to a snow angel. Even though I've never been in love, I knew what love was. Is that not love? To lose your head? To find someone to run free with? But why isn't he here with me? Why did he leave me? Where is he? If I took a mirror or a magnifying glass and peered into my private part; it would be raw, angry, toffee-apple red, festering with poison. But . . . he was so beautiful. He wouldn't have . . . He wouldn't have . . . me. Get out of my head! Get out of my head! Get out!

Something warm and wet brought me back and dissolved my thoughts in the air like thin smoke. It was pee. My pee. I sat in a puddle of my own making. It stung as it seeped out of me, I pressed my fingers down and applied pressure, but that only made the mess worse. And then it came; the crying, I melted avalanches, I thawed the glacier princess that I was for one night, I thawed her into nothingness. She is gone. That girl wasn't me. Wasn't me. This is who I am, a dustbin, a stinking rotting dustbin. As the hours passed, I sat there in my yellow stench, in old snow, and marvelled at the puddle. I wished that I could slip into it, slip into a new and into a different world, and leave this one behind.

Once I wrote a story about a girl who was called in the night by a singing, silken blue light. She left the man in her bed, and followed it through the streets, over the marches, and into a forest. There was a frozen glittering pond that enchanted the trees around it, enchanted the animals, enchanted her. She stepped onto it, onto nature's glass mirror. The ice sang and with a poof, she fell in. Tadpoles drove up her nose, frogs stepped onto her eyeballs, pond grass dragged her down, she screamed and watched as her bubbles floated to the surface, the grass fingers rooted her head into the ground.

If you asked me if I could take anything back; it would be that I never got so drunk last night, that I didn't wolf down five weed brownies. Maybe then, everything would've been different. Maybe if I didn't vomit so much, he would have stayed the night. How could I be such a disgusting intoxicated person? What if he never wants to see me again, because of how repulsive I am? No that can't be it. He liked me. What if he did reverse psychology on me? Making me

think these thoughts, so that he can get away with it? Making me take the blame? Making me think that I am the crazy one? That I led him on? But there must be a reason why he left so suddenly. But he is so beautiful. He wouldn't. He made me feel special. He made me feel real. He is not the type of boy to leave a girl like that. But what happened? Did he . . . ? Did I . . . ? I don't know, I don't know what is happening to me. Look at me, covered in sludge, makeup raccoon eyes, rotten private part, foul breath, my ankles deep in pee. Look at me. Look at me. Look at me. Please don't look at me. Do anything but look at me. He will come. He will come and all these thoughts and feelings will be gone. Get out of my head! Get out of me! He will come. I know it. The overpowering stench of a dustbin was all the motivation that I needed to jump into the shower. The avocado shampoo and conditioner was ready for me to make a froth of my hair. To extinguish the cigarette smoke, to put the fire-thoughts out. My homemade lavender and oatmeal soap was almost finished, but I scrubbed myself until I was porcelain. I am dirty. Dirty, dirty, dirty. It was a soap only reserved for special occasions or to treat the practically incurable homesickness. Today was a special day, though, because I will see Dylan again. I know it. He will come. I know it. I rubbed sugar onto my lips to exfoliate and sweeten our kiss. Flashbacks of how we locked eyes, the way he smiled, how he chose music, how he smoked, chewed his brownie, the firmness of his sculpted body, the electric current between us made me gasp and feel tingly inside. But then, other things. Smoking on my bed, the crumple of my bed sheets, the ripping of my jeans. No! I shook my head. Get out. Get out! A dress was the perfect outfit for today's situation. My panties were on my jeans, he crushed me like a mountain, he naked-mole-ratted himself inside of me. Get out! Get out of me! – I shook my head, cradled it in my hands. "Please, stop. Please, that's all that I ask. Please stop putting things into my head."

I have another story to tell you. There was a girl who couldn't make her boyfriend happy. Nothing was ever good enough for him. The three-course dinners were tasteless, the fancy restaurants were cheap, the sacrifice of her life was lifeless, the freedom she offered was suffocating. She gave it all and it was never good enough. Years later, she left him for good. She filled herself with foreign oceans, new sediments, a different density. Later, she met him again, and this time he was still too good for her.

I regained my attention with creamy coffee and scrambled eggs, and the hangover was not as extreme as people say it is. Oddly enough, I felt well rejuvenated and energised. Now, all that I had to do was weigh myself, clean my bed sheets, burn sage and wait for him. He will come. I know it. I know it. I know it. Above me, his apartment was still. Maybe he was sleeping. Maybe he was sleeping off . . . everything? To pass the time, I decided to write in my diary.

Diary,

Last night was one of the best nights that I have ever experienced. You will not believe it, but I actually got invited to a party! People actually invited me and spoke to me and really liked me. Can you believe it? They didn't call it a party though, it was pre-drinks or pree's to them, but to

me, it was the best party ever! I didn't even have to try to be cool; I just was. I got drunk and high for the first time ever. I am not proud of it, but University is about making memories. Last night I met a boy, Dylan, and I think that I really like him. I know that I have only known him for a few hours, but he is so beautiful. We had sex last night . . . It was unexpected and hurts in the private area, but that proves that it did happen; we really did have sex. If I can remember correctly, last time wasn't this painful down there . . . but maybe he is just bigger than that other boy? If it didn't hurt, how would I have even felt anything? How would it have been real? If I can feel pain, that means that I am alive.

Love,

F

My phone buzzed; who would message me so early? As I reached for it, I saw that I had fifteen missed calls from my mom. Wondering what the matter was, I quickly unlocked my phone, pressed the WIFI button and waited for WhatsApp to throb with numbers. Right then, I saw the date and time; it was Sunday, 14:34. What? What is this? Is my phone broken? I Googled the time and day; it really was Sunday, 14:34. Is it not supposed to be Saturday? Before I could think about anything, a phone call came rushing in. It was my Mom.

"Hi, Mommy," I answered hesitantly.

"Freesia, where have you been?!"

I gulped and peered out of my window, was something wrong? Was I in trouble?

Everything appeared fine outside, I took a deep breath and answered, "Just in my room . . .

Why?"

"I could not get hold of you since Friday night! Why did you not answer your phone for two whole days?"

Two whole days went by without me knowing it? My heart started beating fast and I felt like I couldn't breath, what was happening to me? Am I going crazy? I wanted to call the ambulance, I think the drugs and alcohol might have triggered an underlying mental disorder.

"I . . . I didn't hear it, sorry." I answered, it was the only thing I could say.

"But you know that you need to check in every evening with us?" She sounded a little bit suspicious; it was as though she suspected something. What if she knew what I did? That I took drugs? That I am such a terrible daughter?

"Sorry, Mommy, I promise that I didn't hear it. I . . . I have been so busy – my psychology test is coming up . . ." There was silence; she didn't reply, "Mommy?"

"Yes, I heard you." Knowing her, I knew her lip became stiff as though she had rigour mortis.

"I have to go now, Mommy; I need to study."

"Okay, my lovely, just check-in before you go to bed, okay?" She strained the last part. Maybe she really did know what I did?

"Okay, I will. Bye, love you."

Before I put down the phone she quickly said, “Freesia?”
I had heart palpitations, what was she about to ask me? “Yeah?”
“Are you okay?”
I sighed within, the coast was clear for now, “Yeah, I am fine.”
“Okay, love you, bye.”

The only WhatsApp messages were from my parents; it was mortifying to even entertain the thought that others might have sent me messages. Why would I have even thought that? How could I even think that other people would like me? I opened the curtains; afternoon beams illuminated my room and carried the smell of an almost elderly day. It really was the afternoon and seeing the students coming back and parking their cars, made me realise that it was indeed Sunday. What happened on Saturday? Did I just sleep? Was I still passed out? Oh my word, Dylan! What if he tried to contact me and I never answered? What if he thinks that I do not like him anymore? There was no question about it, he needed me, and I craved him. I dashed a little bit of mascara on and sprayed Wonderstruck onto my wrists and behind my ears, pulled out a knitted cardigan and strode towards his apartment. Nobody ought to see me; I didn’t want to be noticed. This might seem stalkerish, but I knew his room based on hearing his footsteps stamp above me; it was purely coincidental. It took a tremendous amount of effort to make my hand knock on his door; I just could not believe that it was his door; it was so much more stunning than the other identical doors. My heart went into my throat, I perspired and shook, but all that would be eliminated once he crushed me to his chest and once we became one again.

Knock.
Knock.
Knock.

Knock (I wished I didn’t do the fourth knock! Nobody does that . . . Ugh.) It opened. There was a mist of incense trying to conceal that stuff hippies smoke. Claws of strange instrumental music pulled at my hair.

“Hey.” A faceless male voice from behind the smoke said.

“Uhm. . . Dylan?”

“Come on in.” All that I could see was red embers breathing through the dim light. I stepped in, hoping that my eyes would adjust to the darkness. There were pots of broadly leafed plants, a poster of Bob Marley above the sink and Vans stuffed with dirty socks lying on the floor. On the counter, a bag puked tobacco, hemp paper and filters, and a loaf of dry bread lay next to a collection of plastic coin bags. The voice coughed, and the ember stopped glowing, “So what do you want?”

“Uhm . . .” I ventured deeper into the cave.

He coughed a bronchitis like cough and blew his nose, “I got Granddaddy Purple, Sour Diesel, Super Skunk, Golden Goat, California Orange, White Widow, Pineapple Express.”

He said this as though he was a waiter stating the lunch specials to a prickly customer; I didn't understand anything that he said, was this some kind of cult?

"Dylan?" I threw his name into the dim room. The voice's phone's blue light lit his face; it was not Dylan, but a sickly, wormy looking boy with long matted hair and a fat cigarette hanging from his lips.

"I don't have anything that goes by that name on the market."

"I am looking for Dylan?" I asked.

He stared at me with a yellowish film over his tiny pill-pupils and didn't say anything.

I needed to fill the silence, a conversation made me feel more comfortable than no conversation with a stranger, "Blonde hair? Amber eyes? Tall?" I started to get nervous; why am I in a creepy stranger's room? What would Dylan think if he saw me here?

"Oh, Dyl!" he started wheezing, "Shit, Nah, sorry he ain't here."

I was stunned, was I too late? "He is not?"

"Yeah . . ." he looked into my face, and his eyes changed as though a light bulb turned on, "You do know that he doesn't live here, right? Oh, shit. . . you didn't. He's from Kommetjie. He'll be back soon, though." It felt as though my heart had been pecked by a bird of prey, he left . . . I felt weird that I didn't even know such a fundamental piece of information about him, Kommetjie?

There was nothing left to say; I walked out with just a mumble for goodbye. The corridor seemed endless; my legs could not carry me anymore; I bumped into walls and doors, everything grew dark, nature lost its beauty. Where was he? I need him, I want him, I will die without him.

Fast footsteps, joyful chatter and laughter came from around the corner and brought me back to my senses. It was too late to look for cover, turn around, run away, or jump off the balcony; he was right there; Dylan was right there. Only he was walking with three girls, and two of them had their arms around his waist. They wore fluffy purple jackets that looked like they skinned a bear from the East. He looked down and smiled until he noticed my presence against the wall.

"Freesia, hey."

I almost died at the sight of his face, just a pity that he was surrounded by those pests. Where was my pet name?

"Dylan, hi." I wanted to hug him; I wanted to collapse into his skin. The girls shared secret glances with each other behind his back and smirked at me. Was I not pretty or skinny enough? I weighed myself and I was officially 47kgs. I was skinny, wasn't I? Was I not worthy of Dylan's attention?

Dylan stopped but the three girls continued walking to the foot of the stairs, "Are you well?" He asked uncomfortably.

"Uhm . . ." There we go again; he always had this way of making me brainless and speechless.

He turned to the sniggering pests in their purple skins at the bottom of the stairs and said,

"Cheers, ladies I'll catch up with you later."

Dylan walked towards me by the wall. I folded my arms; I didn't feel good around those girls.

He walked towards me, and as the girls ran up the stairs and started screeching like mosquitoes, the hollow walls echoed their calls back to them, which only encouraged them to continue

screeching non-stop. Dylan and I stared at each other until the screeching grew softer as they faded away into a room far above us.

“Freesh, hey. How are you feeling?”

Somewhere from deep within me I found the courage to answer, “I am really good, and you?”

“Good, Good. Listen, I actually have to go now . . . but how about I take you out for brunch next weekend?”

Did he just ask me out? I reined myself in and let out a coy smile, “Yeah, I would really like that.”

He smiled back and ran his hand through his beautiful hair, “I’ll message you, have a good week.”

I stood there on the cold floor unsure whether to go or not, “But . . . you do not have my number.”

He looked intently at his wrist, “Shit, Freesh, I’m really late; I’ll come around next week. Bye.”

He ran upstairs; his footsteps ended outside the hippie’s room. He didn’t knock, nor did he enter.

His footsteps ended before the door. Why was he just standing outside? Did he change his mind?

The door opened, and the building erupted with the LOUD talking of those self-righteous mosquito pests with their beast-from-the-east skins, “Dyl! Baby, get in here you asshole, we are about to smoke a fucking bong!”

“FUCK YES” Dylan bellowed loudly into the hallway as if he wanted the entire building to hear.

Did he specifically want me to hear?

He never wore a watch on his wrist. And he didn’t leave until Monday afternoon. I know this because I sat in my room, waiting for him to leave, or to come to me. As I waited throughout the whole of Sunday evening, Sunday night, midnight, Monday morning, Monday noon, and Monday afternoon, I snipped my jeans, panty, sheepskin jacket and long-sleeve top into shreds. I never went to class, I never showered, I never ate, I never fell asleep, I never left my bed. With each snip, I severed the memory away, and I sat there on the bed where it had all happened.

Diary,

What really happened was that he

That is what really happened. And I never want to talk about it ever again. It didn’t happen. It did, but it didn’t.

If you asked me if I could take anything back, I think I finally have the answer; that I never met him. That I never went to that stupid party. That I said no. Why do I want other people to like me so much? I don’t even particularly like them, so why would I care if they liked me? I thought about many things after that – soap, that it was my fault, studying, pegasus’s, soap, if only I was not such a disgusting drunk, my blanket, soap, pegasus’s, soap, pegasus’s. And, I thought about you, Dylan. I thought about you as I swallowed the morning-after-pill, and whether you would

one day remember me when you smell my perfume in an Uber on your way back from a bar or
get a whiff of me on a plane as a flight stewardess hands you another drink, on a yacht
celebrating your friend's birthday, while you have brunch with your wife at a quaint café, at your
daughter's Matric farewell. And then, would you remember me?

The Happenings Before They Happen

I like feeling stomach aches, back pain, and the splitting of my sides. That's when I'll start to wonder if I'm sick again. I like being bloated, having cramps, headaches and spasms in my muscles. That's when I'll start to suspect that something is up, and I notice that they begin to suspect something too.

They look at me with an extra glint in their eyes, I really like that – it means that they can smell it in my pubic hair. That's when I know I'm most attractive and yet most vulnerable. After all, you can't deny our instincts; it's biology, bitch. Later, I'll get hysterical, suicidal and manic, but I love it. The paranoia, despair, nausea, jealousy and flaming anger come soon afterwards. I love that too. That's when I know I'm about to have it.

I don't really like the paranoia that much, though, but it makes guys hornier, they say. They are attracted to wild things you see. If I don't catch a fever, or secrete sticky discharge, or feel the swelling of my boobs or feel the bulging of my ovaries, I'll really start to worry. But when all of these things happen, that's when I know I've won.

I especially put white underwear on because I'm blind in any other colour. That'll be when I really know for sure. When I see streaks of blood against cotton, I laugh at them because they couldn't conquer me and make me their bitch. That's when I'll feel powerful. But when I sit back in my pail of blood, I wonder about what could've been.

Nemesia

I told her to buy dark green underwear, because she was a redhead. Any other colour would make her a clown fish, a giraffe, or a can of Fanta. Dark green was better because it made them think that you fell on the jungle floor, covered in banana leaves and stickered with nasturtium sheets. It made them think that they chased you feverishly through a tropical forest, and now that you have tripped and have stumbled over rotting trunks, they stand above you like a ruler. That's how they like it, coarse and sweltering. Predators.

*

It was 04:30 and as I unlocked the door to my apartment, I tore a blank piece of acrylic paper out from my art bag, admired the toothed edges and felt a sense of security in their uneven nature. Geese honked outside and then I remembered why I was back in my apartment building instead of being home for Easter Weekend. The tequila boiled in my stomach and with each breath, I felt my insides rotting and swirling in a rancid mess. I fumbled with the paper and crunched it into a ball. The geese continued to honk outside my window, but I couldn't listen to their night terrors for one more night. These geese needed to shut the fuck up, waddle to the end of the plank and fall, or I needed to slam the window closed. En route to the window, I tripped over my rug and landed on the floor, missing the glass by a few centimetres. As I lay there on my back, warm salty tears dribbled into my ears, I thought, *yeah, what if I had broken my neck right now? Would they have even cared?* With a grumble, I slammed the windows closed, "Fuck you, stupid geese!" Back on the dirty floor, I rubbed the acrylic paper into its former shape. It was still scarred. There was no need for me to think, design a layout or create a mind map; I had everything that I needed inside of me. I squished paint out the way you would squeeze an abscess and smeared the colours with my fingers. All I needed was to let loose, expel my guts and transform the madness into art. The puss infected me with its evil inflammation. It needed to come out, come out, come out of me. The pressure was too much, I could understand why people slice themselves. I just wanted to paint it all away, I didn't care if it looked like shit, there is nothing wrong with art.

With each stroke, it poured out of me, I exorcised the wickedness and stuck it somewhere where it would stay for the rest of eternity. My life spilled itself onto the paper, my brushstrokes created an image, it was up to the viewer to interpret it, but they are full of shit anyways – they don't know how the artist feels. Hours passed, and the paint-puss ran out. I sighed and basked in my artwork, which was licked in red, brown, red and brown. It looked much better than the tabula rasa version that it was before. My hands were painted in colours of unexplainable emotions and as I sat on the floor for the rest of the night, I watched the colours change as they came into contact with oxygen and as the night succumbed to dawn.

An orange haze crept up the window and seeped its way into my room, the paint dried on my hands, my floor was covered in my bloody palm prints, and then I thought back to what

happened earlier on, to the reason I was sitting on the floor, to when it all started with a simple question:

“Hey, Josh?” I asked my Mom’s boyfriend and stood outside his office in our home. It used to be the guest bedroom, decorated with the ocean – striped bedding, a collection of seashells and my seascape paintings. Now, it had been transformed into the definition of minimalism – a glass table, spaceship chairs and instruments that were random but “aesthetically” pleasing.

“Yeah?” Josh was hunched over his latest architectural project and squinted as he measured the lines. He was young, only about 10 years older than me, but my mom likes them young. There was a strain in his voice, but I didn’t want to interpret why.

“Can you buy some tampons for me?” I spat it out, just as I would’ve ripped a plaster off hairy skin.

He choked on his pencil, and after an episode of strangulated coughing he croaked, “Can I . . . WHAT?”

“You heard me.” I didn’t look at him. I didn’t like to look at him after everything that happened between us.

“Nem, I literally just told your mother about the extreme amount of work that I have these days, I’m about to get a promotion so I don’t have time to go out gallivanting for that kind of thing.” I just stood there and looked at him. He looked up and sighed, “You can’t be serious.”

I deliberately fingered the Frida Kahlo tattoo on my wrist, because I knew that he hated tattoos, he thought they were tacky and cheap. I saw his gaze fall on my wrist and the look that I had been hoping for appeared: disgust.

“I am being serious . . . you know that it’s risky for me to go out there a few days before my period.”

A smile stretched across his face, unzipped his teeth and his look of disgust faded away, “Damn you a bad girl.”

This was not the response I expected him to say. “What?” The tattoo didn’t do its magic, so this time I folded my arms instead and tried to look unattractive.

“Nem, I knew you were wild, but this wild . . . we are in your mom’s house for God sakes.”

His eyes moved slowly down my neck and lingered uncomfortably long on my boobs, I folded my arms higher along my chest, “Please don’t make this weird . . . You are my mom’s “boyfriend”, aren’t you?”

His glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose, he had aged, his static wrinkles wrote their harsh story along his forehead, “So you’re on your period hey . . . you are fertile young lady-”

His eyes pupils became dilated and he resembled something like a hyena, “Just get me tampons, it’s serious.”

A Cheshire cat grin engulfed his face, “We can play if you want to, you know? My apartment is empty; we can go there . . . then I can shove some cotton up your pussy.”

The house became uncomfortably quiet, like that moment just before you fall asleep, or when you are about to start an exam, “What th-”

“You know what they say . . . when the river runs red, take the ground road.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He ignored my comment and placed a pencil between his lips, trying to pull off a hot architect look, “I don’t care if you’re on your period anyway though. I’m chilled like that.”

The room became stuffy and clogged, it felt as though someone squeezed my gullet, open and closed, open and closed.

We stood opposite each other; his legs spread apart, as if he were some kind of Roman soldier protecting his turf. His eyes scorched holes into me; I moved backwards into the hallway and stretched my arms out, fingering the wall. My tongue swelled and filled its entire being in my mouth, it pushed against my pallet, it tried to sludge down into my stomach. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t. Images came streaming into my mind – me, him, loud music, me, him, alcohol, dress up party, me, him, me him, his face under a mask, me, him, me not knowing who he was, his face under a mask, his face under a mask, his face under a mask. I tunnelled myself further and further away.

“Nem, come on chill. I’m joking. . . can’t you even take a joke? Fuck, you women and periods. I don’t even think that your mental health condition, that you claim is associated with your period, is a real thing even.” His voice ran along the hallway and pounced along the family photos from the past. Premenstrual dysphoric disorder, is the extreme form of the normal PMS that I was diagnosed with 5 years ago. My psychiatrist even had a client with the same thing that murdered someone a few days before their period, because of it. It was all over the News24. There was no telling what I could or would do when he was alone in the room with me during this critical point of time.

In the kitchen, I stood near the knives, ready to attack if I had to. This would be self-defence, this would be self-defence, this would be self-defence. His footsteps pressed along the wooden hallway, he passed the kitchen, “I’ll buy your bloody tampons. Fucking luxury it is.” he said as he slammed the front door.

I watched him through the kitchen window, hidden behind the cat food, rosemary, thyme and oregano pot plants. He jogged towards the car and looked flustered as he tried to switch the ignition on. He glanced in my direction as he turned the keys, he knew I watched him, but he couldn’t see me through the tinted glass.

I might’ve eaten all the herbs or cat food or became a pot plant. That’s how long I stood there staring at the empty driveway until I snapped out of it. Everything needed to seem happy and perfect when Mom came home from work. I needed to do something to counteract the poisonous vibe, to neutralize the pH level, oranges needed to be added to lemons. So, I switched the oven on to 180 degrees and started collecting all the ingredients for sea salt, pistachio, and vanilla chocolate chip cookies – Mom’s favourite. A knife chopped milky bars and pistachios into bite sized pieces, an electronic mixer mixed the dough, my finger buttered a tray, a spoon dropped the cookie dough onto a tray, a fork pressed down on the cookies, and my hand set the timer to precisely eight minutes.

A car crunched on the gravel outside the gate – he was back. He had been gone for longer than expected, the shop was just down the road. I heard the keys unlock the front door, and as he stepped onto the wooden floor, it creaked under the weight of his life experiences.

“Here you go.” He mumbled as he dropped a plastic bag onto the counter.

“Thanks.” I tried to keep my snappy voice to a minimum, but bad habits die-hard.

He looked at the oven, “Smells good,” and acted as if the previous conversation never happened. He had taken on a serious-hardworking-lot’s-of-shit-on-my-plate kind of attitude.

“Their Mom’s favourite.” I replied coolly, trying to play along with the nothing-is-wrong game.

“Not the cookies. I meant you.” I stopped breathing. Beneath my skin, I fizzled with the uncomfortable memory of . . . of us. I said nothing and started to pack in the dishwasher. He hung the keys on the key holder, stood behind me, watched my movements and after a few minutes that seemed like hours, he returned to his office. When he closed his door, I collapsed against the counter, thinking about that time; I was drunk and a few days before my period, I wasn’t sane in my condition. The keys still jingled on the hanger, a reminder that I didn’t imagine anything, that conversation really did happen, he said those things, he said those things to his girlfriend’s daughter.

I grabbed the plastic bag and went into the bathroom. When I opened it, there was a pink box from a make that I hadn’t used before, it said “For a light flow. We care.” There was something else in there too: a packet of condoms, “Mutual Climax. All day under the sheets.” What the . . .? Firstly, who even has a light period these days? Secondly, was this some kind of joke? I pulled down my pants; my panties were soiled brown in blood that came too soon. I stood with one foot on the toilet lid and slipped a tampon in, even though I knew that it would only last for an hour tops, and stormed back into his office, “What did you buy m-”

He doubled over the glass table, his shoulders shuddered, his face inflamed, he bit his tongue to prevent himself from laughing aloud. As he stifled his laughs, a thick earthworm vein formed along his temples. Behind him, the windows were open and the sea breeze tickled the curtains and made the room salty and cold. He irritated me and I wanted to get this conversation over with before Mom came home.

“You know I bleed like an elephant? And what’s up with the condoms?” I threw the packet onto his desk. It skidded along his table and fell on the floor next to him. He picked the condoms up and moved the packet between his fingers.

Josh looked up at me with a smirk on his face and a sideways smile that he probably thought was cute, “Yeah, I know you do . . . but some get turned on by that.” He peered up at me with a stealthy look on his face and winked, “And consider the condoms an Easter Bunny gift. Now you don’t have to hunt for Easter . . . eggs.”

The timer went off and this gave me a quick reason to leave without having to think of a comeback to say. I walked out of his office quickly, but not too quickly, I needed to keep my cool and I didn’t want to display the regret I was feeling. The kitchen smelt like a Danish bakery, evidence that different rooms are different worlds. From the kitchen window, I looked out onto the street, mist and fog rolled in, mother nature was telling us to stay indoors today. I pulled the

oven mittens on, took the cookie tray out and let them cool on the stovetop. The cookies looked liked mounds of volcanoes on a black beach. I was so lost in my thoughts about Josh and what happened between us . . . that I didn't notice that a fluffy thing leant itself against my legs, and soon enough, little paws stood on my feet – Kitty Purry. I picked her up, cuddling her cute dove smell and breathed her in; I needed to forget about everything. I released silent drops of eye water into her fur, wetting it in patches, making her look slightly comparable to a Dalmatian. She was the only one who understood me, the only one who accepted me unconditionally.

Through my tears I whispered, "Shame, my girl, let's get you some food."

"Meow," Kitty said as I pressed her against my chest, I felt better, her purring activated a steady stream of feel-good neurotransmitters. If I were a kitten, I'd love it if she was my cat-mom. I reached for the packet of cat food, the title caught my eye, "Vegetable Nuggets."

"That's weird; maybe there was no meaty flavour at Woolworths?"

"Meow," Kitty said in a slight tone and looked at the floor. Just then, high heels came clacking up the driveway towards the front door. Birds of excitement and dread stuck in my throat; I dropped Kitty, tidied up my face, scooped the cookies onto a painted ceramic bowl that I made and rushed to open the door before she did. She opened it just as I pushed the handle down. "Hi, Mom!" I screamed, unable to rein myself in.

She was taken aback, her eyes went huge, "Nem . . . oh?"

She peered down and her eyes narrowed. She was uncomfortable.

"I made your favourite cookies for you – the sea salt, pistachio and vanilla chip ones!"

For some reason, she looked shocked and impatient to enter the house, "Ah. . . I see. What are you doing here?"

I moved aside and stood flat against the wall so that she could walk through the hallway.

"Here, have one." I tried to stuff a cookie into her mouth, a game we used to play when I was younger; she would stuff cookies into my mouth and tell me to say "Chubby Bunny" to make me laugh.

She pushed her head away from my fingers that were around the cookie, "No, Nem. Come on, let me just get in and undress into something more comfortable." She pushed me aside, her handbag slamming into my face. I went into the dining room, put the cookies onto the table and broke one for Kitty, who ate it up ravenously. Mom finally stepped into the dining room in a tracksuit, her pharmacy smell simmered away. "Here, they are getting cold, but they are still to die for." I pushed the tray towards her, only to realise that I wasn't allowed to move or drag things across the teak table because it scratches easily.

She noticed but there was something more pressing on her mind, "What are you doing here? I thought you were going camping for Easter?"

"Nah, that was a lie. Of course, I'll spend Easter here! I wanted to surprise you! Surprise."

She was quiet, her lips were firm, she didn't even look at the cookies, "You are full of surprises, aren't you?" There was a viper tone in her voice. Maybe she was just getting *hangry*. "Aren't you going to eat a cookie?" I handed her the biggest one.

“... uh, no.” She looked straight into my eyes with an air of assertiveness. I was quiet and brought my hand with the cookie down alongside me. Why was she being so cold towards me? And why am I acting as though I don’t know the answer to that?

“... Why not?” I spoke through my mouth full of cookies.

“I’m vegan now.” She quickened her speech, “And those cookies have chocolate and egg in them.”

I dropped my mouth open and some crumbs fell onto the floor, I knew this was going to piss her off so I bent down to pick them up, “Vegan? What since when?” She wasn’t the kind of person to become vegan of her own free will. Josh must’ve put her up to this.

“For two months already.” She said with annoyance in her tone and looked longingly at the TV. She always watched series when she came home from work.

“Wow. . . Well, I’m sure you can call today your cheat day? All vegans are cheaters anyways.”

Her head turned sharply towards me, “Nem. . . can you please just stop. I would appreciate it if you could respect my decision and stop being so cheeky. I will not cheat on my vegan lifestyle.” My face burned and I felt awkward because I was still holding the extra large cookie that I made for her, “Vegan lifestyle. Interesting. . . Respect your decision? Ok, jeez. . . Did you respect Kitty’s decision?”

She grew even more irritated, licked her finger and ran it along with the newly made scratch on the table that the cookie bowl just made, “I’m tired, I had a long day at work today, so I’m going to turn in early.”

“Gosh, people and their work these days. . .”

She winced, “What did you say?”

“I sai-”

“No, who else have you been talking to?”

“Josh. . .”

“He’s here?” she asked out of breath. I nodded towards the office.

She threw her hands up into the air, “You know that you two aren’t allowed to be alone without me!”

I stood up, dropping my cookie onto the floor, “I didn’t know that he moved into our home! And used your car!” At the mention of his name, Josh, skulked out from his office and came up from behind Mom and hugged her, “Shhh, honey, you have to trust me.” He whispered into her ear and rocked her from side to side.

She wrung herself free from his grip, “I thought you were busy today?”

“I changed my plans for you, honey, you are my priority. . .” Josh murmured into her ear, dampening her earring. I looked at him and saw him savouring every moment of our argument. Then I looked at her; her makeup ran in streaks down her face; she looked as if she were a cheetah. He loves this, I thought. He loves ruining our relationship. She shuddered, her neck turned crimson, “I don’t feel comfortable about having both of you here, now, after everything.” Her voice was steady, she was skilled in professional confidence, but to me her voice could’ve

shattered a thousand shards of sea glass. Kitty filled the noise by crunching the cookie loudly under the table and purring.

Mom composed herself, covered her eyes and said, “Nem, leave. Please leave right now.” I stood there and stared at them; I couldn’t believe what was happening, Mom wouldn’t make eye contact with me, but Josh did, and his eyes were on my boobs, my nipple eyes. I pushed the cookie bowl off the table, scattering the floor with what was supposed to be our comfort food. The ceramic bowl broke; months of slaving away gone with a single whip of my hand. Why do I destroy everything? How could she do this? She doesn’t mean it, does she? Was she chasing me away forever? Does she hate me because I fucked her boyfriend? Because I fucked her cheating, lying, perving boyfriend?

I grabbed my things, I hadn’t even unpacked and raced out the door. I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t care about anything, so I ran in the middle of the road, hoping that a truck could hit me and end it all. I put my hand out, like those people in New York City do when they look for taxis. It didn’t work; these were only residential cars, filled with happy families driving off to restaurants together or going away for the long weekend. There were no trucks here. This was a safe neighbourhood, so nobody would kidnap me.

I got into a random car with a stranger, it turns out we were headed in the same direction – the central business district. As my driver drove, I looked at the sparkling skyscraper reflections in the window and wondered what it would be like to stand at the edge of one of those buildings. Would anyone even see me from up there? Would I even see anyone down below? He swerved into the wrong side of the road, probably drunk; that’s good, I thought. He dropped me off outside a club; I paid him and headed straight for the bar. It was a heavy metal club, not my usual dance music, but I’m flexible. As I walked deeper between the metal heads and their plumes of smoke, the music started to get me. The screaming was therapeutic.

“Three tequila shots for mates and me, please,” I asked in a forced, normal voice. Then I realised that I wondered what my makeup state was since I had been crying. Fuck that shit, I thought.

“Salt and lemon?” The bartender asked as he dried some glasses.

“Yes, please.”

The bartender was a hottie, but then again, I think everybody is a hottie. Evil thoughts started filtering through my sober head, I began to get twitchy – I needed my fucking alcohol. The bartender placed the shots, salt and lemon onto the table. I wanted to squeeze the lemon into my eyes and sniff the salt right up into my frontal lobes. I downed the first shot, licked the salt and ate the lemon, then the next and the next. I ended up eating the lemons with their peel, blinking back tears and scrunching my nose. When I was done, the bartender was still standing there looking at me, “Bad day?”

“Uh-huh.” Relief sat next to me; I welcomed her very soon hug-to-be.

“Here’s one more. . . on the house.”

“You’re sweet. Thanks.” I said and drank the next shot. It worked; the edge was sandpapered down to a pebble, thank God for the Mexicans. I rolled my eyes into the back of my head and looked at all the memories of my father and sister. This was getting morbid, so I jumped onto the

dance floor and started head banging along to the music. It felt good to rock my brain in my skull; I hoped to head bang some memories right out. While I was headbanging away to a Blink 182 throwback, a girl came up to me and tried to talk to me. I couldn't hear her over the blasting music.

"Your pants!" she shouted into my eardrum.

"What!?"

"Your period is showing through your pants!" This I heard. I looked to see a vast red blossom blooming from my thigh towards the back under my ass. In this light, you could see everything, even secrets. I looked up to see everyone staring at my pants; some pre-pubescent boys were taking photos on their phones. The bartender had his hand over his mouth and chuckled at the feral sight of me. With my fuzzy hair, a bright halo around my head, with my ugly bag, with my witch face, with my stained clothes. The girl pressed a heavy flow tampon into my hands. Everything hurt all over, my back, my legs, my arms, my dignity. Angry tears popped into my eyes; I ran out into the night. I ran and never stopped running. I ran until I dried up all my tears. I ran until my pants was soaked to the rim with blood. I ran until that little tampon slipped out of me. I ran until I reached my apartment door at 04:30.

Freesia

It was a colourless midnight when the bus reached the border between two worlds. This was no-man's land, a place where you could be what you didn't want to be. It offered that freedom and new enlightenment in the stealth of the night. Not even the animals knew who they were. Not even the air particles knew how to stir the atmosphere. I liked this feeling. Hovering. Like the space between oil and water, like that area where brown and white meet on a skewbald horse. What do you call that place? I switched my phone off, and with a passport stamp, I walked away from South Africa. I didn't look back at my shadow, which stayed behind. I didn't wave goodbye either. Over the bridge, I walked, and all the while, the Orange River continued to leak towards its destiny. As I stepped onto Namibian sand, I stepped into myself, into a new shadow without scabs.

*

A rooster fractured the silence as he embraced the rising sun. I wasn't there to watch its steady ascent, but I knew that it climbed the faraway purple mountain, like it always did. And shone between the crevasses, like it always did. I awakened with the avian beings, and with them, I slept, nestled under feathers, cotton and the amenity of a completed day. Sometimes, I'm nocturnal. Not an owl or a nighthawk, but a nightjar. Yes, a nightjar, with its eerie eyes and wings that slice at the sparkling veil. A nightjar, yes, cursed to soar the night sky, doomed to fade in daylight, predetermined to chase satellites. I curled myself into a nightgown and made my way through fog as I opened the chicken cage. I trailed a swirl of poultry feed behind me - a handful of sunflower seeds coated in zebra attire, flaxseeds that glistened like Arabian ants, red sorghum that rolled like goldfish eggs, and corn – the farmer's gold. Later during the day, I sat in the dust and tried to tame chickens with gooseberries. The cocks pranced around me in their pantaloons, the hens waddled under the heaviness of their Victorian dresses, the chicks played snakes and ladders in the dust.

*

There is more sky here than there. It stretched out in a "naughty elephants squirt water" layout, in a way other skies don't. And more blue. Always blue. Trusting blue. A forever blue. Sometimes it's the colour of space when a dust storm thunders past or a shade of pigeon during a cold front from Antarctica. But, mostly, an azure blue. Too blue. If you stared too long at the sky, you might think that you were underwater, and the lucerne field was a kelp forest, but when I propped myself up, there was only desert around me. Endless sand, an unbroken sun, a too blue sky. I fell back down into the lucerne field. Sometimes it's better to be underwater.

*

We plant our crops in winter and autumn because spring and summer are too hot. The black nets are the best for your leafy greens: spinach, lettuce, rocket, mint, basil. When you eat them, a jungle grows inside of you. The white nets are for the roots and bulbs: radishes, carrots, onions, baby marrows, beetroot. These paint your organs in marmalade and tiger. They give you something to hold on to when a famine comes. To make the perfect habitat, you need dried river-sand, horse, sheep and chicken manure, phosphate, bone meal and preferably green fingers. As I push each seed into the ground, I name each one; Mildred, Lee, Sasha, Irving, Raul. After a wash of water, I close my eyes, and move my hands over the soil womb and concentrate on white light energy. Two weeks later, they sprouted, Raul and Lee being the weakest of the lot. Four weeks later, the chickens broke in and devoured everything. At least I knew that my children tasted good.

*

The quest of the Southern wind is to travel as far North as possible, over the Namib desert, beyond the red sands of the Kalahari, across Etosha pan, and into the mighty Okavango river – to tell the Northern wind of our hardships. They swirl together like a cyclone, the birds of prey gliding with them, waiting for a decision. With a treaty, the Northern winds pushed the last of the summer clouds towards our homestead to quench dried skin, to resurrect the soil. Scents of baobab, marula, and makalani palm made our desert trees sway with possibility of change. I jumped bareback onto Escape and released the other horses. We galloped against the wind and stampeded towards the North. The clouds were pregnant like candyfloss, one moment they weren't born, the next they consumed the entire sky. Pink, purple, plum, and a flash of lightning. I saw it. I saw the lightning strike the earth between Escape's ears. I was sure it had cracked a hole in the ground, to set the rain people free.

*

I harvested beetroot that morning. There was a ladybug on one of them, so I set her free. I hoped that she flew to the evening star with her glassy wings – I told her that it was better there. The beetroot boiled for a good hour; I heard them thumping against the aluminium pot, begging me to open up. But I didn't. I peeled their hardy coats off their ruby flesh. As I poured their water into the sink, the spoons, forks, and plates were drenched in a bloodbath. Their beetroot-blood stained my hands. Others might think that I was pricked by a cactus, bitten by one of the hounds, or scratched by a camelthorn tree.

*

At dusk, I boiled water on the stove and filled a bucket with cold water. In the broken shower, I squatted amongst clusters of hair that looked like rats. I poured the hot water into the cold – a meeting of fire and ice. With a measuring jug, I cascaded myself in lukewarm purity. As the water drenched me from head to toe, I opened my mouth to taste it. My hair came alive with water, flyaway's curled along my temples like adders, the heavy mass slinking down my back

like a slug. I became another creature as I squatted, naked amongst silver pots in the fading light, with new hair and eyes that reflected the candlelight. The one that puts on her pyjamas after a shower is not the same one who rose in her pyjamas at dawn.

*

The sheep had pneumonia, and so I scuttled into the herb garden and searched for medicinal herbs. There were calendula and nasturtium. I waited until my hand could fit firmly between the horizon and the sun, then I harvested them. Inside, I steeped the plants in boiling water to make tea. I sucked the tonic with a syringe and stuffed it down the sheep's throat. Sometimes they gurgled and burped. Mostly they fought. But in the end, they all died with unclogged lungs.

*

Guests came for dinner. We had been cooking since noon – Mommy was in charge of the side dishes and Daddy prepared the main meal – leg of lamb coated in thyme, lemon juice and apricot jam. It cooked for three hours in red wine, the smell was enough to drive you into the kraal. Brother made peasants potato soup, served with ale. And me? I made dessert – malva pudding drenched in Amarula syrup. The guests spoke of the never-coming rain, jackals, jackals, jackals, and the never-coming rain. They didn't eat any of the veggies.

*

Something was there on my bed, with me. There was no denying the creak of my bed as it sat down. The only thing you can do is to pretend to be asleep and maybe they'll go away. But they didn't. I knew this because I heard a muffled rumbling sound. Slowly, I opened my bravest eye, I blinked, and I saw it. It was human but had two oversized eyes, a small snout, long whiskers, and pointed ears. It was a werecat. It was strangely more human than a cat as it sat and watched me. Had he come with the buck moon? Had he finally come to take me away? How didn't I hear his jellybean toes pad along the carpet? I stayed put and hoped that he would leave. *She who is bitten under a buck moon . . .* sorry, I forgot the rest of the curse. He never left, but as soon as he came, I fell back into a deep, deep slumber. In the morning, my cat, Pumpkin, shimmered in the light as he lay between my legs.

*

I don't know why, but I had a feeling that I needed to go outside. The day hadn't yet yielded to the night. There was no wind, no sounds; it was just me, the earth and the sky. I walked around and looked at the washing that hung like dead men at the gallows, when a bright light caught my eye. The bright light – interchangeable to a falling plane, or an anglerfish's lantern. "A shooting

star,” I whispered. I didn’t call out to my family – I didn’t want to break the silence. It hurdled towards earth, and then it split into two pieces, one was smaller with a greenish tinge. As quickly as they came, they dissipated into stardust before my eyes, with their absence, the sky surrendered into nightfall. I was supposed to make a wish. I always make the same wish. But I forgot to. How long does a shooting star’s power last for? Out of nowhere, a lone wolf howled, a pause, and then another howl. I heard a wolf, but there aren’t any wolves here.

*

A noise diverted me from my book – the lambs bleated for their milk. Was it that late already? I was their mama, so I mixed replacement milk, heated water, placed it all together into an empty coke bottle, and squeezed a teat on top. I shook the bottle until it turned into a strawberry flavoured Nesquik lookalike. There were three Afrikaaner lambs, all of which whose mother’s caught a bacterial infection, blocking the udders and causing mastitis. Their bellies swelled with each gulp of milk, their eyes closed as the milk foamed at their mouths. They would be tame sheep one day, but they would never be strong. And I would never be their real mama.

*

I went for an evening stroll towards the hills that were usually teacup pink. The further away from our homestead, the taller the grass grew, the louder the sociable weavers spoke. Later the grass became shoulder height. They could’ve been people, millions of silent people walking with me through the dried riverbed, only talking when the wind questioned them, but they never uttered a word when I spoke to them. When I reached the top of the hill, I saw a family of bat-eared foxes, they jolted into the safety of the grass. A herd of springbok grazed below, and not far off, a few oryx roamed on their quest of great importance.

*

I switched my phone on, and with a passport stamp, I walked away from Namibia. I didn’t look back at my shadow, which stayed behind. I didn’t wave goodbye either. Over the bridge, I walked, and all the while, the Orange River continued to leak towards its destiny. As I stepped onto South African sand, I stepped into another me, into the other shadow with scabs; this time, I looked ahead and strangled that shadow.

Nemesia

After painting a self-portrait of how we thought others saw us, my classmates and I walked out of the art building and into the swarm of students. Jade painted a cowering little girl in a corner (true), Rebecca ink-and-washed herself screaming in red, squashed under a boot (true . . . girl, you need help). Kirsten drew a selfie-whore with dog ears, a lapping tongue and cigarettes all around (so true). Ava oil-pasteled herself being best friends with the lecturers (spot on – you are a teacher’s pet. Should’ve oil-pasteled yourself licking their asses). Mara sculpted a figure with a big bootie and thunder thighs (very true, girl, you bootylicious). Max/Desire charcoaled a body with a dick and a vagina attacking each other (own it, baby, you’re beautiful). And me, I painted myself with blizzard hair, kisses all over, tattoos saying “Fuck U”, “Bitch”, “Hoe”, and me pulling the middle finger (they said the accuracy was outstanding).

There was ten minutes in between classes, so many students took this opportunity to buy coffee, cigarettes and muffins. The smell of a freshly baked muffin was too good to ignore, so we walked towards the bakery and did some people-watching. In front of us walked a girl with an oversized handbag, cradling a MacBook Pro and clutching her iPhone to her ear. She wore the latest fast fashion from head to toe and seemed like the type of girl who was only best friend material when she is drunk and waiting in a line at the club’s bathrooms. A basic bitch, I decided. A guy slinked up from her right and hugged her hello. He had a comb over hairstyle, Nike sneakers and an eyebrow slit. He said something about not being able to go to the digs jol because he had to “graft bru”.

It was Wednesday, and I knew that there was a digs jol happening this afternoon. It was a pool party. Do you know what that means? That I had to shave. I stood behind an urban hippie who scrolled on her Instagram page and looked at her posts and stories from AfrikaBurn. I looked at them behind her shoulder and noticed that she wore thrifted clothes. When she reached the front, she ordered a vegan, gluten-free muffin. She seemed on edge when they didn’t have that kind of first-world muffin at the bakery. She needed a joint to calm down.

After I ate an entire muffin with my classmates, we said our goodbyes and promised to meet each other at the pool party after we all shaved and got ready at home.

When I arrived in my apartment, I shaved my underarms, shave, shave, shave, done. The shaving cream was like white chocolate mousse on my legs and smelt like a businessman. I shaved from the ankles all the way up to my inner thighs. Making sure that there were no survivors on my kneecaps. I tapped the razor on the shower floor, *clink clink clink* and pulled the last bits of hair out. I slid the razor over my pubic hair, down the sides, over the lips and left myself featherless, smooth like a dolphin.

Next, I divided my hair into a strict middle parting with a brush designed to hunt lice. I bet my lecturer would be proud of that linear line; whoever said only crazy people could draw straight lines, was a liar. I muttered as I sprayed Britney Spears onto my hair and made tight pigtails on the top of my head. I patted glitter onto my cheekbones, eyelids and collarbone. Now, I was your sparkling diamond.

Jams by Nicki Minaj and Drake know how to put me in the right kind of jolling mood. I popped my earphones in and rapped along to Nicki Minaj's part and hummed along to some of Drake's part, "fuck it, me and hmmm hmmm gettin' married today." All the while, I smothered my body in Vaseline and Bio-oil for that wet look. As I rummaged in my cupboards, I threw out the black bikini – it was booked for naughty nighttime swims. The floral bikini was for tanning in the park. I threw it out too. The full piece was to keep things PG when parents or kids were around. Threw it to the back of the cupboard. The white bikini? YES – let them think that I'm innocent. I pulled the bottoms high over my pelvis to trick the eye into thinking "wide birthing hips" and laced the back strings around my torso for some crisscross action.

Dungarees over my bikini, white platform shoes, retro sunglasses, lollipop in my mouth; I followed the music, the trail of students: girls with ass-crack shorts and guys holding brown paper bags to the jol – a house on the main street with a spray-painted name: "The Mariana Trench". It was pumping inside and swarming with already drunk students and some sly lecturers.

"Girl, you made it! How hairy was your pussy, because shit that shave took long!" yelled Jade. "You know I gotta prepare like its my wedding night!" I laughed as I hugged her.

We met up with the rest of our classmates and headed straight for the punch – vodka, rum, Fanta, Sprite and litchi juice mixed inside an empty (and hopefully) clean dustbin. They said I looked like Lolita, like Iggy Azalea. I said that they didn't look too bad themselves. With red plastic cups, we scooped up the powerful punch, looked into each other's eyes, "cheers," and downed it. Thenscoopedsomemoreanddranksomemore.

Banging tunes thumped in my eardrums; it was deep house, spiced with a few throwbacks. A sidewall was used as a male urinal, the stench overpowering like cat-piss-craft-beer. They stood and sized each other up as they pissed, fenced and wrote the names of girls they wanted to grope, on the wall. Toilets for girls proved to be more problematic since the digs was locked in fear of a future Project X. Some girls squatted in between the plants, taking cover under the flower petals and elephant ear leaves, while their friends guarded them. The entire back garden was used as a dance place; smoke erupted from the twerking and drop-down-low dancers. A DJ was doing his *thang* on that bad boy and controlled the rhythms of our pumping hearts. A small generator stood like an obedient dog next to him – just in case Eskom pulled a fast one on the jol. A plastic baby pool stood next to the beer pong table and was crammed with ripped summer bodies. I needed to get in there. I whipped my dungarees off and walked to the pool to the beat of the music.

"Scoot up, would you?" I said, and a girl moved into the armpit of her conquest; another joined a nearby body. They were stitched up like Siamese twins. I plumped into the stale water, and as I looked up, a purple bikini girl raised her eyebrow at me, glanced at her friends then started to engage in telepathic communication with them. A guy wearing sunglasses with beaded eye strings looked up and smiled, "I'm Troy, this is Caleb, Sam, Paige, Gemma . . ." The list went on and on; how big was this pool? And how skinny were these girls? Didn't they have any asses?

I introduced myself, the guys sloshed the water around and poured a drink for me. I don't want brag, but they were all over me. It must've been the pigtails, my nipple stand or my intoxicating charisma. The girls eyed each other like I was weird. They couldn't see my eyes behind my sunglasses, but you know what they say if looks could kill, they would be dead right now. There were many guys who were easy on the eye, but I was more concerned about leaning my body against one of them for support.

"Taste this." The guy next to me handed his drink over, I tipped the liquid into my mouth and groaned that it was so good and joked that it better not be spiked. He put his arm around me; I couldn't see his eyes because he wore check-you-check-me-back sunglasses.

The purple bikini girl stiffened—she was too cool to say hi to me when I jumped in. She stared at me and gave me the evil eye. It was chronic, so I started to think that she naturally looked like that. Engineering student? Nah. Geology? No way. BCom? Maybe. She grabbed her phone and pressed on an App; the screen turned blue. She held her thumb down for a long time, and the screen changed to something else. It was Shazam. I leaned over and pulled my phone out of my dungarees and Shazamed the song too. We both looked up and smiled at each other when we saw we liked the same jam.

"It's a cool song, hey?" I said over the water.

She nodded and flaunted her teeth, "Yeah, very cool." We looked at each other, and her gaze softened.

A silence as deep as the water filled the air; she looked around nervously, "Aren't you getting cold? I. Am. Freezing."

The guys spoke about random things, mostly their lectures and fights outside the clubs. The girls just stared at them and craved their attention to make them feel alive. My classmates waved at me and went off to dance.

"Uh-huh, it's cold," I answered as she plumped herself next to me. At first, I couldn't hear what she said because the punch deadened my ears, but after a while, I registered what she said: "I'm so cold. Come on in with me, and you can change inside the house." She put her finger over her lips so as not to alert the others.

"Oh, you live in this digs?" I was impressed that she could handle this jol. She nodded as she stood up, the water running down her inner thighs like deltas. I got up too, and as I climbed out, one of the guys whistled under his breath. I followed her through all the bodies and towards the side door, and she unlocked it. We didn't speak, the music too loud for that. Inside, the house was icy, the music dulled into white noise, the tiles stuck to my soles, and I followed her into her room. She was about the same height as me, a brunette with Galatea skin.

"What's your name, by the way?" I asked only to hear my voice.

"Gemma." She turned around and smiled as we entered a lavender room, "So this is my room. You can change here. I'm going to jump in the shower. This jol is over for me." She went into her bathroom.

There wasn't much for me to do besides take off my wet bikini and slide back into the dungarees, "Okay, cool. Thanks." I said, but she already turned the shower on; she probably

didn't hear me. After I changed, I sat on her bed as I put my shoes on. Across from me was her desk toppled with purple stationery. Through the window, students danced and squirted Sour Monkey into their mouths. It was quieter inside. I glanced towards the bathroom; the door was open. The steam fogged up the glass; her body was a blur, a hint of rose-scented soap drifted towards me. Why was I sitting here with a random girl when the party was outside? Just then, she walked back into the room with a towel wrapped around her body. Her makeup was gone, and I found myself thinking that she was prettier naked.

She sat on the bed, "Thanks for waiting, but you didn't have to." It wasn't normal for me to feel dumbstruck around someone. I usually make people feel that way.

"Don't worry about it." I searched for something to say, "Why's this jol over for you?"

She sighed, and after rubbing body lotion onto her legs, she said, "My boyfriend is acting kind of weird."

"Weird?"

"He's been flirting with other girls all night . . . He says he's just being friendly, but I know he's cheated on me before. I just don't have any proof yet."

Now her salty vibe made sense to me, "Why don't you get him really drunk, then ask him if he has ever cheated on you?"

"Tried that already. Didn't work. He's really guarded about that kind of thing." She got up, dropped the towel and walked to the cupboard. My heart pumped in my vagina. I watched her minute muscles shimmer along her shoulders as she reached up to grab something. She put on stripy pyjamas without a panty, "Could you do something for me?" she asked almost painfully. "What?"

"If I showed you who my boyfriend was, could you make out with him?"

I sunk my head into her pillow, it smelt like shampoo, and laughed, "Are you serious? You want me to be your contract killer?"

"Yeah." She acted as if I was being weird and moved towards the window, "He's right there."

She stood there for a while without blinking, her forehead knotted, "Dancing with one of your friends. I saw your group as you came in."

"One of my friends?" I jumped up and stood next to her. There were many people, but then I saw what she meant. Somebody was dancing with Jade. They were talking into each other's ears, smiling; he touched her elbow, his hand grazed the small of her back.

"He will do this all night. Flirt with her, dance with her, lead her on. He does this all the time and then makes out with someone else when I'm not around. Or maybe with her. Then, he says that I am his forever."

"What an asshole," I muttered and felt sorry for her.

"Yeah, I know, right. He even forgot my birthday and begged me to have sex without a condom." Jade laughed as he smothered her with attention; I didn't want her to get hurt; she was so sweet; she meant well wherever she went. She deserved better. I walked out of her room and heard her ask if I was going to do it, that she will stand behind me when the time comes, but I didn't answer.

The music slapped me in the face as I walked out. I had to push past wet bodies, dry bodies, clothed bodies and bodies that were tangled together. I finally reached Jade and the others when I heard him say, “You know, jade has always been the prettiest gemstone for me.” He really was an asshole. Jade blushed and genuinely smiled; I’ve never seen her so happy. This needed to end. I squished in between them, grabbed the back of his neck and pressed my mouth onto his. He resisted as I kissed him, but as I pressed my boobs onto him, I swear I felt him give in a little. You player, I thought.

As I let go of him, I turned immediately around to Jade, “Jade, he has a girlfriend.” She gaped at me, the hurt showing in her eyes and turned them into a murky green. The rest of our friends all had their hands to their mouths and prepared themselves for a potential cat fight. A new song came on, and she still stared at me until she croaked, “Yeah, I’m his girlfriend . . .” Everything froze around me; they were all music statues. All I could see was her and her pond eyes.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Jade’s pond eyes turned shiny, “Nem, he’s the guy I was telling you about. Why would you do something like that, Nem?”

“Jade —” I grabbed her wrist and made her look at me.

“No, get away from me.” She tried to free herself from my gecko grip.

I grew lightheaded and nauseous, “I swear I didn’t know he was your boyfriend.”

“I told you that I met someone, but you never listen. You only care about yourself. You’ve never listened to me!” Her neck and ears turned crimson.

“Jade, I’m sorry, this girl put me up to this. She told me he was *her* boyfriend, and that he was cheating on *her* with you.”

“What girl? I don’t believe you. And so, what you think that it’s a good idea to bewitch him to prove he’s a cheater? Who even does that? You are so sick; you are such a psychopath.” She and everyone else moved away from me and disappeared into the crowd.

I turned around, but the purple bikini girl wasn’t there anymore.

The Country Girl's Kit

She had eaten something rotten again. It must have been the chicken liver pâté from the friendly neighbour or the smoked mussels from the rocky shore.

And so, as her body commanded; she doubled over and vomited her guts out. They looked like spaghetti worms wriggling all along the floor.

She sipped on chamomile tea, day and night, night and day, all day, every day.

She ate all the parsley in the herb garden and poisoned her organs with wild, wild basil. Too much of a good thing can be bad, you know?

She pricked her skin with blackjacks, pricked herself deep and true. The kitchen devil knife that she had always loved became her updated version of the blackjacks. With it, she stabbed at her abdomen and twisted her intestines.

She poured an excessive amount of Dijon onto everything – for that mustard headache.

For breakfast, lunch and dinner, she made cassava chips, cassava pie, fried cassava, baked cassava and boiled cassava.

She squeezed lemon juice into her eyes and glared at the sun. Apparently, you can see Mary, mother of Jesus if you stare too long.

She bathed in boiling water at noon, and while the water blistered her, she crunched bath salts and snorted them deeply into her frontal lobes.

She ran down all the roads barefoot, bleeding and bruised.

She rode horses and begged them to buck her off.

She fell downstairs, sank off chairs and slipped off mountains.

She swallowed Panado, and gulped down mouthfuls of Bleach, Jik and Handy Andy – she was dirty, very dirty.

Doom became her new deodorant spray.

Then she drank heavy liquor – whiskey, brandy, vodka.

When that didn't work, she starved herself in the hope that she would become a dinghy with a hole.

But all the while, the chamomile tea that she drank was high in calcium – the perfect habitat for a little skeleton to grow.

Freesia

I missed my period. It was only when I looked at my diary's calendar that I noticed an entire month without any circled dates. It was during the time when I was home for the holidays. They were like the phases of the moon, those circled dates. Six days, circled in red every twenty-nine to thirty-one days. But this month, there were no phases of the moon. A moonless month. Now that I thought about it, I didn't remember my breasts becoming tender or heavy, nor did I have my usual cravings for a mug of hot chocolate in the evenings. One thing I noticed was that I craved lemony chicken almost every day. Be it squeezed lemon juice on fried chicken breasts or baked chicken decorated with sliced lemon. Food cravings were not new to me, but not yearning for hot chocolate, was new. Maybe it was stress? Exams were well on their way, and I still had a lot of studying to do. Maybe I forgot amidst all my psychology notes? Maybe I circled the dates with that pen that turned ink invisible? I used to think that pen was magical, but now its cloak of invisibility only frustrated me. Or maybe, just maybe, I finally lost enough weight to reach amenorrhea? A small part of me grew excited about the last maybe, but I knew that wasn't the case.

It is said that prehistoric humans and Neanderthals used to think that when a woman was on her period, it was the totem animals fighting each other. Their clawing, biting and ripping, left women bleeding through their private parts. It is said that this was a sacred month, where men forced women to leave their warm hearths and go somewhere far away, whether that be in blizzards or thunderstorms until the fight was over. It was bad luck for others to mingle with the totem world, whose powers were beyond those who dwelled on Earth. It is said that when the cycle was completed, one totem animal won the fight, and the other was left to lick its wounds. There were two possible options. First, go to the doctor for a check-up. They would probably know the answer and give a list of various suggestions and treatments. Second, spare me from the doctor's professional suggestions and treatments, and get a pregnancy test. I decided to do option number two.

Inside Clicks was like being inside a unicorn. The perfume section had every kind of smell, every possible identity, every solution to mask who you really were. The toiletries powdered shoppers with comfort and modern-day soapwort. The essential oils and home remedies made every woman feel witchy. The pregnancy tests were stacked in rows like pink flamingos. I looked left, then right, quickly grabbed one and hid it under a magazine. The waiting line must've been the slowest line that I had ever endured, and I felt as though everyone was staring at me or that they knew what was hiding under the magazine. Why did the lady in front of me keep turning around? Why was the guy behind me breathing down my neck? Why is everyone looking at me? Is there something on my face? Did that girl just look at my waist? The line was sandwiched between condoms, lube and last-minute sweets, all the things directed at the very needs of human nature. The line became thinner and thinner. I wanted to scream if a condom touched me. I'd vomit if lube fell on my shoe. When I finally reached the cashier, pointy nails moved the pregnancy test across the counter. The lady had a fake beauty spot drawn above her

lip with black eyeliner, red cat-eye spectacles, curly bob hair and smooth teeth. I didn't look at her. I just imagined her like that.

Outside Clicks, the mall bustled with shoppers, workers, and girls like me. Usually, I would watch them, imagine their lives, scrutinise their fashion, and maybe even imagine what it would be like to be one of them, somebody other than me. But the way the cashier looked at me when she handed my change made me hurry towards the nearest bathroom. I didn't look at her, but I knew how she looked at me. She had a look that said *you-probably-are-pregnant-skatjie*. An answer was needed, and the toilet cubicle was about to be my fortune teller's crystal ball. Inside the bathroom, white tiles went all the way up to the ceiling, I was alone, and my footsteps echoed along the smooth floor. I creaked one of the doors open. I didn't want to make a sound. As I fumbled with the pink flamingo box, I noticed there were three white sticks inside.

The instructions said to:

1. Uncap the lid.
2. Place the stick into a stream of urine for fifteen seconds.
3. Put the lid back on and wait for a minute.
4. One line = negative.
5. Two lines = positive.

I sat on the toilet seat and prayed for it to be negative. My pee was shy. With a sigh, I tried to relax my muscles, and I thought of the sea. Somebody walked into the bathroom, followed by the sound of wheels, detergent and lapping water. My pee must've heard that water because a warm liquid trickled out. I stuck the stick into the stream. I prayed for it to be negative. I would do anything, just please let it be negative. It was two lines. I did another test and another and another until I did all four of them. They were all two lines. I was pregnant. I was pregnant. I was pregnant, pregnant, pregnant, pregnant.

I was a product of nature. This was my fate. The crystal globe clouded all around me. Dark mist poured over the floor and into my toilet cubicle. There was nothing to do but to break out in tears. My heart ached and my shoulders slumped down. I lay my head in my hands and cried silently into the spaces between my fingers. I didn't know what to do, what I wanted, or what the right thing was. I was pregnant. I wasn't ready to be a mother, I hadn't completed my education, I had no money, the baby would grow up fatherless, I would become a family scandal, my parents would hate me, and if I had the baby, it would hate me too for not being a good enough mother. We barely knew each other, and he made it perfectly clear that he didn't want anything to do with me. Is this my fortune, fortune teller? I was pregnant. I wondered if I should tell him, but would it make a difference? I was pregnant, and I didn't know what to do. An option came to mind, but it made me feel despicable. I was pregnant. I was pregnant. I was pregnant. There was a skeleton growing inside me. I wanted to stay in the toilet cubicle for the rest of my life, but the cleaner knocked. The only thing that I could do was go to the nurse at Clicks. I knocked on the door, she opened it, and I entered her tiny room that advertised cold and flu medicine on the

walls. I told her that I was pregnant and didn't know what to do in between my sobbing. She hugged me, rubbed my back and didn't mind my trail of snot on her shoulder. She smelt like custard and felt like pudding. Her rolls poured over me as she cradled me. She said that I could go to the government hospital, it was free, but it would take about a week before I would receive treatment. I couldn't wait that long. I needed it out of me. The skeleton needed to leave. She gave me a number of a gynaecologist and said that all the other doctors in town are against abortions. She let me stay in her room until I had the strength to leave. As I ran home, I remembered it was raining, but I didn't feel anything. The natural contraceptive brew that I made never worked. When I needed nature the most, it wasn't there to help me.

The doctor's waiting room had artworks of pregnant women, babies coming out of the birth canal, mothers holding their new-borns, umbilical cords tied and cut. They were all scribbles on canvas, but I knew what these scribbles wanted me to see. Opposite me, a content looking couple leaned into each other. I imagined what it would be like to come with your partner to get your first ultrasound. It would be special, I thought, to be treated as though you were a porcelain doll, to know that you were about to become a little family, to cherish the last time when it was just the two of you. Afterwards, you would probably go to a cafe and share a croissant and steal secret kisses. Behind the table, an overly friendly secretary tapped loudly onto the keyboard, took long sips of coffee and answered the telephone with, "Doctor Hawthorn's practice, how can we help?" There was a fishbowl on the counter with orange fish swimming clockwise. She looked at me, glanced down at the registrar and looked at me again, then sprinkled a handful of fish food onto the surface. The fish shot upward, to which a cat jumped onto the counter and glared at the fish. The door opened, and a heavily pregnant woman with her husband came wading out. Her smile made me smile. His expectant eyes made me tear up. The white coat peeped out, looked at the waiting room and stopped when he saw me. He told me that I was next. The doctor's office was an exact replica of the waiting room, with the scribbles of the birthing process. The cat followed me into the office and jumped onto the table to stare at another fishbowl bubbling with fish. There was no need for me to be friendly, just decent; he knew why I was there.

"Can you tell me why you are here today?" He asked as he folded his hands together. His question took me aback, surely, he knows who I am, "I . . . phoned two days ago about the . . ." I looked outside the window; a mother and daughter cycled past in matching pink bicycles. He leaned forward, "About the?"

"I haven't had my period for a month." I looked down as I said it, then realised that I didn't even know what he looked like.

He sat back in his leather chair; the hinges squeaked under his weight, only after a while did, he say, "Ah . . . *that* phone call." I could tell that he didn't forget phone calls if they were about abortions. He knew why I was here. Why did he want to torture me like this?

I looked down at the fishbowl and waited for his next question. He caught me staring at the fish, “Ah . . . these fish . . . I have a fishbowl in every room, they breed like maniacs, but I don’t have the heart to exterminate them.” I flinched at his statement.

He changed the topic from extermination to management, “Are you on birth control?” He asked, and I shook my head, no. “Why not?” He didn’t seem empathetic or have that paternal atmosphere most doctors have, or maybe he was like that with people like *me*.

“I . . . didn’t think it was natural.”

He sighed, “You know, some girls don’t take birth control because they can’t afford it, or because they have an underlying physical condition that permits them unable to, or because they don’t want their parents to find out. But you . . . don’t take it because you think it’s *unnatural*?”

He scoffed and frowned at me across his table, across the fishbowl, across his felt-tipped pens. When he spoke, spit landed on the table and left a dark mark. I wasn’t on birth control because my parents would think that I was sexually active. They would disapprove. They would think that I was filthy. They believed in sex after marriage. I couldn’t let them hate me; they were the only ones who loved me. And, because I feared weight gain more than anything. If I wasn’t skinny, I would be ugly and disgusting. But I couldn’t tell him that.

It was as though he read the last half of my thoughts when he said, “It’s only a myth that birth control makes you gain weight. It might increase your appetite, but you can learn to control what you eat.”

There was nothing to say, so I just let his statement hang in the air. If I opened my mouth anymore, my heart would’ve escaped, or a feral sound would’ve filled the room.

He asked me to get onto the chair and take off my shirt. I sat on the chair, and he tossed a robe towards me. It fell onto the floor. He didn’t pick it up but instead eyed me like I was one of his fish that ought to be exterminated this time. After I bent down to retrieve the robe, he squeezed lubricating jelly onto my abdomen and moved the ultrasound around. By the look in his eye, I could tell that he loved his job. He was probably good at it too. The screen was fitted onto the wall so that both patient and doctor could see comfortably. But I turned my head away towards the table with the fishbowl and pretended that I swam with them. I could pretend all that I wanted to, but I couldn’t escape the cold jelly, the hard bed, the mean stranger and the shame I that I felt. The ultrasound moved over my uterus, he tried to explain each organ to me, the ovaries, the fallopian tube, the uterus, but I didn’t care. He continued to move the ultrasound when he said that my uterus carried a single embryo.

It was under eight weeks, so I didn’t need an abortion by surgery. He gave me some pills, told me what to do and made a follow-up session for another ultrasound to see if it was expelled appropriately. I said bye without looking at him, but he said nothing. The secretary smiled at me when I came to pay. She needed my address; I wrote down a fake one in a suburb where all the rich people live. I left as soon as I could and stepped into the most desolate day of my life and cried with the rain. It rained and rained and rained, but everywhere I went, I died of thirst, drought and heat. It was a soft pattering rain. A gentle drizzle to make the flowers shiny again, to let fish know that there is a world beyond their pond. I didn’t have an umbrella or a rain jacket,

this town had four seasons in a day, and I thought it was summer. The streets were quiet when it rained. People here fear the rain. Some worshiped it like we did, for the grass to grow on the farmlands, for the animals to survive. But here, rain washed away all that people wanted to hide. They were imperfect under the force of nature. There was no way that I could return to the emptiness of my apartment – forced to face the reality that two would lie on my bed, two would shower together, two would eat together. I couldn't be alone with myself right now, so I went into the botanical gardens, where I passed the rose garden, passed the lily pond, passed the living stone lithops and turned into the tropical section. It was humid there amongst the banana leaves, the thick bladed grass and heart-shaped bushes. I sat under a broadleaf that was bigger than me, brought my knees to my chest, wrapped a leaf around me and wept into the stream. It must've been hours that went by because the rain quietened, the sun came out, and birds shook the wet trees to life. It was only then when I noticed the stream around me, with the orange and white koi fish. One popped its head up from the surface and opened its mouth at me. I just stared into its mouth and wished it was a black hole.

Nothing happened after the first round of pills, but it was the second round, a few days later, that I needed to watch out for. I didn't go to class, and I didn't send a sick note either. Nobody would even care or notice if I wasn't there. I wanted to be alone, but I also wanted company, like a fish in the corner of a pond filled with other fish who swam by every now and then. But I wasn't a fish. Maybe I'd be a fish in my next life. I popped the pill under my tongue, and immediately an earthquake shuddered throughout my body. I collapsed onto the floor and made my way towards the toilet, whimpering as a beaten dog would. When I reached the toilet, I vomited from the front and the back at the same time. The contractions came, where each spasm bent and twisted my spine as though I were a changeling. I shivered uncontrollably. Warmth was what I needed. I turned the shower on to boiling lobster and sat in it for the rest of the evening. I spilled all of my insides onto the shower floor. Jelly-like blood poured out of me like chum, and diarrhoea found its way in between my toes.

I stayed in bed for a week, in my pyjamas, with a period pad attached to my panty and watched the same movie, *Tulip Fever*, over and over. The build-up of stress, hormonal changes and the abortion left me depressed. I didn't focus on my studies anymore. I didn't eat healthy meals anymore but rather opted for fast food deliveries instead. When I didn't watch the same movie over and over, I spent hours convincing myself that I did the right thing, that it wasn't murder, that I did it a favour, that it wasn't even a proper thing yet. When I didn't think of that, I thought of the koi fish from the botanical gardens and whether I should set it free.

When I felt a little bit better after pouring my body with everything, I deprived it of: burgers, pizzas, chocolate mousse, ice cream, I decided to go to the botanical gardens to see the koi fish. I read on the student news that feral cats came in occasionally and fished the koi out, to which they would pierce them with their needle-like fangs and eat their wriggly flesh like overripe fruit.

I sat near the stream and cried again, aiming my tears to fall into the water like last time. They did, and the koi fish must've sensed my spirit in each droplet of saltwater because the same orange and white koi came up and stared at me with its gaping hole. When I was sure that there was no one around, I caught him with my bare hands. His scales shone rainbow-like, he flapped viciously in my palms, but I held on tighter and quickly dropped him into a plastic bag and filled it with stream water. I tied it closed and put him in my backpack and when I walked home, I checked every few minutes to see if he was okay. At my apartment, a fishbowl and yummy looking fish food waited for him. I bought these things a few days ago, but this was only his home in transit until I found the perfect place to set him free.

Little by little, I felt better when the fish was in my room, and I started focusing on my studies and going out into the sun again. Time went by, followed by the most painful period I have ever had, and I still hadn't found the perfect place to set him free. The truth was he filled a void within me, but it made me sad to see him so lonely; his fishbowl was so small and empty. I didn't name him because I didn't want to make him real. While I was on a walk, I found the perfect dam for him not far from where I stayed. It reflected the mountains at sunrise and sunset, had dairy cows roaming nearby, a horse riding stable just up the hill, water birds, and I bet it had a beautiful underwater world. It was the kind of place that I thought he would like, it suited his personality I thought. It was a sad day when I knew I would never see him again. With a pet bird, they might fly by you while you walk to class one day, or a cat might watch you from the trees, but a fish? A fish would only come with a calling. And how long would he remember? I put him in his old plastic bag and popped him back into the same backpack. I chose the perfect night – it was a sickle moon night that sparkled like a druid's knife. With a heavy heart, I took him out, held him in both hands and kissed him long and hard on his head. He tasted like smoked salmon against my lips. As I suspended him above new water, I watched him gape for air, for life that was in my control. A wind picked up and blew the peppery scent of the Eucalyptus trees over the dam's still surface. A cow bellowed at the sickle moon, a bat whooshed past, stones slipped into the water, and then while he gaped relentlessly and squirmed in my hands, I lowered him slowly above the dam. For some reason, I wanted to see him suffer. I wanted him to know that suffering doesn't last forever and that after a period of pain, happiness comes. I didn't know what trickster bewitched me to almost kill him that night, but thankfully there was something inside of me that snapped me back into reality. It was only then when I was aware of how long I held him above water, did I lower him into the dam just before he suffocated. He floated on top of the dark water. His white and orange patches gleamed with pride. For a moment, I thought that I killed him. But with a flick of his tail and dollop of water, he swam away until all I saw was murky water under the moonlight.

Nemesia

Baked the cake – check.
Wrapped the present – check.
Wrote the card – check.
Dyed hair – check.
Face done – negative.
Outfit on – check.

It was Roomie's 21st birthday party this afternoon. Michaela decided to make the theme *Alice in Wonderland*, so she booked an outside table at one of the wine farms for a high tea. With the Coetzenburg Mountain in the background, carefully snipped bushes, a vineyard and the historic Cape Dutch house – it was the perfect place for a high tea.

Now, normally, I would be Alice, but that, of course, is Michaela. She made a WhatsApp group, where everyone had the opportunity to book which characters from *Alice in Wonderland* they were going to dress up as. After a fashion show created to show off our costume, the best dressed would win an R300 bar tab. As her roommate, I knew exactly when Michaela posted the information on the group. Call me a stalker or a very attentive roommate, but I just got vibes with these kinds of things – so I had the upper hand here and booked to go as the Red Queen before anyone else could – it was my personal mission to win the bar tab.

On WhatsApp, I stalked all of her friends that were invited to the party. They were all strangers, but judging from their profile pictures, I decided that none were as Red Queen worthy as I was. Michaela and I had lived together for a while. We often went out to bars during our first few months, cooked together, and binge-watched *Love Island* and *Ex on the Beach*. But then she met her boyfriend, Mike, and everything ended just like that. The longer her tongue was plastered onto her boyfriend's pallet, the more our relationship fizzled away from what could've been a deeper friendship. In the beginning, I was annoyed about this because I always wanted to be tight with my roommate. It would've been as though we were sisters. This was probably too much for me to ask for, anyways. Everyone knows that a sister can't ever be replaced, and I should know that more than anyone else.

After a while, I realised that Michaela and I wouldn't have been compatible as friends. We were better off as roommates that kept our personal lives to a minimum from each other. Firstly, she wasn't interested in art, she didn't see the point of it apparently. And I wasn't interested in what she studied – Accounting. Secondly, she didn't get as wasted as I did. Of course, I can't force somebody to drink with me but come on, we were students. This is what we are supposed to be doing at university. And if you ask me, she wasn't a "normal" student, because she played house-house with her boyfriend. They were close to a young married couple, all cooped up in her bedroom. Thirdly, she wasn't crazy enough for me, not even a dreamy kind of crazy. As in, she wouldn't dare try and experiment with recreational drugs. And for the dreamy crazy – she wouldn't bother to try to imagine anything outside of the ordinary, and when I did, she'd say that

I was paranoid or schizophrenic. Either way, Michaela wasn't a bad roommate – she washed her dishes, paid her rent, kept the bathroom clean after she used it (except when it was soiled after her boyfriend punished the porcelain), and she didn't steal any of my makeup. We had the occasional girl talk where she would gossip about all the annoying things her boyfriend did and said and acted like and didn't do and should've said and shouldn't have acted like.

I bought the Red Queen costume online at a dodgy store. It wasn't perfect and didn't look like the dress in the movie, but hey, I wore the dress, the dress didn't wear me. The washbasin was stained in red liquorice and mascara fingerprints as I coloured my hair in a deep red velvet shade with a dye that doesn't last more than three days. While I dried my hair, I heard Michaela humming along to Avril Lavigne while she transformed into Alice. Her humming made me smile. I didn't need any music to get me in the mood. Her energy was contagious, anxiety and all.

I leant towards the mirror to apply my new face. With red hair, I was different. I wasn't the Nem that everyone knew me as. It felt liberating to be somebody else for a change. Someone with no history, regrets, mistakes, anger, or family problems. The Red Queen had her fair share of issues, but like I said, I wasn't an exact replica of her visually. Now I was just a pretty cover with an empty inside, parallel to a beautiful bed sheet but with no lovers underneath the covers.

I powdered my entire face white, drew black eyebrows two fingers above my own, and coloured my new long eyelids blue. A musky scent came up beneath the door, the humming stopped – Michaela was done. This hurried me a little. We needed to be on time for her tea party. A moan, followed by something deliberately falling onto the ground, came from her room. I raised my voice and asked if everything was okay. Her door opened with a bang, and her footsteps walked confidently towards the bathroom door. She opened it without knocking and stormed in with a blue dress, white apron and pumps. I thought she looked okay, but I secretly knew that I would've made a much better Alice.

She didn't look at my transformation. She probably guessed that I looked better than her anyways, "Mike is going to miss my 21st!" She sulked while she stared down at her phone and tapped at it furiously.

"What! Why?"

"Remember when I said that he was taking the bus from his parent's house to here?"

I nodded as I worked my lipstick on. Michaela didn't wait for me to finish my last nod when she said, "I thought that he already arrived this morning and that he didn't message me because he was busy sleeping the bus ride off. But it turns out that the bus broke down and they are stuck in the middle of nowhere. . . He had to walk like 5 kilometres just to get a signal in a random *platteland* town to tell me this . . ." Tears pricked her eyes; I knew what was coming – I lifted her chin up and blew into her face.

"Oh. My. God. I seriously can't believe his planning! I don't get why he didn't take a plane. Roomie don't cry. His stupidity is not worth ruining all of your face admin."

She didn't listen to me and started to vent all her frustration out, "He didn't take a plane because it's bad for the environment! I just can't believe that he's missing my 21st! Like it's the most important birthday party in the whole world. He can't miss it. . . If he misses it, then I would have to consider breaking up with him . . ." She slumped down, crossed her arms and sat on the toilet. Her phone flashed with every incoming message. I assumed they were from Mike.

Over the past couple of months, their relationship was on the rocks. Long story short, Mike thought she was too clingy, too controlling and too boring. She thought he was too flirty, too unreliable and too much of a dark horse. Since Mike was a drama student, he often lost himself in roles and this irritated Michaela, whose brain couldn't handle any kind of artistic notion and she worried who the real Mike was. "Well, you guys have been fighting for quite a while now. Maybe this is a sign? Anyways I wouldn't be too sad about it. There are millions of guys out there. Just the other day, I saw such a hottie, I almost died."

"No, but I love him." Michaela whimpered as she looked at his messages. She double-blue-ticked him without replying. That's my girl.

"Fuck love, girl. Come on, we gotta go. You and Mike can't both miss your 21st."

*

The tea party was from three to five-thirty, it's a good sedentary time, that makes it seem like going out to bars is not a priority anymore now that you are 21. You are apparently an "adult" now, and a super mature one at it too. I smirked at all this 21st bullshit. My therapist told me that only after age 25 are we officially adults because our adolescent brain is finally finished developing. I honestly didn't get why turning 21 was such a big deal. What was there to celebrate about becoming financially cut off from your parents, and getting an increase in cellulite and wrinkles?

Michaela chose the ideal place for a civilized *Alice in Wonderland* party. As we made our way over the damp lawn towards the table tucked between in the vineyard, water soaked through Michaela's pumps and threatened to soak my black Doc Martens. Suddenly, the light saturated the trees into maple syrup and Coetzenburg Mountain loomed over us the way a magnificent secret would. I pulled Michaela towards me and snapped a few pics for Instagram. Triangle streamers hung from the trees, they reminded me of little kid's birthday parties. A long table was set with sponge cakes, floral teacups and champagne (it wasn't champagne because it was South African and not French . . .), and since Michaela loved Avril Lavigne, it was the background music to her party. We still had a few minutes before her friends arrived, so I tried to get Mike out of her mind by taking selfies of us in this beautiful scenery. If she posted these photos on Instagram, they would make him jealous. Which was good.

Michaela's friends arrived – there were Tweedledee and Tweedledum, four rabbits in a blue waistcoat, Absalom, The White Queen, Mallymkun, someone with a codfish on their head, and about five Mad Hatters.

“Hello, daaa-ling. How yooo?” They all greeted her and hugged me with a “How yoo?” whisper in my ear. After a series of posting their Instagram stories, they all sat around the table, drank tea and spoke of accounting and what a pity it was that Mike couldn't make it. Accounting wasn't my strong point. I failed that shit in school. When they asked me what I studied, I could tell that they didn't like my answer, but I didn't give a fuck. There were moments when I tried to redirect the conversation to Instagram, the clubs, Cotton On and even the damned architecture of the wine farm. But it didn't work – I had to endure listening to them rant about how difficult Accounting was, what a great accounting-filled future they were bound to have and how BA students have SUCH an easy life. I rolled my eyes at them and decided to flirt with some of their boyfriends just to piss them off. Michaela shot me a look when I preyed on the closest boyfriend I could find (he was dressed as the Mad Hatter), but I shot her a wink back. It was at this exact moment that she decided to start rating who the best dressed was. We each did a little fashion show around the table to a more upbeat song than “Skater Boy”. Since, I'm hmm what do you call it . . . extra? I jumped onto the table, slut dropped, twerked and shook my hair into some random girl's face.

I could hear Michaela screeching out of embarrassment and nerves, “Nem! You are such a tease!” The guys all smiled at me (look, I knew that I was fun) and the girls glared at me after they saw how popular I was with their boyfriends. Did I detect a hint of envy? Shame.

In the end, Michaela was crowned as the winner, but this wasn't a surprise because with the show I put on, damn I deserved a role on *Step Up*. I got the R300 bar tab and took this as an opportunity to escape all that accounting babble before the speeches started.

At the bar, I slumped against the counter with my hand against my cheek and contemplated why I wasn't having fun.

1. This party was boring.
2. Roomie's friends were boring.
3. The second point offers a substantial reason why the party was boring.

“You can't always blame other people . . .” My mom's voice jumped inside my head. Another voice entered my head, it was my therapist's, “You have to look at your own behaviour as a reason for your problems”. A pang shot through my body, but it got worse when my dad's voice weaved its way in, “You have to be more responsible, my angel . . .” It was the last thing that he ever said to me. Tears welled up inside, my heart thumped bunny-like, my hands grew hot – I was going to break. I needed to forget. I needed to take the edge off. I needed my fucking alcohol. I ordered a whiskey on the rocks. That usually does the trick.

Whiskey was something that dad and my sister both hated – it wouldn't bring back any unwanted memories of them. A crystal glass slid up beside me, I downed the whiskey within seconds. I

sighed, leant against the counter, ordered a vodka shot and watched the tea party from the window.

“The speeches are starting soon.” A Mad Hatter with a Southern American accent said as he slid up beside me. He wore a mask that covered his hair and neck and wore a plain brown tweed suit with a red bow tie. Apparently, there was a sixth Mad Hatter that I didn’t see at the tea party.

“Another vodka, please. And one for my friend here, too.” I signalled to the barman.

“So, we’re friends now?”

I smiled, it was refreshing to hear his foreign accent, “I need a drinking buddy at the moment.”

“No, I mean, the Red Queen and the Mad Hatter hate each other in *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“Oh, you’re a fan? Heh-heh-heh. Yeah, we can be friends, why not? What’s your name?”

“Michael. And you’re Nemesia. It’s a nice name.”

“Michael . . . I feel like I know a lot of people with that name. Yeah, I’m named after a flower. I should’ve been named after a weed or poison ivy or something.”

Our vodka came. He didn’t reply, which I liked. He didn’t hover or try to pry me open like other people that I knew. He told me that he ran late but came right on time to see me twerk on the table and win the bar tab in the shelter of the vines. When he saw me run to the bar, he saw it as an escape as well because accounting was not his thing either. He hadn’t even greeted Michaela yet, that’s how badly he needed to get a drink. I asked him how he knew Michaela, because she wasn’t the type to mingle with foreigners, she was a proudly-South-African-kind-of-girl only. It was then when I was shocked to find out that Michaela planned to study her post-grad in the USA, and she met Michael at the USA exchange student program on campus. My surprise wore off once the vodka mingled with the whiskey in my bloodstream. Other than that, we spoke about university, how he used to be a drama student (but took up lecturing English instead) and about his home in Texas. His accent reminded me that I may have had an American lecturer for English, but I wasn’t 100% sure because I never went to class. I turned to look at him. To really look at him. His mask had crazy orange hair, one blue eye, one green eye, white eyelashes, and a top hat. He looked like the exact replica of the Mad Hatter from the movie. I gasped. He made me feel stimulatingly weird. I didn’t even know if he really looked at me or not. The strange thing was that, although I only saw his mask, I felt like I really saw him.

I didn’t even know who he was, but I couldn’t deny my excitement. And damn that American accent was doing wonders to my clit.

“Let’s get some air?” It was more of a command than a suggestion as he picked up both of our drinks before waiting for my reply.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” I made my way towards the sign that said “RESTROOM”. He muttered something and walked behind me, so I presumed that he needed to go too. Just before I reached the door, I turned around, grabbed him by the collar and pulled him inside after me. I knew there was no one in the bathroom because I had been eyeing it as a potential area to get to know this guy more . . . deeply. He laughed at the fun of it and put his hands on my hips as he

pushed me against the wall and kicked the bathroom door closed. While he moved his hands over my dress and fumbled my boobs, I unbuttoned his shirt to feel his pecs. A waft of male cologne poured out from his armpits. It smelt like Hugo Boss that's always on those posh guys who wear polo shirts. He didn't take his mask off and I didn't want him to either, it made me wetter when I didn't know he was. At this moment, he grabbed my shoulders, walked me backwards into the nearest cubicle and shut it closed. I kissed his pecs and loved the feel of his man-heat beneath my fingertips. He turned me around to face the toilet. There was a moment where I thought that he was going to gently unbutton my dress, but he twirled his fingers around my hair – twisted it as though it were a pig's tail, then laid it along my spine instead. It felt good that the Mad Hatter choose me over those other characters, especially over the fucking White Queen. I loved the thrill of *who* I was about to fuck. He could've been my classmate (the unnoticeable middle-seater), my neighbour (the one who never opened his door) or my English lecturer hiding behind the painted face. There was something familiar about him though. It might've been the feel of his hands (had we shaken hands before?) or his natural odour (have you jogged past me before?). The rush was like heroin in my veins. Like a helium balloon laughing fit. Like a sugar high.

Suddenly, a tunnel opened between my legs. The treasure lay in the pit of my stomach. His breathing changed, my breathing changed, his heartbeat quickened, my heartbeat quickened. He knelt, ran his hands down the insides of my legs and lifted my dress up high. My lips spread apart like the entry to a diamond mine. I unzipped his pants and shucked it off below his ass, then he pressed his thighs tightly against mine. Okay . . . he breathed a little bit too loudly for me . . . doesn't he know that's a turn-off? He rubbed his swollen, slimy member against my entry. I guided him in, and he travelled until he reached the door that guards the diamonds.

I wanted the Mad Hatter to fuck me hard. I wanted his bells to jingle, his hat to fall off, his smile to wipe away. He moved in faster, harder and banged against the treasure chest door. In and out. In and out. He fitted in perfectly. It was as though we had fucked before. He pulled my dress straps down so that my breasts tumbled out. He held my breasts in his hands and twirled around my cherry nipples. I wanted to scream but couldn't. My vagina opened wider, and I begged for more. He was attached to my vagina wall. Stuck. He held his breath, and then I felt a squirt inside of me. The doors opened, he sprayed his seed onto the treasure, and it erupted - I moaned under my breath, thrust harder, jerked and throbbed. After my last throb, he slid out with ease and exhaled as he said, "The speeches are starting now." in a not-so-Southern-American accent. But I didn't take this too seriously because I was too preoccupied with my post-orgasm glow. I opened the door and we stood in silence in front of the mirror while we re-organised our costumes and washed our hands. I watched him as he tucked in his shirt and looked at his watch. We must've made eye contact through his mask because he started to chuckle and shake his head. We both laughed at the craziness of our behaviour, God it felt good to be so irresponsible. We never peed, we never needed to. I forgot everything that I wanted to, and that was all I needed him for.

The speeches started without us, and I heard Michaela over the microphone say, “Nem, you’re up next. Nem? Are you here?”

“Oh, fuck . . . I forgot to write a speech.” I giggled as I grabbed the Mad Hatter’s arm as we were about to make our way over the lawn. “I gotta go, I’ll see you afterwards?” He nodded and stayed on the veranda while I ran across the lawn and into the vineyard towards Michaela.

“Looks like somebody enjoyed that bar tab . . .” Michaela joked as I took hold of the microphone and stuck my tongue out at her playfully. After one of the best freestyle speeches ever, which ended with me dropping the mic (and breaking it), the tea party ended, and everyone headed out to the nearest bar. I scanned the veranda for the American Mad Hatter but couldn’t find him. I wasn’t going to chase after him, if he wanted to hang out with me after the party he would’ve been here. While everyone ordered Uber’s, I said bye to Michaela and told her that I’d see her at home. This was the one time in my life that I turned down an opportunity for a good jol.

When everyone left, I returned to the bar and bought everything that I could with the remaining bar tab and walked home. The wine farm was situated on the outskirts of town, so it was only about 2 km’s from where my apartment was. As I walked through the residential area in the fading light, I must’ve looked like something out of *Sleepy Hollow* with my long dress and red hair. Dads’ drove their kids home in their fancy cars that dripped with cold-hard-cash. They slowed down and dropped to first gear as they neared me. I made eye contact with every dad in the passing cars. With my eyes I promised them paradise. In the last car, a little girl yelled from the backseat, “Daddy, there’s a princess!” Well spotted, little girl. Her words, “Daddy” rang through my head, and the vision of the car and the other little sister, made me shake. Memories of that night started filtering through, but they were all blurred. The alcohol had done its job. I ran home and when I reached my apartment, I ran into my room, set my phone on self-timer and took a photo of me crouching on my bed. My art exhibition was coming up, so I needed all the ideas that I could get. In the shower, I washed my hair four times until I stripped the red colour out. For the rest of the evening, I smoked a joint, and watched *Ex on the Beach*.

Freesia

2 August

I feel hollow, a hollow tree. I am a husk. If you cracked me open, there would be nothing, not even a nut. And if I was a nut, I'd be a walnut. The reason? There is no reason. My life is a series of going to class, trying to make friends with strangers, studying, weighing myself, jogging and daydreaming about food. I want my future to start already.

5 August

Some girls have sparkly diaries, or polka dot ones, or leather banded ones, like the ones from Harry Potter. I bought my doughnut diary at Typo. I wanted the one with the butterflies on it, but it was sold out. I don't even like donuts. I wished I was one of those girls that was invited to *huisdans* then I'd have an excuse to dress like the princess I ought to be. It's my third year, and I haven't been to a single dance, even though I see lots of people dressing up for them.

18 August

I haven't told my psychologist about Dylan or the abortion. It's not only that, but she also doesn't know how difficult my life is on the farm, how my parents only talk about sheep and jackals, how my brother is the heir to their "throne". He can do anything, he doesn't wash the dishes (I have to), he doesn't hang up the washing (I have to), he doesn't clean the house (I have to). I'm sick of this backward living. Girls have secrets as deep as the roots of mountains. I look at people and wonder what their secrets are. Are they filled to the brim? Is the secret only in their arms? My secrets are from my torso up. There is nothing hiding in my legs or feet. I feel so guilty saying these things about my family. How could I be so mean and think such evil thoughts? They are good people!

21 August

Today I ate lamb chops, potatoes and a salad. Why am I even writing this? What do you want me to say? Why are you forcing me to write journal entries? Can you stop talking please. Shhhhhh be quiet. Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh. Please, please stop talking.

8 September

A jet stream cut the sky in half. I took it as a sign when I saw the aeroplane flying above me, a distant seagull. On my phone, I went onto Flight Radar, moved the map to South Africa and scoured the aeroplanes by my geographical location. I found the exact one: Cape Town to Doha, Qatar Airways, arriving in 09 hr 25 min. I moved the map to Qatar and planned that from there I could jump onto an aeroplane to Oslo, Stockholm or Copenhagen. To the forests of cloudberry, reindeer and to lakes that had so much sky in them. I would change my name, live in a cabin, speak a foreign language and become another person. That's a good life.

24 September

In class we learnt that September has the most suicides, because people need a break from the year and even Christmas is a stressful time. Mommy and Daddy video called me today. They thought that psychology was a contested issue. They didn't understand why I studied it. Well, what else am I supposed to study? I don't feel like writing anymore. I'm tire-

25 September

I'm sad because I released a non-indigenous fish into a South African dam. I can't live with myself anymore. How could I have done something so irresponsible!?!?!? Another reason why I'm depressed was because a girl that I sat next to in class last week made eye contact with me and then sat next to someone else. I even lent her my pen. Why didn't she sit next to me? Why does nobody like me? What is wrong with me?

30 September

Music I like: Raised by Swans (favourite song: The Waiting's Over) & Grimes (favourite song: Genesis) & Oklou (favourite song: god's chariots). This is to anyone who ever finds my journal if I die.

1 October

A pinch and a punch for the first day of the month. It would be nice if I had a real person that I could say that to.

2 October

On my 5km jog: When I ran up the hill, a short man walked towards me. As we neared, he looked at my breasts, then looked at my private part and stared there unashamedly until I jogged past. I ran faster and wished that I had my pepper spray. At the top of the hill there was a sloping horse paddock, where they were getting breakfast. But through the mist, I saw a figure in a dress standing in the middle of the paddock. It was a girl, with red hair. We stared at each other, spellbound by another human presence in a field of horses. In the dim sunlight, the curve of her profile was like a leather saddle, the sun shone through her dress and outlined her nakedness. She stared at me, I stared at her. Something tingled in between my legs.

3 October

I would like myself more if I wasn't myself. This is dumb. I wish I was skinnier. I'd be skinnier if I purged, but after we learnt about eating disorders, I shouldn't purge. We learnt that sticking your finger into your gullet gives you calluses on your fingers. I don't care about my fingers, but the continuous induced vomiting makes the stomach acid affect the salivary glands, which turns your face puffy and big. A fat face is my worst fear, so I cannot purge. Sadly. We also learnt that there are websites called Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia, to promote anorexia and bulimia. I tried to find them but couldn't.

11 October

The boy that bought biltong in Spar this evening looked like he climbed mountains. He looked like someone that I could survive in the wild with, he would protect me from lions, snakes, scorpions. I can imagine us living in a straw hut and cooking on the sand. He'd go out and hunt impalas, while I'd search for tubers and herbs. The stomachs and intestines of the animals would be washed and used as our water bottles.

15 October

In class, I saw a girl who was pretty like another world is. One where we wore coats made from Karoo korhaan and spoke in two tongues. I bought body lotion today and threw it in the dustbin because it wasn't environmentally friendly. Then I regretted that I threw it away. I can't live when I know that the earth is dying. I swear I will never eat meat again, or shower for longer than two minutes. I'll never use plastic again, or drink cow's milk. I'll deprive myself of everything, I'll spend all my money to help save polar bears and to stop glacial melting.

Freesia

It happened on Tuesday because things like that happen on Tuesdays. I was the first to walk into the lecture hall, and just as I did, the Afrikaans accent of Mrs Botha's voice echoed throughout the empty lecture hall, "Good morning, students. I hope that you had a good weekend. Ugh, I mean week. Ugh *ek bedoel dag soos Dinsdag*. O-kaaay *julle*, turn to page 346. Today we will be talking about self-fulfilling proph- oh, hi Freesia, sorry *Ek, ag my yinne*, I am busy preparing for class today and didn't know that you were standing there! Listen, I need to prepare, so just sit down and do me a favour and put your earphones in. Do you have earphones? O-kaaay *heerlik*. Listen to music so that you don't hear me. O-kaaay? *Fantasties*."

Mrs Botha always had a way of putting me at ease. She secreted an atmosphere of "study hard, and everything will work out". She knew me by name, not because I was an outstanding student but because I always sat in the second row on the seat closest to the stairs to take notes on everything that the lecturers said.

The seats were fern green. They looked like hundreds of leaves budding and spreading out from a branch that was the oaken floor. I sat down and popped my earphones in just as I heard Mrs Botha repeat her preparations for class.

Students came rushing in one by one then in groups of three and four. They were the cicadas' that screeched while they sat on the leaves, like the cicadas that inhabited the oak trees that lined the main street. Through my soft music in my earphones, I listened to the chatter that the minutes before class entailed. *Did you see what she wore last night? How many followers on Instagram do you have? Thanks, I got a haircut yesterday. Are you going to the digs jol tomorrow night? Did you see they took a video of that girl shitting on the dance floor?* Mrs Botha broke the cicada screams with, "This will be in the exams." I took my earphones out, and the chatter calmed down until only a few voices tainted the silence with their catch-up talks. The students in class ought to have known that Mrs Botha pulled this line every time she wanted silence, but since most people never came to class, they didn't realise her attention-creating techniques as well as I did. Most people did UNISA here – they hardly ever went to class and downloaded the slides from the student website. University was about the social more than tertiary education. Apparently, I was the only one who didn't get the memo regarding this. If my parents knew, they would force me to drop out.

From a distance, Mrs Botha's voice flowed into hundreds of ears, "Can anyone tell me what a self-fulfilling prophecy is?" She peered at the students whose heads were buried in their textbooks. Some started writing furiously. Others pretended to cry, so that Mrs Botha wouldn't ask them.

"Freesia?"

It felt like somebody electrocuted me when she called my name. I thought I was in the safe zone after we spoke before class started, surely there was somebody else to throw the limelight on? “Uhm, when you act in a certain way and then it becomes true.”

Mrs Botha walked closer, clasped her porky hands over her paunch, “Freesia. If that was your answer to an exam question, you would only get zero out of five. *Kom my engel* elaborate please.”

I became more nervous and took a few deep breaths before I answered, “It is when a person expects or predicts something to happen, and then they change their behaviour to subconsciously fulfil this prediction, and then it comes true.”

“*Dis reg*, now give an example so that I can see your lateral thinking.”

I scoured for anything my brain could come up with, but there was only one example that kept popping into my mind, “For example, if somebod-”

Mrs Botha butted in, “Louder, asseblief.”

I swallowed and started over, “For example, if somebody thinks, or predicts, that other people don’t like them, that person thinking that, starts to act as though people really don’t like them and then because of their strange actions, people end up not liking them, thus they fulfil their prediction of people not liking them.” I sighed and thanked God that I studied all of this last night.

“*Fantasties. Vyfuit vyf. Shoe maar ons leer baie interessante dinge.* That is a good life lesson to us all. Students, I hope you paid attention because I’m going to test you on that. Let’s continue.”

I made notes, not to make notes but to make it seem like it wasn’t a big deal that I just had to speak publicly in front of 200 students.

*

After class, I made my way under the oak trees towards the student-counselling centre. Today would be my first group therapy session. A light rain dripped off the leaves, and the sky was cloudy, but you could see patches of blue peeking through. Rain at University and rain where I’m from was not the same. On the farm, the rain smelt different, it smelt like petrichor when it came into contact with parched soil. Only those that dwelled in the desert would know this smell. But here, the rain fell through the shadows. It smelt less potent, corresponding to a tamed earth that I didn’t know.

Inside the counselling centre, the rain smell vanished the deeper I walked towards the group therapy room. It smelt like dust mites. In the city, this natural smell was unnatural. I’m used to this smell on the farm, but it was unusual amongst the scents of exhaust fumes and the thick smell of makeup that dominated city life.

You could hear the group members footsteps echoing along with the tiled floors down the hallway, but as soon as they reached the group therapy room, they stepped onto a carpet, and any notion of their existence was drowned out except for the smells that they brought in – coffee, deodorant and new clothes.

I never thought that I would reach this breaking point in my life. As a psychology student, you wouldn’t believe that I needed to go to a psychologist. I should have everything sorted out,

shouldn't I? How can a psychology student see a psychologist? Should I become a psychologist, or am I merely in desperate need of one? I'd been seeing a psychologist since my first year. It was my third year now.

The door closed, and when I looked up, I saw my psychologist and another male psychologist sit down on opposite poles of the circle. They set ground rules of how the group should work. The only ones that I remember were:

- Be on time. The group will start without latecomers.
- Give everyone a chance to speak, and don't chip in.
- Respect each other.
- Don't be afraid to give input. We are here to grow, and growing is a painful process.
- Don't put up a facade. It is essential to be yourselves. Otherwise, this will not be beneficial for any of you.
- And most importantly, NO relationships of any sort outside of the group space.

The psychologists' took turns talking about the benefits of group therapy: as a place to gain insight into our behaviour, to learn communication skills, to see how we are a problem in our own lives, and as a safe area where we can relive traumatic experiences. The group is a natural space in an unnatural place where we can express real feelings with real people. Although we will only have a group session once a week, we might not be physically with each other often, but we will be mentally with each other all day. The group will mirror our real lives and indicate how we interact in the real world. At this moment, we had to introduce ourselves, and that was the first time I looked at the group members.

And that was when I saw her. I had never seen anyone like her before. She sat two seats away from me, so she wasn't in my field of vision; otherwise, I would've noticed her. Nobody else seemed to be spellbound by her aura, it was as if she didn't exist to them. I only saw her when her arm protruded into the middle of the circle to set her bubblegum Steri Stumpie onto the floor. There were streaks of blue paint along the insides of her fingers. It was not only her appearance that stunned me but, there was something about her. She was like a killer whale swimming amongst a group of sharks in a charcoal sea. She just floated there, unmoving among chaotic starving sharks. Around her was an electric storm unlike any other that threatened to combust at any moment. She could rupture midnight cities down when she made eye contact with you. She had curly hair that was the colour of a white dog's fur. It was the type of white that's not really white when compared to snow. Her eyes were widely spread apart and looked like two bluefish plastered onto her face. They had a life of their own as they swam from left to right. And when they settled onto me, I couldn't breathe. My heart stopped beating, my mouth grew dry, I shivered. Her pupils pierced into mine, she didn't blink. But nor could I. And the last thing that I could do was tear myself from her intense stare. Our vapours may have reached out to each other

and intermingled. Our secrets spoke to each other. Different energies and foreign electricities whirled together.

My psychologist chirped in and ruptured our staring, “Looks like we have two flowers in our group this year, Nemesia and Freesia. Nem, could you please introduce yourself to the group and tell us why you are here?” Nem stared at me for a few seconds longer, the group was silent, I swore I saw a faint smile on her lips.

She stood up to reveal a curvaceous, petite body and spoke with confidence, “I’m here because I’m apparently bitchy, reckless and irresponsible.”

Her voice was akin to a kitchen knife sharpening against basalt. I might’ve heard her words pouring out through her shiny lip gloss, but I didn’t care how messed up she thought she was. The other group members giggled, and the psychologists smiled at each other. My concentration on her otherworldly beauty broke when it was my turn to introduce myself.

“I . . . I’m Freesia. I don’t really know why I’m here . . . I think because I have low self-esteem and struggle to . . . Uhm . . . open up.” I didn’t stand up, but remained seated as I spoke. If I stood up, my legs would’ve shaken too much. As the other members introduced themselves I looked down and stole secret glances at Nem’s Steri Stumpie. I couldn’t believe that our session ended so quickly when it did. After everyone left, I couldn’t wait for our next group therapy, because I wanted to see Nem again.

*

The week took forever before the next Tuesday arrived, and when it did arrive, I had never been so feverish and thrilled at the same time. I couldn’t wait to see Nem again. After class with Mrs Botha, I sprinted towards the counseling centre and arrived ten minutes early. I walked through the hall and when I arrived at our group therapy room, I chose a chair that was exactly opposite to the chair Nem sat in last time. With my compact mirror, I checked to see if my pimple was still hidden under my cover-up stick. It’s white head peaked through as a Snowdrop in Spring would, so I quickly applied some more over it. When I was done, something caught my eye in the reflection of my compact mirror. Two huge blue eyes glared at me, and a mop of curly white hair. I snapped it closed and turned around, only to find nobody there. Was I imagining everything? Or was Nem spying on me from the door? Suddenly, the group members and our two psychologists poured in, and to my dismay, another girl sat opposite me in Nem’s seat from last week. The session started and our psychologists started opening the floor to the group members. Nem was late, or she wasn’t coming. My heart sank to my pelvis, if she wasn’t attending today, it would be so boring. A girl spoke about how she hates everyone, but I didn’t care, or bother to listen. It was exactly seven minutes past, when somebody knocked on the door. It was Nem, “Sorry, I’m late everyone.” She moved towards the open seat, which was, once again not in my direction of sight. As she sat down, some members muttered “so rude,” and

sighed loudly as Nem sat down. For some reason, this annoyed me, why were they being so mean?

“Good on you to join us, Nem. Could you tell us why you are late?” the female psychologist spoke.

“I got held up at the art studio.” Nem said.

“Members, this question is directed at you, how does it make you feel that Nem came late?” the male psychologist asked the group.

The girl that sighed loudly spoke up, “It makes me feel like she is disrespecting the group's rules, and therefore she is disrespecting us.”

Nem glared at the girl, but I secretly thought she relished in the attention.

“Do you feel that people disrespect you often?” The psychologist asked the girl.

I can't remember what happened after that because all that I lived for were the tiny movements that Nem made: she criss crossed her legs, after that she put her feet flatly on the floor, then after that she bent her leg over her knee. Her arms stayed folded all the while. While I stared at her in the corner of my eye, I noticed that her head was always in the exact same position, always, unmoving. I stole myself a glance, and looked at her, only to find her staring at me, the way a jackal looks at a steenbok. When you see death, or your tormentor, or your lover, you can't look away because you are glued together with superglue, and that is why for the rest of the session, I couldn't tear my eyes away from hers. When the session ended, I hoped that Nem would take her time to leave, but she raced off back onto campus as soon as we ended, with not so much as a look behind her.

*

When the next Tuesday arrived, I decided to wait a little bit in the bathroom before entering the group therapy room. I wanted Nem to see what it felt like when I arrived late. So when it was one minute past, I quickly left the cubicle and entered the room. Nem was there and she sat in the exact same seat that I sat in last week. The seat opposite her was free, so I sat down as I quickly said, “I'm sorry for being a little bit late.”

“Hi, Freesia. Can you tell us why you are late today? Because you are always on time.” My psychologist asked me.

“Uhm . . . I thought that being one minute late wouldn't be too bad.”

“Yes, but what are you ‘saying’ when you are late?” She pried and I could see the concern through her nerd glasses. I think she had a soft spot for me.

“I guess that . . . it didn't really matter if I came late.”

“Are you saying that you don't care about the group? Or that the group wouldn't care if you weren't there?”

“Maybe, that the group wouldn't care that I wasn't there.”

“Freesia, I know you have been battling with low self-esteem, but that is an error in your thinking pattern, when you believe that you don't matter to people.” My psychologist leaned

forward and clasped her hands together. I didn't know how to react, was I doing my own self-fulfilling prophecy? Or did I do that purely only to get Nem's attention. When the conversation evolved into something that wasn't of interest to me, I looked up properly at Nem for the first time today. She wore All Stars, frayed jeans, and a purple spaghetti top. It was then when I saw a pearl choker around her neck, and at that moment, I realized why boys like chokers so much. It's the secret that lies beneath that's so exhilarating. What does her skin look like underneath? Is there a love bite? Or dents from the pearls? Never before had I seen such a delicately sculptured neck, all I wanted was to touch her skin. When I looked into her eyes, she stared at me. There was an interest in her eyes that I'd seen before, but I couldn't remember where. She looked at me as though I was an ever changing billboard in Times Square. This feeling intoxicated me. I didn't want her to stop. When the session came to an end, Nem brushed past me with a smile. When she passed, our arms rubbed against each other, and even in the evening I could still feel the heat of her skin on me.

*

In our fourth Tuesday group therapy, Nem spoke to me. While we were in the group, Nem abruptly said, "I know why you're here."

The group grew silent, and although she didn't give a name, or look in any particular direction, I knew she referred to me.

"Me?" I looked behind me, but there was nobody there.

"Yeah, you. You're a people pleaser." Her voice was soft but puckered in a confidence that I was unprepared for. I didn't know what to say, so I looked at the psychologists, but they looked at me expectantly.

"Okay . . ." Was all I could manage. Her presence unearthed something within me.

"You see, you're doing it again. Why don't you say something back to me?" Nem asked curiously. The other group members looked at us like they were watching table tennis. The psychologists remained silent.

"I'm not giving you the reaction you want." I said.

Nem sighed, "That's the thing, you're not standing up for yourself. That's why people walk all over you."

"How would you know that?" I was taken aback by how easily she could read me. If anyone else said these words, I didn't think that they could've done it with the softness that she did.

"I'm an artist. I don't just look. I see. And I can really see you."

The male psychologist asked Nem a question, "Nem. How are you so sure of Freesia? Does she perhaps remind you of someone?"

"Maybe. . . maybe she reminds me of my sister, but I don't want to talk about that right now."

The psychologist turned towards me, "Freesia, how do you feel about this conversation with Nem?"

“Uhm, I feel hurt that she would say something like that to me because she doesn’t even know me.” It was true, I felt hurt by her forwardness. Was that what all our intense staring was about? Is she trying to figure me out? Nothing more?

“Nem, why do you think you are in group therapy?” the psychologist asked.

“Because I’m a low-key bitch and enjoy fucking people with masks.”

The psychologists elaborated on what Nem said for a while. Then they said something that I would never forget, “Everyone, that was some great energy that we saw between Freesia and Nem. In group therapy, the ones who have the most conflict, or who are drawn to each other, are actually the ones who will be most beneficial to each other in some way or another.”

The session ended after more tension between other group members occurred. But all I could think about was how forward Nem was with me. I started to second guess whether I was cut out for group therapy, maybe my self-esteem is too low to be conversing with people like that. When the hour was over, I went straight into the bathroom to wash my face. After a couple of minutes, I walked out into the rain and ran for shelter under a tree. Something shiny caught my attention, it was a glitter-covered phone, and it was in Nem’s hands. She stared at me and walked over. She wore a corset shirt that made her breasts wobble in union when her feet landed on the floor. “I know we aren’t supposed to talk to group members outside group therapy and all that shit, but I just wanted to say sorry if I came too hard on you in there. I didn’t realise that you were so sensitive.”

I was taken aback by how genuinely sorry she felt, “It’s okay. I understand.” I said. I couldn’t believe we were actually talking.

“It’s not okay. I think you should stand up more for yourself. Like, don’t be a people pleaser.” The rain fell harder now.

“How do you know or think that you know all of this about me?”

“After all that staring, I know. Like I said, I’m an artist and a pretty good one while we’re at it.” My hair bristled in the coldness of the air. Nem was one of the most direct people that I had ever met. Maybe she had a point, I knew I was a people pleaser. She was the type of girl that I couldn’t pretend with, so I thought that I might as well not say anything in return. If she supposedly knew me so well, she would understand.

“I have an art exhibition coming up, and I think that you would be the perfect face for my topic. I’ve seen a lot of faces, but yours is something special. Like, as in, artist worthy. Not your standard kind of beauty, but art beauty. Could I paint you?”

If anyone could see me when she asked that question, they would’ve thought I was mute. When I found my voice I nodded. She handed me her phone with a new contact page open. I typed my name with (Group Therapy) in brackets, in case she forgot. As if in a trance, I gave her my phone and she typed in her number as well.

Nemesia

Sun catchers lined every window in my apartment. Opalescent in nature, they were the optical illusions of my fluctuating bitch moods. But one thing that never fluctuated, never changed, and never seemed to alter was my art inspiration. It was like E that constantly coursed through my synapses. When I saw Freesia, I knew that I needed to paint her. There was something in the way she shone, matching a diamond ring locked up in a safe. Eclipsed, yet its very existence was moulded for our eyes. Freesia came two minutes late, which was the cue for being early and stalling to avoid appearing overeager. She wore a loose jersey that covered most of her thighs, slip slops and no makeup. She looked good, half-dressed. Besides “hello” and “hi”, we didn’t talk as we stood on either side of my welcome mat. My words from before must’ve made her aloof and sceptical. Judging from her vibe, she was probably paranoid that we were breaking group therapy rules. I didn’t give a fuck about that. Paranoia, anxiety, vulnerability were good – I needed to capture some kind of emotion in her painting. As she breezed into my apartment, a floral scent travelled behind her. It was a pink mist that clouded air pestered with rain. I sat her down on the pouffe, and the sun catcher’s rainbows reflected along her face and splattered her in futuristic freckles.

The canvas was rough like old glitter beneath my fingertips, but it only added to Freesia’s frigidity and broken texture. I offered her a glass of wine? Tea? Juice? Water? Cigarette? She declined every time. I was about to suggest a joint, but then I thought better of it. I knew that she had never done something like this before – as an artist, you can tell when someone is a virgin when it comes to being painted. I sketched her jaw, oversized lips, eyebrows, and heavy-lidded eyes. For a while, the pencil was the only sound between us. Sometimes I heard her breathing, but the moment I tried to concentrate on the level of her breaths, they were silent. She needed to grow her eyebrows thicker - it’s Lily Collins eyebrows that are trendy now, hun. From far, she had one of those chronic lazy looks that seemed like she was oblivious to life. But, as I looked deeply into her eyes, there was a humid sadness that contaminated her entire appearance. She wasn’t a basic bitch, a nerd or an urban hippie. The truth was, she was hard to pinpoint, and that’s why I chose her. If she were a drink, she’d be cinnamon whiskey, the kind that you can gulp more quickly than the usual whiskey, but its aftertaste lingered longer on your tongue.

My palette was paint-bombed in colours that didn’t have names, but I wasn’t one of those artists that needed a clean palette before I could start anew. For me, my previous art merged into my present artwork. Freesia looked perfect in the afternoon glow, her hair brightened halo-like against the sun, and the sun catchers made her look like she had topazes everywhere. Those dots made it seem as though she caught an outer space disease. Freesia ran her eyes along my windowsill and looked at my crystals and quartzes. After a few moments, she moved her eyes to my wall and gazed at my paintings. Her eyes grew more intense and stopped when she looked at my photos, though. They were Polaroid’s that were taken at the clubs, bars and parties. It was only then when I realised that I was the centre of every photo. And it was only then when I saw Freesia staring at only me in the photos. I heard her stop breathing, and her mouth opened, to

which I saw her teeth. And that was when I saw them. Her beauty spots. Freesia was marked with beauty spots along her cheekbones, lips, neck, chest . . . They were in no specific order. Untamed. Unpredictable. I looked into her eyes, and they flickered slowly up at me and widened in question.

Somewhere between connecting her beauty spots and squeezing the acrylic onto the palette, I sloshed two glasses of red wine and handed one to her. I didn't care if she wasn't a wine drinker, an alcoholic or an alcohol hater. She sipped on the glass and left a Vaseline lip print on the rim, as I thought she would. Her nails weren't painted, and she wore no jewellery. I looked down at my own shiny nail polish, the colour of alien pee, and to my millions of rings. She was of average height with sculpted legs. Her skin was the colour of a beer bottle that glowed in the sun. It looked warm to touch. She was either naturally dark-skinned, or she spent a lot of time on a towel. The wine relaxed her, and we chit chatted about where we were from, what we studied (even though mine was an obvious guess) and the student town that we lived in (we both agreed that it was a cesspool). I mixed red, blue and white. It took a while before the perfect lingerie purple came into view. Purple is a colour you don't forget.

I lit a cherry-scented candle. I always did this before I painted. Then, I scrolled on YouTube for some background music and chose an album by Mabel. I put bright pink lipstick on, downed my wine, swayed my hips and sang along to the tune to get me into the zone. Freesia smiled at me with her eyes and giggled. Yeah, I knew I was a handful to take in, but I enjoyed being the centre of attention, the life of the party. Honestly, I felt kind of obligated to spice shit up. She was beautiful when she smiled, but not even her laugh could shake the pain in her demeanour. She said, "No, thank you" when I topped up her empty wine glass. "Did you hear that? It sounded like a mosquito." I said with a wink. "Hun, you can't let me drink alone," I said as I mixed the next batch of colours.

I painted her in different shades of youth: purple, pink, orange. Behind her head, I painted a dark storm of scribbles that threatened to consume her. The moment I put the paintbrush down, her jersey slipped over her shoulder, and she pushed her hair behind her ears. There was a purple wine moustache above her lips, and I took a photo of her without asking. "Did you just take a photo of me?" she asked. I nodded in reply, and she just smiled. I asked her if she had Snapchat? Instagram? Facebook? She said that she only had WhatsApp. Interesting. We exchanged numbers. I saved her under "Cinnamon Flower" and looked at her profile picture; she hugged a horse in the desert. Oh, so she's a horsey person or a farm girl, that would explain a few things. She said that she liked my room and paintings. I said that I liked her face and that I wanted to repaint her. She looked down and smiled as she whispered, "Okay, sure." The sky turned a dark blue, the sun catchers stopped reflecting their rainbows, Freesia's halo was gone, and I stopped painting. The halo was long gone, but I didn't stop painting until it was well past nine.

The cherry candle burnt out and left a stream of lava on the bedside table. Freesia stood up, moved her way around the easel and stopped to look at the painting. In the corner of my eye, I

watched how her jaw dropped and saw tears form in her eyes. She raised her eyebrows and blinked to prevent them from falling. “You are so talented.” She whispered. Her breath smelt sweet like sapphires and roses. “Thanks, hun. You were a great model. Like seriously, really great. I loved painting you.” She smiled again, and a fresh set of tears threatened to burst through her eyelashes. The music stopped, and I pulled her in for a hug. She felt frail beneath my arms, but she smelt good. So good. She offered to paint me to my surprise, so I gave her a clean sheet of paper and scooted the paint towards her. She wasn’t an artist, but she painted a vaguely human figure in blue, where yellow and green flowers sprouted from my body. After we said our goodbyes and she left, I lay on the bed and looked at her painting in my hand. That was when I noticed that the flowers that she painted sprouting from my body were freesias.

Freesia

On my way to class, I thought about Nem while I listened to music through my earphones. I chose soft instrumental music because anything else would've diverted my attention away from my thoughts about Nem. And I didn't want that at all. The night after she painted my face, something stirred from deep within me. There was a dormant adder that lay coiled in my gut, but now it started twitching itself awake for the first time in a long time. As I walked onto the street lined in student accommodation, pairs of girls walked adjacent, parallel and opposite to me, and I found myself wishing that Nem was with me. Walking for the millionth time through this street would be a breeze with her. I felt as though Nem really saw me and didn't care how broken I was. That she chose me to be her model meant that she found my aura aesthetically pleasing for her artwork. It was the first time I felt worthy, that I had a purpose in my life, that I meant something to someone. Not only was I just a person, but now I was a piece of art, forever captured in brushstrokes of paint and Nem's emotions.

The fact that Nem was an artist excited me. Something about her freedom, creativity, and I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude instilled a desire to take control of my life and be a more chiselled version of myself. With her, I didn't feel like "that Namibian farm girl" – an outsider when in South African company. Nor did I care that I was considered "that loner girl" in my farming community in Namibia anymore. Nem was everything I wasn't – she had a beautiful body (that looked like she didn't restrict herself from food like I did), Nem was artistically talented, confident and one thing that set us apart wholly was that people seemed to like her from the get-go even though she came across as bitchy. Fashion had never been my strong point, but now I even found myself wanting to dress like Nem. She wasn't one to go full-on-trendy, but she used trends according to her personal style. She worked those Levis dungarees with a classic white T and platform sneakers with ease. When I looked down at my lanky dress with moth holes in it, I knew that I needed to buy an entirely new closet. So I made a mental note to wander over to Cotton On, Factorie, and The Lot to find "the new me" as soon as class was done.

During our painting session, there were moments when I felt guilty about breaking group therapy rules – I really liked my psychologist, and I didn't want to let her down. But, with Nem in my life, I didn't feel lonely anymore, and that was my presenting problem for coming to therapy in the first place. Surely, my psychologist would understand? Sometimes, I feared that Nem was like everyone else because the entire thing between us was just too good to be true – would she also ditch me once she saw what I was really like? Would she get bored? Would she find somebody better than me? Did I like her more than she liked me? Was I merely a still-life object for her art project? When I rounded the bend and stopped at the pedestrian red robot, I saw two girls in matching French braids holding hands. It was then when the adder opened its gleaming eyes in my gut. A tingling feeling happened between my legs, so I rushed over the road before the light turned green.

I changed the song to something more upbeat to move my legs faster towards class and away from the two French-braid girls. Through the gardens, I walked while I re-played our entire painting session in my head – the way Nem spoke, our conversation, and how she looked at my every flaw and transformed them into something alluring. I never felt pretty or skinny enough, and for one, I thought I looked between a mixture of a dassie and an impala that lay dead on the side of the N7 highway. But, never had I ever felt so precious in another person's presence. It felt odd to yield to somebody else's gaze for a long time, but it felt good to be looked at. When I walked in town before I knew Nem, people used to push through me, and hardly anyone made eye contact with me. And once the automatic sliding doors even closed on me in Spar – I was even invisible to machinery detecting sensors. But Nem rippled the waters inside of me and rattled the adder within me. Now when I made my way towards class, that stuff didn't happen anymore. As I sat down on my usual seat in class, my phone flickered. It was a message from Nem.

hey gorgeous. another painting session today?

It took a couple of minutes before I could type. I erased and re-typed a message that seemed okay enough to send.

i would really love that. same time as last time?

She replied almost instantly, as though she had never second-guessed any of her thoughts like I did.

jaaaaas, can't wait xxx

And then she sent two heart emojis. *Two*.

A warmth spread throughout my chest, and I decided to ditch class, to get ready instead, even though I would only see Nem in three hours. The lecturer was late, so I took this as the perfect opportunity to run over to the mall and do some clothes shopping. When I walked past CottonOn, I saw exactly what I needed on the mannequin: a dark green corduroy jumpsuit. I swiped without checking the price at the counter and rushed home to put on “the new me”.

*

When I arrived at Nem's apartment 30 minutes early, I took in her entire neighbourhood. The Eerste River flowed behind her building, and I remembered seeing it from her window lined with the suncatchers. It gleamed in the sun, but I knew that it was piled with dirt and chemicals underneath it. Her entrance was throttled in oak trees that swarmed with Grey squirrels. I walked closer to the gate and noticed a cobblestone walkway that led to the main door. It was laced with

arum lilies and agapanthus – white and blue, leaving a fog heavy with a floral scent. When I came for our first painting session, I was too nervous about taking in my surroundings, but now I had ample time to gain more insight into what kind of person Nem was.

Did she love nature like me? Did she also consider that living in a beautiful environment brought out the best in you? A hadeda jumped from the lilies and cawed into the sky. It broke my thoughts and made me glance up towards the building. It was a whitewashed Cape vernacular house, definitely designed by an architect. At that moment, it dawned on me that Nem was probably well-off financially, maybe even wealthy. Who else would stay here and have the opportunity to play around with fashion like that? This type of information usually filled me with rage because coming from a not so financially secure background, I was jealous of rich kids that engulfed this town. But, since it was Nem, it simply made me more enraptured and intrigued by her. I was about to ring the bell when a voice sounded behind me.

“It's a pretty building, isn't it?”

I looked around but couldn't see anyone. It sounded like Nem. If I didn't know any better, I would've thought that my anxiety was getting the better of me. Had I officially come to that stage where I became so anxious and paranoid that I started to imagine things? I turned around and placed my finger on the bell and was about to push it when I heard that voice again.

“You don't want to do that. . . My roommate is inside fucking her cheating-ass boyfriend. You'll piss her off.”

It was clearly Nem's voice and not a figment of my imagination. I heard faint mumbling sounds from her building that could've been people having sex, so I took Nem's word for it. I looked behind me again, but there was nobody there. I peered over the fence this time, careful not to get shocked by the shocking wires and looked into the tiny garden. Except for a squirrel, there was still nobody there. Just then, my phone flickered. It was from Nem. Had she seen me spying outside the fence? Did she think I was a creep, or worse, a *stalker*? I opened her message and read:

Look up.

The hair on my neck bristled, goosebumps speckled my skin. I froze and slowly tore my eyes away from the blue light and into the towering oak tree above me. I could make out a matt of curly hair plastered along with the bark in between the leaves. It might've looked identical to white cat to the untrained eye, but those colossal ocean eyes and human figure gave her away. Nem was in the tree watching me with a poker face. Her gaze was indifferent to me being early, very early, and staring at her building for a good twenty minutes. We locked eyes, and for some reason, I didn't know how to say hi. At that moment, she moved, and something fell from the tree where she was seated. I moved toward the pile to pick it up, only to find that it was a sketchpad with rough sketches of me. They were all of me standing outside her fence. She was a talented artist, and she even captured my profile in which I could detect curiosity and maybe even

obsession in my pleading face. She had been watching and sketching me all this time, and I never knew it.

I felt uncomfortable, was this evidence of me being a creep? Would she show this to campus security? I gathered my thoughts and kept my eyes on her drawings, unsure what to say or do. But Nem shattered the unbearable silence and said, “My mom's boyfriend designed this place. He's an architect specialising in designing family disasters. I fucked him once before I knew that my mom and he were dating. It was at a dress-up party at a club, so I didn't see his face. I liked it back then, but you know that anyway, having heard my mask-fetish business in group therapy.” Her comment stung, was that all I was, just a fellow companion from group therapy? A sense of relief came over me when I realised that she wasn't bothered about me standing statue-like and staring at her house like a perv. Then she continued, “And I fucked a guy with a fake Southern American accent the other day. He had a Mad Hatter mask on. Who the fuck, fucks the Mad Hatter, anyways?”

None of her comments left me mortified, which was what she probably intended. As a psychology student, I learnt that there are many abnormal things out there. My duty was not to seem shocked because that would only add to mental health stigma and make people feel uncomfortable. I wasn't Nem's psychologist, but I enjoyed playing the role. I didn't say anything. I just let Nem steer the conversation in the way she needed it to go.

“Anyways, that's why I study BA Drinking now,” Nem said as she took a swig of Crackling white wine that lay on her lap.

“I thought you studied Fine Arts though?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do. I meant BA Drinking, as in binge drinking all my problems away. It's educational.”

I set her sketchpad down and climbed my way up the tree to where she sat. The bark was rough and left my hands raw. It was difficult climbing an ancient oak with my new jumpsuit on, but while I climbed I continued to look into her eyes, and when I reached a branch opposite her, I sat down cross-legged and waited until she spoke again.

“I'm messed up, Freesh. The sooner you know that, the better.” For a while, I didn't say anything and just looked into her face. She was pale, her eyes dull, and there were pimples on her face. I smelt the distinct metallic period smell and realised that she was on her time of the month. “Say something, Freesh, anything, to distract me.” Nem exhaled as she placed her arm over her forehead.

I knew her feelings ought to be dealt with, but since she wanted a distraction, I gave her one, “Uhm, these oak trees and Grey squirrels were brought in by the Dutch and English colonists to remind them of home. It's selfish that they did that. And now the squirrels are alien invasive, destroying the natural habitat for our native animals. And the oaks suck up more water, leaving South Africa drier.” Nem just stared at me, her face still indifferent. She moved her hands towards her uterus and applied pressure while she grimaced. My topic of distraction didn't work, so I said, “It is a pretty building that your mom's boyfriend designed, but the fact that he didn't replace . . . or counteract the oak trees with local trees is not so good.” This time Nem closed her

eyes. I noticed she started taking deeper breaths because I saw her breasts rise and fall with every breath. “we're all messed up, Nem. You'll feel better once you continue going to therapy.” I said, stating the obvious.

Nem's eyes shot open, “You don't understand. My dad and sister died because of me.”

Her statement made my blood curl. I wasn't prepared for a comment like that.

“A drunken driver killed them in a head-on collision. It was all because of me that they drove at night. I was drunk and high. My Uber app wasn't working. I had no one else to call, so I called them since my sister was the only one who knew where the club was, and my dad had a drivers license. It would've been too complicated if drunk-me tried to explain where I was to a taxi driver over the phone. Even though my dad had lived here his whole life, he was oblivious to where all the dodgy clubs were. So my one phone call ruined everything.”

A breeze whistled through the leaves, and a pair of hadedas landed in our tree. Grief and death had always disturbed me. I never knew what to say to people who had lost loved ones. The only thing that I could do was be here for her. That's all people want – belonging, support, understanding, comfort. Nem continued, “I was so drunk that I didn't realise how long they took to pick me up. My mom called to let me know, but I didn't believe her. The funny thing is, I still don't believe it happened.”

I knew that I needed to say something, “How long ago did it happen?”

“Five years ago. But I think about them every day. That's why I do whatever it takes to forget it. I smoke weed, drink, fuck around with guys, party, and take hard drugs. Occasionally.” The look on my face about “hard drugs” might've made her add “occasionally” at the end.

“Have you gone to a psychologist about it?” I asked, even though I knew that she had because why else would she be in group therapy without a referral from a psychologist.

Nem's eyes glistened with moisture, and through her sniffles, she said, “Yeah, I did. I thought I accepted it and moved on . . . but ever since this year, memories started coming again. I don't know if it's stress over my art exhibition, my future as a penniless artist, the fact that I haven't seen my mom for over five months, or maybe because my friends don't trust me anymore because of how fucked up I am.”

It hurt me to see Nem in pain. My heart went out to her. But there was one thing that I couldn't deny, and that was the stab of envy that I felt when she spoke about her “friends”. I had no idea how to help someone in this position, let alone an almost-friend. I wanted her to think I was supportive and wise, but the only thing that I could muster was, “I understand why you feel that them being dead is because of you, but all I know is that people have choices. It was their choice to get into the car and drive at night on a highway filled with drunken drivers. You were drunk. It would've been better if they didn't encourage your drunken behaviour by actually coming to get you in the danger of the night.”

Nem moved into a new position and tore a leaf off from a nearby branch, “Yeah, but if they didn't come, I would've probably been mugged, raped or murdered out there. Any parent would come and pick up their child. Hello, we're in South Africa . . . not peaceful-ass Namibia.”

I flinched when she made that comment about Namibia. Was she distancing us? Me trying to be wise had not worked, clearly. I let her comment go – I knew she was suffering, and her period didn't make it any better.

Time went by as we sat in silence in the tree. The only sounds were the 5pm rush hour cars racing past with 5FM exploding from the radios. I fingered the corduroy material while listening to the voices of the homeless swearing at each other from across the Eerste River, “*Jou, fokken naai!*”, “*Ek kak sommer in jou hand!*”. The sounds of Nem's roommate seeped over the walkway, “I hate you, you lying cheating bastard!” and after a series of banging and things being thrown about, the roommate, who I came to learn was, Michaela, screamed, “No, Mike, please don't go. I love you!” Right then, so-called Mike, walked out and as he passed under the oak tree, Nem threw a handful of acorns onto his head. He didn't bother to look up. Then the neighbour's dog spotted us wedged in the tree and went into a barking fit that was bound to result in a heart attack. None of these sounds was disturbing. This was the usual energy in this student town. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Because Nem had opened up so much to me, I felt guilty that I hadn't shared any personal information about myself and couldn't help her as a psychology student, so I opened up and spilled everything out to break this loud silence between us.

“I'm messed up too, Nem. I might not have the same history as you, but I have one that is very painful for me,” I glanced up into her eyes, which beckoned me to continue, “I haven't met anyone that I've clicked with, as a friend, in Namibia or here at university. My conservative parents held me back from doing things that would open me up to meeting new people. They don't like clubs, parties, anything to do with alcohol, or boys or drugs. They don't even like what I'm studying. It's hard to feel good enough for them because, as being a girl, they view my brother as worthier than me. He can do anything – drink, sex, be naughty, but oh no, not me. Sometimes, I want to rebel against them, which led me to my worst experience of my life . . .” Nem moved over and placed her arms around my shoulders, “I met a guy, Dylan, and I thought that we shared something that went beyond usual attraction. That night, I ate five weed brownies, drank a lot and passed out. When I woke up, Dylan was having sex with me. . .” I bent my head and wept into Nem's shoulder, “then I became pregnant, so I got an abortion . . .” Nem rocked me and whispered comforting words into my ear. It was then when I noticed that the city's noise died, and all I could hear was Nem's breathing. If a squirrel jumped into the tree, it would've only seen two humans hugging beneath the oak's branches. But it didn't know that our friendship was sealed into the ancient trunk that was now “our tree”.

Freesia

Nem's phone rang for a while before she picked up. She must've been busy painting.

"Hey, Freesh! What's up? You good?" She sounded out of breath. There were muffled sounds, a crunching of a feathered dove, and by the depth of her voice, I could tell that she was lying down.

"Nem, hi . . . are you busy? Because I was wondering if you wanted to go mushroom foraging with me?"

Nem's voice changed as she moved into an upright position, "That sounds sick. I'm free all day, so when?"

"In 15 minutes?"

"15 minutes! Shit, okay, I should be done with this naked guy between my legs by then." Even though the boy with Nem didn't make any sounds, I could detect his reek through the phone call.

"Uhm . . . okay, I'll meet you at your place then. Have, uh . . . fun?"

Nem put the phone down without saying goodbye. I figured she was too preoccupied with other things at the moment.

From my rain-splattered window, a deep fog submerged the surrounding mountains. The mountains had been transformed from their stable claret shade into a sooty grey. The pine plantation appeared bosky and thick – who knew what kind of creatures dwelled under the safety of those conifers. When the wind hummed, it stirred the mist into eddies and made it seem as though the mountains were in a steaming pot of water, on route to being boiled into mountain stew. I tucked into a raincoat, tekkies and walked towards Nem's apartment with a wooden basket in hand that I had bought from street vendors. During my walk, candles flickered from the windows, and I was unsure if load shedding had just begun or students thought that with rain, candles were required to keep the heavy fog at bay. In the puddles of the potholes, I could see the mist talking to me in sign language. If only I knew what it was saying. When I finally arrived in Nem's neighbourhood, I had sliced through opposite ends of town in a handful of minutes. It was definitely my record time. As I neared, I noticed a figure coated in a bright yellow raincoat, making out with a handsome boy. I could tell from the kiss that it was either their last kiss or the first of hundreds, fuelled with passion and possession, which made me uneasy. Nem's hands were stuck onto his jaw, and he practically couldn't get enough of her, by the way he leaned in. I hovered behind a house and waited for them to finish sucking each other's teeth out of their sockets.

Two – That's the number of minutes I waited before I looked over the wall to see if they were finished. Which they weren't.

Thirteen – That's the number of mating calls a lone Egyptian Goose made in a nearby tree.

Forty-four – That's the number of raindrops that had sunk into my bare hands as I waited and waited.

Two – That’s the number of times that I tried to control my jealousy but failed miserably. After a string of deep breaths, I found the strength to walk towards them, who were attached to each other, twin to a leech on skin.

I cleared my throat, hoping that the sound would distract them. When that didn’t work, I mumbled, “Nem?” I noticed that this boy’s hands were groping her breasts through the yellow zippers of the raincoat. She turned in my direction with a look of annoyance on her face. But when she saw that it was me, she broke into a smile and a giggle, “Freesh! You took forever! You ready to go?” she pushed the boy off her – his eyes still closed in delight, “I brought some paint, brushes and a canvas, just in case I find you ethereal in the forest.” She turned towards the boy, and they said their dreary goodbyes. When we walked away and were out of earshot, I asked, “Who was that?”

“Oh, him? Just a random fucker.”

“Okay . . . Where did you meet him?”

“On Tinder, babes.”

“Are you going to see him again?”

Nem burst out laughing, “Girl, are you for real?” Nem stared at me. When I didn’t laugh or smile, she said, “It was just a hookup. And he wasn’t that good a fuck anyway.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Honey, his girth was thin, like super thin. And now that I think about it, there was a little bit of a mushroom vibe going on down there.” Nem laughed, pulled me towards her, and we hooked arms. I swear that I could smell his semen on her breath. We continued walking towards the mountain with the pine plantation, and all the while, she lay her head on my shoulder and beamed as she thought about, well, I hoped about me, but I suspected that she thought of that random.

The running trail was muddy and clogged with fynbos, but we pushed through until we arrived at the wall of conifers that separated the sun-flourishing fynbos from the vegetation housed under the pine trees. As we entered the forest, the rain quietened, the air cooled, and there was an ambience of contrast from the world that we just came from. Our shoes crunched over pinecones, and I could hear Nem humming along to a song. But then her footsteps sped up; she overtook me and walked in front of me. I watched how her legs curved like dunes, sloping with unafraid certainty. Her thighs looked firm beneath her black tights and widened as they neared her bum, which was as round and voluptuous. She was free of saddlebags because her flesh rounded over her hip bones in a gentle slope. I tore my eyes away when Nem said, “Smile!” and before I knew it, she took a photo of me. “So what mushrooms are we looking for anyway? Are we gonna trip today?” Nem said with a wink.

With a smile that I couldn’t hide, I answered, “Red Pine mushroom. It’s orange and has a convex cap.”

“And where do we find these bad boys?”

“Under conifers, they form a mycorrhizal relationship with the host tree. The deeper we travel, the more likely we are to find them.”

“Fascinating. And why did you choose the wettest day of the year to look for fungus with me?”

Nem said as she struggled to pull her platform Doc Martens out of the mud and pulled her hoodie over her face as it started to drip.

“They come out after the rains. If we waited for too long, they would’ve dried up, and then I couldn’t have made a stew for you.”

From the movement of Nem’s head, I could tell that she rolled her eyes, “Don’t mushrooms grow on shit or something? Are you sure they are safe to eat? Like I don’t want to die right now . . . we ain’t in the Hunger Games.”

“They are so safe . . . I’ve eaten them before and survived. The only side effect I had was orange pee for a week.”

“Orange pee for a week? Okay . . . let’s do it.”

When we reached the edge of the plantation below the cliffs of Coetzenburg Mountain, I found the first Red Pine mushroom. It was nestled under a heap of pine needles. Its carrot colour with dark orange rings was distinct. It popped out as though it were a smile after a crying spell, unsure of itself. I looked underneath to confirm if its gills appeared crowded. When I had made the correct diagnosis, I pulled out my pocketknife, sliced through the base and dropped it into the basket. Nem squirmed next to me, “It looks like a slimy dick, weeping cum.”

I cringed, “It’s the milk that it’s exuding, which means that it’s fresh.” After showing Nem how to identify it, we split up and searched by ourselves. We were apart for 30 minutes, and I took the time to breathe in the smell of the forest into my lungs. I wanted to become the forest, one with nature. My basket was full when Nem and I found our way back to each other through a series of mating calls between the trees. She dropped a few mushrooms in, but some of them were Chicken of the Woods and Slippery Jack’s instead of Red Pine mushrooms. Although they were edible, I threw them out as an offering to the forest.

We walked quickly out of the safety of the pine plantation as a substantial dark Cumulonimbus cloud devoured the sky. It threatened us with thunder, It needed to wet the forest to replace what we had foraged. The ground was slippery, and we trotted gracefully through the fynbos. When we arrived back at civilization, we kept underneath the oak trees and ran the last few hundred meters to my apartment.

Since arriving at University, I had never invited another girl into my room. Now, as we stood outside my door, my hands were shaking as I unlocked it. Nem strode in – immediately shimmying off her raincoat before dropping it on the tiled floor.

“I want to paint you while you cook for me,” she said with excitement in her voice. . . I had deep cleaned my room in an environmentally friendly ointment that made my room smell equal to a pincushion protea, for that heart-warming feeling. I hoped Nem noticed. Load shedding was over, but I still only lit the room with candles.

“Cute Pegasus dove”, Nem stated as she sat down on it and started sketching on her canvas. I gently washed the mushrooms and heated a pan with olive oil. Then, I dumped them dry with a paper towel. While I was busy chopping garlic and thyme, Nem came up behind me and tied a bandana over my head while pulling strands of hair over my ears.

“This is to make you look like Lana Del Rey.” Her body was pushed up against mine, and I could feel the soft feeling of her breasts against me. She looked into my eyes, “Damn, Freesh, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were in love with me by the way that you look at me.”

“What? I guess I just look like that.”

Nem walked away to her canvas, “Sure you do, hun.”

While I fried the mushrooms, I prepared a lemony butter sauce; Nem had already started mixing her paint. Her sketching was quicker this time, “Are you already done pencil sketching me?”

“Yup. It doesn’t take long anymore because I know your face quite well.”

I licked the spoon and pulled out two bowls from the cupboard. They were white on the outside, with a deep green interior; I bought them from Mr Price Home, especially for this occasion. I would’ve thought more about my beautiful bowls, but there was a nagging question tormenting me – I was curious to know how many boys Nem had slept with. How many hugged her warm naked body? How many kissed her soft skin?

“What did you say?” Nem asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You said “skin”.”

“Oh, I was thinking about the . . . the mushroom skin.”

“Looks like foreskin, right? I recognised it from miles away.” Nem joked.

“Since we’re on that topic, how many people have you . . .” Nem barely looked up at me and this was my cue to finally spit the question out, “How many people have you . . . uhm . . . been intimate with?” If my heart had fists, it would’ve been shaking them at me.

“Like sex?” Nem asked curiously.

I nodded without meeting her eyes.

“Wow. Let’s see, there was Max with the leopard trench coat, he was wild. Torge, biggest fuckboy ever, but shit, he fucked me so good, I almost caught feelings for him. Then, Justin, he was lame, super nerdy, I literally fell asleep while I was under him. Leo, my matric dance date, but he was a lazy fuck. He just expected me to ride him like we were at the rodeo in Texas or something. Luke, a one-night stand, had a limp dick. It was like sticking dough up my cunt. Adam, he was a hippie, super-hot, but not a Casanova in the bedroom. Roma, my first Girl, well we didn’t have sex, we just fucked around. She’s considered a player in the gay society here. Jazz, another girl, it was a spin the bottle dare that ended up being sex on the t-”.

“Okay, okay. I just wanted to know the number.”

“Oof, since when did somebody become a mathematician? Probably around 16 to 20 people.”

“Did you wear protection?”

“Nah, I like skin on skin. I really want to feel them, you know.”

“But, Nem, you could get AIDS!”

“Now? It’s not a big deal . . . like it’s not a death sentence anymore, you can get pills for that shit and lead a normal life.”

“But then you won’t be able to have children one day . . .”

“Maybe I’m not supposed to.”

I set the table and placed a small candle between the bowls. We ate in silence while other students slammed their doors and walked through the halls. Nem shovelled the mushrooms into her mouth, leaving orange milk running down and shining her chin. I, however, savoured them with slow bites, tasting the forest in my mouth. She finished her entire bowl with a burp, “Oops, sorry. Thanks, Fresh. It was so good!” She then set back to work. When I finished my meal, I gave her three lipsticks for her painting ritual. She put on the vampire red lipstick and even smeared some onto her canvas.

Outside, it was already dark because of the fog. Everywhere, leaves were stuck onto the gleaming tar, and I thought about asking her questions, but I didn’t know what to ask without seeming obsessed or weird. I wanted to get to know her, and this was cuddle and hot chocolate weather.

“You should move out of here. This fitted white desk, fitted white cupboard, fitted single bed, not to mention, tiny-ass room, is definitely no place for a model to live.” This was the first time Nem commented on my surroundings, I knew it wasn’t the best place, but it was the cheapest. “Like, I feel like I can still feel the city’s filth in here.” Nem was right, but everything else exceeded my parents’ budget, and it didn’t help that we lived in the most expensive area in South Africa.

“I’d love to move out but there’s nowhere else that I can afford. Anyways, we are graduating at the end of the year, so who knows where we’ll be?”

Nem’s answer cut my soul, “I’m definitely not going to be in South Africa next year. I’m over this shit. I need to transcend the fuck outta this place.”

I calmed myself down so as to not seem too eager or pestering, “But, where would you go? What would you do? With what money?”

“I dunno, maybe the standard thing like teach English in Asia, backpack Europe, go volunteering . . . anything but stay here in this gutter of incest and freaks.”

When Nem dropped her paintbrush, I hurried over to see what she captured. It was in shades of forest, a little red lipstick, and it was me cooking, but instead of wearing clothes, I was draped in mist. A treacherous kind of darkness formed outside while Nem painted away, and I reviewed my psychology notes for my upcoming exam. Nem made no move to walk home or call an Uber. The following words that came out of my mouth shocked me to my core, “You can sleep here if you want.”

“Might as well - I have a late class tomorrow.” The sleepover offer seemed nonchalant to Nem like she had gone to thousands of sleepovers before, but this was a massive step for me.

Sleepovers never really happened with me after primary school. I was about to make a bed on the floor, and sacrifice mine for Nem, when she said, “Nah, don’t go through so much admin, let’s just sleep together in your bed.”

“But it’s so small?”

“All the more cuddling then. Besides, I hate sleeping alone.”

We showered separately, and when Nem showered, there was an emptiness in my heart that wanted her to come back as quickly as possible. When she opened the door, she was wrapped in my purple towel, “Got any spare pyjamas for me?”

I took my new Cotton On Body pyjamas out and handed them to her, grateful that I bought them because my others were stained in old period marks. When it was my turn to shower, I looked for evidence of her being in my shower. *My shower*. I found a strand of blonde hair on the wall, and this time I didn’t wash it away with the showerhead like I usually do with my hair. My soap was lathered – she had used it, and my shampoo was facing the wrong direction – she had looked at it, my shower loofah was soaked – she had exfoliated her skin with it. After my shower, It took a while for me to open the bathroom door, but when I did, Nem was snuggled in the corner, beneath my family photos. It looked like she was already sleeping. I cracked open the window so we wouldn’t die from carbon monoxide poisoning (even though there was no gas) and slipped into bed next to her. Her feet bit me with their cold. As I lay on my side, she turned towards me and put her arm over my body.

“Sweet dreams,” she whispered. That night, I slept wide-awake.

Freesia

Nem walked out of the art building as confidently as a dressage horse. She wasn't the type to show that she was nervous, but I could detect that she was heavily disturbed by the darker shade of her eyes. They weren't their usual bright blue that you often see on travel billboards showcasing tropical islands. No, today they were a murky blue, as though she lay on the ocean. Her curly hair was tied up into an effortless bun on the top of her head, and it was the first time that I noticed her ears. They were pierced with rings on the helix and reminded me vaguely of a bush-baby's ears.

"Let's get the fuck off campus!" she said as she reached me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked as we walked away from the art building.

"Yeah," Nem said as she opened her box of cigarettes.

"Okay." I didn't like it when Nem smoked, but I guess she needed a dose of nicotine-induced numbness.

"No, actually. I'm just freaking the fuck out right now because I just set up my entire years' worth of work for the final art exhibition, including my Freesia Series." She searched her holographic backpack for a lighter as we walked.

"Your art is amazing, Nem. You don't have to worry. You are going to be such a successful artist one day, I can tell."

"Fuck, I don't have a lighter," She stopped walking, rolled her eyes and continued, "It's just with art, my soul is painted onto those canvases. I'm worried the external examiner is an asshole and doesn't like my soul because, like me, my art is like really messy."

"Nobody could ever not like your soul, and I like messy."

"You're cute," she pinched my cheek.

As we walked through campus, into the city centre and towards the street with the bars, a girl with pink and blue hair walked towards us. Nem stopped her and asked for a lighter, after which the girl handed it over. I watched Nem's profile as she leaned in to puff on the lighter, and I noticed that she had a tattoo of a purple diamond behind her ear. All I wanted at that moment was to get the exact same tattoo behind my ear, even though I had no idea what it meant – Rhianna's "shine bright like a diamond"? Materialism? Brilliance? Either way, I knew that my parents would disapprove.

"Girl, I love your hair," Nem said to the pink-and-blue girl.

"Thanks, Harley Quinn inspired. Love those locks you got there." she said to Nem, without so much as glancing in my direction. She, too, got out a cigarette and started smoking.

"Thanks, Medusa inspired," Nem said, and they both laughed while I just stood and stared at them, growing more envious by the second. Why were they all of a sudden so interested in each other? They were complete strangers.

"I'm, Nem, by the way, and this gorgeous creature over here is, Freesia, my art model." I did a small-uninterested hand movement that was supposed to be a wave. Why didn't she introduce me as her friend?

“Annabel. Wow, so you’re an artist? I’m studying graphic design at the academy.” Annabel glimpsed at me and quickly diverted her attention back to Nem. I decided that she was an Aries from her atmosphere, and I didn’t like Aries’s. Being an earth sign and Nem a water sign, we were made for each other. Even the stars knew it. But a fire sign had no place in our friendship. And it ought to stay that way.

I could understand why people would be drawn to Nem, but why would Nem think this girl was attractive? I hoped that she only faked being interested in a lighter, or for an Instagram follower, and nothing more. They stood opposite each other and talked about famous Impressionist artists they liked as they both smoked. I stood awkwardly and sank into the role of the secondary smoker – sulking and trying to dodge the cancer.

After they both finished smoking, their arty conversation finally ended. I let out a sigh of relief because I didn’t think that Harley Quinn was good for Nem. When they exchanged their Instagram names, my cheeks blushed. I didn’t have Instagram, and I knew that made me look weird, but who would I follow, and who would even bother to follow me? I couldn’t help but think it annoying that they swapped Instagram accounts because it only made me want Instagram so that I could connect with Nem virtually, as well. After they said goodbye and yelled, “I’ll follow you on Insta!” We continued walking to the bar. Nem looked more relaxed after she gained a potential follower and had nicotine rushing through her veins.

The street was dotted with vibrant restaurants. Only tourists walked in and out of the fancy restaurants with their safari hats and hiking boots.

“Jeez, whoever owns the safari clothing shop in Europe is making loads of Dolla Dolla bills, man!”

“Shhh, Nem, they’ll hear you.”

“They’re probably all German. Our English is too fast for them.”

“They’ll think badly of us and never come visit again,” I said and regretted because I knew Nem didn’t care.

“Don’t give a fuck. Let’s turn in here?” Nem pointed at a cosy student bar, Lion’s Honey. It was decorated with wood and pot plants. Before I could reply, she said, “A table for two, please?” to a bartender.

“Sure thing. Where would you ladies like to sit? Inside, we can get your beer on tap quicker to you, outside you can watch the people at the Hot Yoga Studio, and at the back, we’ve got a live band playing.”

“The last one,” Nem said without blinking.

We followed him into a courtyard. I thought it was attractive that Nem didn’t ask if I even wanted to sit by the live band, let alone go to this bar in the first place. Maybe she knew what I liked or knew that I wouldn’t have been able to make a decision quickly enough. We stepped into the courtyard filled with various levels of drunk students, all celebrating the end of exams. Nem directed the barman to a small table in the corner, the music was alternative rock – I vaguely recognised the song by Milky Chance. We sat down on the rickety chairs, and Nem ordered a glass of red wine for me, craft beer for her, and a plate of the bar’s finest finger foods.

After he left, she went directly onto Instagram. I knew this because I could see the reflection of her page in her irises.

“Oh, she hasn’t followed me.” She said with a frown.

“Maybe she will still? It’s only been a few minutes.”

“Maybe.”

“Did you think she was pretty?” I asked, twirling my hair and trying to act blasé.

“Yeah, I did. Did you?”

“No, not at all.” I stopped twirling my hair and placed my fists on the table. I dug my nails into my palms until my knuckles turned into dice.

Right then, our drinks came. I hid my fists under the table and daintily picked up my glass of wine by the stem. Nem immediately slurred her beer so that foam formed on her upper lip. She looked similar to an old hippie man. I leaned forward, placed my index finger on the foam, and wiped the foam slowly away. Nem stared at me with laughing eyes, then I put my foamed finger into my mouth to taste what lay on her tender skin, “Ew, disgusting. How could you drink that?” I said as I scrunched my nose.

Nem laughed, “You get used to it. Anyways, Freesh, let’s get down to business.”

‘Business?’ I couldn’t forget the taste of the foam in my mouth. I could definitely taste her sweat.

“I think you should get Instagram. You have such an interesting face, beautiful body, and you are an amazing still life model. When I post my paintings of you, everybody literally wants to know who you are. I think this is good for you, other artists might use you, and you can ask for fees.”

“Isn’t that bad for you, though?” I leaned in my chair and sipped on my wine. The band announced a ten-minute break. This gave me the chance to make sure that all my senses focused purely on Nem.

“Nah, I had you first. Their art wouldn’t be the same.”

“There are a lot of interesting faces out there. I don’t see what makes mine so special.”

“When I look into your eyes, it’s like reading a really, really depressing book. It’s so artistic, and I mean that in a good way.”

I smiled quietly, “I mean, what if nobody follows me? What if I get no likes?”

“Trust me, with my help, that’s the least of your worries.”

“Okay.” I shrugged and looked around to see if I knew anyone at the tables.

“Cool, gimme your phone.” She stretched her hand out towards me.

“You want to do this right now?”

“Now, or never.”

I handed my phone over guiltily and watched how Nem took control of my phone, my life, my virtual identity. I loved it. The barman came over with our finger foods – a plate of deep-fried chicken strips, deep-fried mushrooms, deep-fried cheese balls, mayo, and a house dressing.

“Okay, you need an Instagram name. Make it something catchy so that people don’t forget.”

“What’s yours?”

“@nemthediva”

I pondered while Nem put my phone between her thighs and dug into the platter. I couldn't choose my name and surname because it was already taken.

Nem broke the silence as she spoke with a mouthful of crumbs, "Okay, how about, @freeshfreesh? It's a young tongue twister! I love it."

I nodded, only because I liked how much she liked it.

"Got it. Okay, you're officially not a serial killer anymore." She burst out laughing, "Come on, Freesh, in this era, it's weird if you don't have social media. You can't deny that. You're either a freak, in a mental institution, an introvert, or a psychopath, without Instagram. Do you want to be that? And aren't you going to eat anything that I just ordered?"

Besides being a psychopath, I wasn't sure what was wrong with the list of people she mentioned. I moved my head left to right, "Too many calories, I can't afford to pick up weight."

"Your wine has calories, just so you know. Okay, so your bio – keep it low-key as if you didn't put any effort into it. Just say what you studied (psychology student), your work (still-life art model), and where you're from (from sunny Namibia). There, look, it's done!"

By the time Nem was finished with my Instagram profile, she handed my phone back to me. I did a quick review and saw that my profile picture was a painting of me, and my first photo was a picture of me sipping wine at this very bar.

"Did you just take this photo of me?"

"Yeah, you looked so cute! Definitely going to make you Insta famous. Now let's take a selfie of us so that I can post it on mine and tag you in it."

Nem took out her phone, "Oh, Annabel, followed me."

"Who's Annabel?"

"That girl we just met."

"Oh, you mean, Harley Quinn?"

"Shit, she's got a nice profile. Fuck, she's even prettier online. Damn, she's pretty hot. I think I'll ask her to model for me too. She'd look so good on this new theme I'm planning to do."

"Aren't you going to take a selfie of us anymore?" I butted in.

"Freesh, look how pretty she is! I'm gonna DM her and see if she wants to join us."

It felt as though I fell into a thorn bush and couldn't wriggle myself free, and when I finally did, my entire skin suit hung on the tree's teeth. I was left ripped, raw, dripping red, and raging. Like a plant to water, I too was destined to have my own osmosis, except I sucked up the most rancid of poisons instead of water.

Nemesia

4 pm

“You 100% sure you wanna do this?”

“I’m sure.”

“Yeah? Cool, because I got us the best shit there is.”

“How do you know that it’s the best? Isn’t it a dangerous low-class drug?”

“Oh, wow, look at you, Miss “Neuropsychologist”!” I laughed and elbowed Freesia in the arm,

“Sure, it’s dirty – you never know what it’s laced with. But I trust my supplier, he wouldn’t give me anything ratchet, because you know how it is . . . I promise him paradise with my eyes . . . Trust me, he’d want me to stay alive, if you know what I’m saying, girl. Anyways Fresh, not knowing what’s in there is why it’s so fucking FUN. Seriously, you’re gonna lose your mind tonight.” Freesia flinched at “lose your mind”, so I quickly added, “As in, lose your mind in a spiritual awakening, not like lose your mind and become brain-damaged.”

We were on the way to Freesia’s first trance festival and my millionth one. It was always an honour to be part of somebody’s first trance festival and psychedelic drug use. The bond would bind us like taproots, deep and always seeking. After everything that Freesia had been through, I thought this would be a sublime opportunity for her to de-stress and for me to see her wild side. It was also my treat to myself for finishing the Freesia series for my art exhibition. Graduation was soon, and we needed to celebrate.

I drove my VW Polo onto the highway and glanced at Freesia in the passenger seat. Her head was bent over her phone, and I assumed that she was Googling the side effects of taking MD. Before we left, we got ready at my place. She rocked up in jeans and a cardigan, and that was when I put my foot down, “No, no, no. You can’t go dressed as a substitute schoolteacher to a trance festival!” After rummaging through my wardrobe, which mainly consisted of teddy fur coats, LBD’s, groovy tights and revealing bras, she chose something that was a tad too low-key for me – my old crochet crop top, shorts and yellow glitter for her face.

Compared to Freesia, my outfit was idiosyncratic and fit Coachella – fishnet stockings, sequin underwear-outfit, pink face glitter, and oversized vintage sunglasses. If I had to describe myself in a toned-down version, it would be a sparkling rainbow that was tripping on fire.

The road was packed with festival goers trying to arrive before the 5-pm rush hour. Many had already dissolved their drugs in water or were busy chewing their magic mushrooms as they drove. I looked into the car next to me, and the girls were whipping on some last-minute glitter and doing each other’s hair in space buns. Another vehicle had a plume of weed fog seeping out from the windows. Just thinking about MD made my blood rush, and I swear I already saw my pupils dilating in the rear-view mirror.

“What if I get a heart attack or become brain-damaged?” Freesia mumbled more to her phone than to me.

“Honey, shut the fuck up. You only fry your brain after you take MD, like for more than six times or something. But that’s why you move on to Acid, Cocaine or’ shrooms. Anyways, there

are paramedics on the premises, so you're gonna be fine." The look on her face told me otherwise, "What, don't you trust me?"

"I do trust you . . . it's just what if somebody from class sees me?"

"Then we'll say hi, and I'll twerk on them. Think about it, if they're there, that means that they are probably on drugs too."

"Maybe they would just be drinking alcohol? I mean, as a future psychologist, I can't take drugs . . . it's so hypocritical, irresponsible, dangerous, immature, stupid, and can trigger a mental disorder."

"Oh. My. God. Spare me the sermon. Fuck, you psychologists are so fucking boring. Don't you ever stop taking things so seriously? YOLO, man." With that, I turned up the radio. 5FM played some sick deep house, which put me in the party mood and dissolved that vibe Freesia was transmitting. The robot light turned green, and the car in front stalled. Usually, my road-rage was equivalent to a mother elephant protecting her calf, but today I let all that shit go. I had good vibes only, well when I was finally rushing on MD, I would. Next to me, Freesia squirmed. She was playing table tennis with her thoughts, conversing with her angel and demon. Knowing her, I assumed that she might yield to her anxiety, which might mean me on MD alone. Not happening!

"Don't you need to have lots of life experience to become a psychologist?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Exactly. Like I would bond way more with my psycho if I knew he took drugs in his youth . . . It would make me feel so much more comfortable if he was the type to experiment with hectic shit. You feel me? Look, all I'm saying is, you'd be a more interesting person if you tried drugs – your life experience would skyrocket outta here, man. It's not like you're gonna become a druggie or go to rehab. . ."

"You really think so?"

"Fuck, yes."

"I suppose experimentation is a normal part of life, right?"

"Right. If you don't experiment, you're a tight ass. Do you really want to be like that?"

"No, not really. . ."

"Cool, so take MD and don't worry about it because I've done it tons of times and look at me. I'm pretty cool, if I do say so myself."

Freesia didn't answer after that but instead looked ahead at the traffic. I saw a Spar and Tops in the corner of my eye and decided to turn in there for some last-minute *padkos*. We bought one bottle of Olmeca Tequila, two boxes of Tassenberg red wine, five bottles of water, a box of Camel cigarettes, two King Pies, and a packet of lollipops. Judging from our outfit and sunglasses at the ready, the cashier eyed us suspiciously. She was tight-lipped, but she said, "Have fun, neh?" with a smile when we paid.

"Thanks, hun, we will! Have a good day," I answered as we walked out. When we got to the car, Freesia became increasingly paranoid.

"Do you think that she knows that we are going to take MD?"

“Course.”

“What!?”

“Chillax, maybe not MD specifically, but she definitely knows that something is going down tonight.” I unlocked the car and put our *padkos* on the backseat, then closed it to find Freesia leaning against the passenger door, biting her nails, “Do you think she’ll call the police?”

“What? No, man. They’re off hunting rapists and murderers. They wouldn’t come after two dumb bitches. This ain’t Europe, jong. Freesh, honestly, like please calm down. You’re killing my vibe.”

“Sorry . . . I just can’t help but feel so worried.”

“Here, take a sip of Tequila – it’ll take the edge off.”

We got into the car, Freesia opened the bottle of Tequila and took a few sips.

“Wow, wow, wow. Drinking on an empty stomach? Eat your pie as well.”

“You know I don’t want to eat it. . .”

“And waste my money? You have to. Otherwise, you’re gonna get a stomach ulcer, combining alcohol and MD like that. And I don’t want to hear any complaints at the festival, so eat your pie.”

“But it’s a carb explosion. I’m going to pick up weight.”

I sighed as I switched the car on and reversed out of the parking lot, “You know, MD makes you dance like it’s your last night on earth. I lost 2kgs on that shit within a day. Trust me, you are going to burn loads of calories tonight, and you aren’t fat anyways.”

While I wedged back into the traffic, Freesia stared ahead and contemplated what I said. We drove in silence while I drove carefully along the mountain pass. The mountain’s edge was to the left, and to the right was a steep cliff that fell into the sea. I slowed into second gear and concentrated on not driving off the edge. Freesia unbuckled and sat in the backseat to be closer to the sea. I could hear her stuffing her hand into the pie packet. In the rear-view mirror, I watched her nibble akin to an elephant shrew as she looked at the sparkling sea. Then, with an intense stare, she started eating ravenously and tearing at the pie with her canines. I stifled a laugh, mostly because I was worried about her choking – I didn’t know how to do the Heimlich manoeuvre but figured that somebody in the traffic would save her if need be.

After a while of driving and pausing for road works, we were almost there.

5:30 pm

We arrived at the festival; I drove slowly over the potholes while I tried to find a parking spot under a tree. A troop of baboons gave people hell and a few stray dogs that looped around the cars. When I finally parked, I noticed that Freesia looked less anxious as she watched the people running away from baboons that were stealing their sandwiches.

I switched the car off just as a baboon climbed up the tree. “This is going to be so much fun! I can’t wait to get my ass over there and stomp like a madman.”

“It looks really cool,” Freesia squeaked.

“Okay, Freesh, look, when we enter, don’t freak out if you see police, okay? They are searching for weapons, glass, and drugs.”

“Drugs! But you told me that this isn’t Europe! No, I can’t do this anymore.”

“Damn, you definitely need a chill pill. Listen, Freesh. Look at me, deep breaths, in and out, in and out. Okay, good. Exactly, this isn’t Europe. They don’t give a fuck if we have drugs, they are only worried about glass because they don’t want anyone to get stabbed. We are going to take our MD capsules right now. So, if they do search us, they’ll have nothing to find.” I opened my sequin fanny pack, pulled out the bankie and gave Freesia her capsule, “Here, take it.”

She held the capsule to the light and stared at the crystals while continuously checking the side mirrors.

“It’s not suspicious at all when your head bobs up like a crazy weasel and looks into every single mirror while holding MD in your hands.”

She looked at me and burst out laughing, “I’m checking where the baboon is!”

Just then, I could see her anxiety melting away, and my heart softened at the innocence of her fairy-like being. She handed me the Tequila, which had decreased substantially, and I took a long, deep gulp. With the wind, I could hear the sound of the distant trance music that grew fainter and louder as the wind played with it.

“We need to finish a whole bottle of water so that we can pour our alcohol in and take it with us to the dance floor.” I pulled out an empty 500 ml Pump Bottle from under my seat and filled it with water. Freesia looked at me expectantly. I spoke soothingly to make sure she remained calm, “We gotta stay hydrated. Water is so important. Such a beautiful element, isn’t it?”

She nodded in agreement. Then, I held the 1.5l bottle with the remaining water and decided it was time to wash it down our throats, along with the MD.

“You ready?” I held the MD to my mouth. Freesia nodded.

“Let’s do this!” I said, but when I was about to pop it in, Freesia clutched my arm, “Nem, will you look after me if anything happens?”

“Of course! I love you, man.”

“Y-you love me?” Freesia stammered.

“Yeah, you’re like a little sister to me, hun.” We stared into each other’s eyes without blinking.

“Okay, let’s take this bad boy together? Then we’ll be bonded via hydrochloride salt, and nobody can take that away from us.”

We clinked our capsules against each other, “Cheers!”

I tilted my head back, closed my eyes, took a guzzle of water and swallowed the capsule. I felt it slipping down my gullet, rubbing against my walls, and when it finally reached my stomach, a feeling of fullness and satisfaction came over me. It felt in the same nature as a round ball nestled in my stomach.

“You look like a child on Christmas Day,” Freesia giggled from her seat. I glanced over, and her chin dribbled with liquid.

“Did you take it?”

She nodded, “Uh-huh. How long until it kicks in?”

“Like, 40 minutes,” I leaned over and hugged her, “I’m so proud of you, Freesh! You have officially made us unbreakable. WE. ARE. UNBREAKABLE.” Our cheeks pressed against each other, and I could feel her jaw slowly relax beneath me. When I pulled away, my pink glitter mixed with her yellow, forming an extra-terrestrial life on both of our cheeks. We looked otherworldly, yet still burdened with too much earth.

5:45 pm

I locked the car, and we made a run for it before the baboon came down. We crossed the highway and made our way towards the longest line ever. Some guys wolf whistled as we walked past, so I just shot them the middle finger while Freesia cringed and covered her eyes with her hand. While we stood in line, we chatted with the people around us, but we turned back to each other when we got bored.

“Let’s take some selfies before our makeup smudges and we look ratchet,” I said as I unzipped my phone. Freesia’s face overflowed with joy – she loved taking selfies with me. After a few snaps, there was one adorable pic of us looking fly, so I posted it on Instagram with this caption:

Me and Bae. Love this special bitch so much RN!
#BFF #TranceFestival #Love #Memories

I added a mushroom and alien head emoji and tagged Freesia in it. Ever since I literally made Freesia on Instagram by posting my paintings and photos of her, her own followers soared, and she got people sliding into her DM’s daily, asking her to be their art model as well. When we reached the front of the line, the police searched my fanny pack. I kept a straight face while Freesia put her sunglasses on and tried to act normal as she scrolled on Instagram. The police officer raised an eyebrow at my lollipop collection, “Why so many *suigstokkies*?”

“I like to suck on things.”

He chuckled, “Ja, I know why you have it.”

“And, how would you know?” I asked flirtatiously.

“I just know these things. *Julle kan maar gaan.*” He said with a knowing smile and waved us through.

After we got our festival armbands, we finally entered paradise as we made our way beneath the trees and followed the heartbeats of the newcomers. The trees ended, and before us lay giant yellow hoops decorated as suns. With every hoop we walked under, we moved closer to our MD destiny. I couldn’t help but feel that this was my grand entrance, where people were filming my every movement and editing me into slow motion, making sure that my ass jiggled at all the right places. At the last hoop, the Atlantic Ocean opened up in front of us equal to a blue ribbon.

Although it was merely a fragment of False Bay, it held the entire Atlantic in its cusp – great white sharks, cape fur seals, African penguins. Freesia and I took millions of photos, then we stopped to take in the view. The bay was bordered by peaking mountains, the beach sand was wispy white, and the campsite was dotted in colours like fruit Mentos.

The trance music grew louder and louder the closer we got to the dance floor. A beach ball was thrown around, there were blow-up dolphins and ducks, dreadlocks, tattoos, yeti's, Tarzan's, that danced madly. As soon as we arrived at the outskirts of the dance floor, the ping-pong music quietened, and a raspy female voice from the music rolled over my shoulders as it echoed, "*Evolution. Regression. Humanity. Evolution . . . Evolution . . . Evolution . . . Humanity.*" The festival goers slowed down while she spoke and basked in their endorphin explosion. When the drop came, Freesia and I started trance dancing hard and kicked up dust. We laughed as we made funky moves and screamed while we took videos for my Instagram story. We danced for 10 minutes. The MD hadn't kicked in yet. There was a delicious smell of Cape Malay samosas that wafted into my sinuses. I grabbed Freesia and pulled her out of the bodies, yanking her along the way so we could follow the smell. We arrived at the food stalls, which were colourful shacks that sold everything from Fizzers to Indian curries. I ordered a samosa and a packet of popcorn, while Freesia bought a vegan smoothie. We threw popcorn into each other's mouths but missed each time.

"Here, this time, I'll put it in your mouth, and we can say that we finally scored something," I said as I picked up a single popcorn and placed it on Freesia's tongue. Just as I was about to take my fingers out, she closed her mouth on them and sucked them, "You tripping?" I laughed as I drew them out of her mouth.

6:45 pm

After we had our fill, we made our way back to the dance floor.

"That's incredible!" Freesia screamed as she pointed at the trippy kaleidoscope spider web that hung above us.

"Stop staring and come dance!" yelled one of the guys we spoke to in the line. He wore a kikoi sarong and backpack, which only meant one thing – more supplies.

"Come on, Freesh, let's join those hotties."

"You think they're hot?" Freesia stood and asked with a tinge of annoyance.

I followed them, keeping the backpack in view, "I think everyone's hot."

"Do you think I'm hot?"

I held her hand and walked backwards into the crowd, never taking my eyes off her, "Yes.

Freesh, you are so hot."

When those words escaped my lips, there was no controlling them, truths like these are uncontrollable. We wedged our way deeper through the bodies and closer to the stage where a trance artist was DJing, punching the air, and shouting, "PARTY PEOPLE! ARE YOU READY TO PARTY? NOW PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR. FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE."

With the doef doef drop, everyone started dancing hard, bumping into each other, and just getting plain rural and creative with their dance moves. Then the MD kicked in. I began to sweat, my jaws clenched, my teeth ground against my gums, my heart pumped like I was fucking. I felt happy, so unbearably happy. And I fell in love. I looked over at Freesia, she was swaying her

hips to the raspy female music voice that came again, “*Conscious awakening, awakening, awakening, awakening, awakening, awakening, awakening . . .*”

Freesia’s slender arms were high in the air, dangling in the breeze. I moved closer to her, put my hands on her back, and handed her a lollipop. She unwrapped it as if she were a sugar-addicted dragonfly and chomped on it. It was then when I looked at the fullness of her lips. They glistened under her luscious lip-gloss; the curve of her heavily defined cupid’s bow was too much for me. They looked so soft, so warm, so inviting. When I made my way towards her eyes, I saw myself staring straight back at me. Freesia’s eyes were hidden beneath her tinted sunglasses, but when I saw my reflection, it was a sight that shocked me. I had never seen myself look so empathetic towards somebody else, it was scary, but it turned me on. I sucked on a cherry flavoured lollipop, and within seconds, my jaw crushed it down to the plastic stick. I was rushing. Suddenly, there was a lone a-wooooo wolf howl from the crowd, then everybody howled in return. Freesia made a small a-woo yelp. It was too cute for this earth.

“How are you feeling?” I asked as I took her by the elbow.

“Amazing! This is amazing! I feel so amazing!” she cried as she hugged me. I had never seen her so happy and free, and what I did next didn’t shock me. I grabbed Freesia’s jaw and kissed her on the lips. As I pulled away, I instantly thought that I had sexually assaulted her, “I’m so sorry, Freesh. Kissing on MD is just amazing, so that’s wh-”

She kissed me before I could finish my sentence. This time she opened her mouth, and we made out while everyone around us danced.

8:30 pm

Freesia tasted like the raspberry-flavoured lollipop, but that wasn’t what made me insane, it was her perfume. She wore that Taylor Swift one that smelt like a cupboard full of tea and an oriental garden at dusk. All I knew was that I wanted more of it, so much more.

“Follow me,” I whispered. Freesia nodded as her hand flew to her mouth to cover her smile. The guys that we danced with grinned wildly at us. I knew they liked what they saw. Like two antelope, we ran and pushed through the masses of people. When we reached the beach, the sun had already set, the sky was an inky dark blue, and we sat down on the sand. I leant in towards her and kissed her on her lips. God, it felt good to kiss lips so different to the more brutal lips of guys.

Freesia pulled away, “Nem, this is crazy!”

“I know, right!? You taste so good, though.”

“So do you.” This time Freesia took control and ran her hands along my sequin underwear.

Drunk and drugged up people walked past us on the beach. They had left the dance floor to get some quiet too. My heart thumped in my cunt, I couldn’t take it anymore, “Let’s go somewhere quieter?” I said as I stood up, and Freesia followed me to the campsite.

9 pm

We never brought a tent with us. We planned to sleep in the car for the night, but now we sneaked into the campsite, and I searched for the cleanest looking tent. Some tents had slip slops outside the flap door, indicating that someone was already inside. Others were brightened from the inside, and I could make out the figures of people doing drugs in secret. I found the perfect one – it was orange, and we tumbled inside. Out of respect and to ward off others, we took off our shoes and left them outside. Whatever we wanted to do had to be done quickly before the tent owners came back, but judging from the stillness of the tents, the owners were probably tripping on the dance floor. We lay on the neatly made sleeping bags and kissed some more. I moved on top of her and pressed my crotch against hers. She kissed me wildly, spread her legs apart, and clasped them around my torso. I drank her like she was poison, and I was suicidal. “Do you think the owners of the tent will come anytime soon?” Freesia asked out of breath. “Nah. And if so, we’ll kick them out.”

I moved my hands down her neck and felt her boobs. They were small and firm beneath my crochet top. Her nipples hardened into cherries when I rubbed them between my forefingers. I moved my head down over her stomach and kissed down the lining that separated her abs. They felt firm beneath my lips, and I could feel her shivering at my touch. When I arrived at her shorts, I unbuttoned them, slowly, to which she shucked them off over her bum. Her underwear had a little white bow in the middle with ribbed edges. I tugged it slowly downwards and over her feet. When they grazed her soles, she gasped.

“Aren’t you going to take my bra off?” I asked, challenging her because I knew that she had never done this before.

Freesia’s eyes widened. She slowly reached for me and unclasped my front-opener bra. There was a moment of silence when I sat over her. Although my bra was unclasped, my boobs and nipples were still covered.

“You can continue, don’t be scared.” I ushered. She ever so gently slid each sequin cup off my boobs, and when they were free, she gazed lovingly at them. The way she looked at me made my nipples harden. All I wanted was that she held my breasts. Not even the trance music could sound loud in the tent, all I saw was Freesia, and all I felt was the MD setting my neurotransmitters on fire.

“Seriously, Freesh, don’t be scared, trust me.” I grabbed her hands, brought them to my boobs until she cupped them. I groaned, rolled off her and took off my sequin underwear and fishnets. My hands found her clit, and I rubbed it in circular motions, sometimes squeezing and pulling. I slid my tongue into her and tasted her cunt. She moaned, and I could feel her heartbeat pumping in my face. She pushed my face away and reached for me. I crawled over her body until our heads faced each other.

“You can touch me down there if you want . . .” I said.

“But . . . I don’t know what to do.”

“Just do what I did. Come on, don’t be shy.”

“What if I don’t do it right and you get disappointed?”

"I'll let you know if you need to change some things and I won't get disappointed."

"Are you sure?" she asked, while staring into my soul.

"I've never been more sure." I smiled at her.

Freesia went down on me and hesitated before lapping at my clit. After a while, she asked, "Is this okay?"

"I love it. You can also increase your tongue's pressure and speed if you want."

"Like this?" she asked shyly. I hummed in agreement and scratched the sides of the tent while my body continued to submit to her mouth. Then I felt my stomach hollow out, and I whimpered in union with the contractions of my orgasm. There was no time to waste. I pushed Freesia down and nestled my mouth onto her clit and did the same to her until she bucked, pushed back and moaned the name of pleasure into the night.

11:30 pm

The MD wore off after my orgasm. Its four hours had done its job, but I planned on taking another capsule as soon as we re-joined the party. Freesia lay opposite me in a foetal position, and we stared into each other's night-dilated pupils.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

"Loved it." Freesia said with a smile, "But what does this mean now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know . . . are we still friends?"

"Of course, we are!" I sat up, put the torchlight of my phone on and collected our clothes that were flung about.

"So, we're only friends? Not girlfriends?"

I raised my eyebrows, "Yeah."

She went quiet and looked at me before dropping her head, "I don't understand," she said.

I handed her clothes to her, "What don't you understand?"

"I thought, since we made love, we'd be girlfriend-and-girlfriend now."

"Freesh, no. I don't. . . date girls," I said with the utmost care that I could manage.

"So what was this to you then?" She looked up at me now, with an accusing look in her eyes as she put her shorts on.

"It was just us having sex."

"Who 'just' has 'sex' with their friend?"

"It's not unheard of, Freesh." I buckled my fanny pack over my arm and across my chest.

"But after everything that you know I've been through, how is this just sex to you? Didn't you think about my feelings?"

Maybe it was my coming down from MD, or the Tequila, that made me lash out, "Freesh, we were on MD! This kind of shit happens when you're on drugs!" I waved my hands about, hoping that she could understand what I was trying to convey. She was silent as I put my underwear outfit back on.

"Don't call it 'shit'. . . it wasn't 'shit'. This actually meant something to me, Nem!"

“Freesh, we were on the love drug. The love drug! Everyone feels all loved up on the love drug!”

“Well, I never took it!”

“What?”

“I never took MD.”

“What are you talking about, Freesh?”

“When you swallowed yours, I just swallowed water. I left the capsule in the car under the seat.”

“What the fuck are you saying to me right now?”

“I was never on drugs, Nem. I never took MD with you. I was only high on you.”

I shook my head, my breathing grew shallow, “That’s sick. You’re sick. How could you lie to me!?”

“I didn’t want to take your stupid MD. It’s bad for you.” Freesia started to whimper, tears forming in her eyes.

“You are fucking fucked in the head, Freesia! You’re cooked! How could you pretend to take MD and all that shit about it being so amazing and that we were unbreakable? Huh? What the fuck is wrong with you, you fucking psycho! How could you even fake the physical things?” I got up to leave and roughly unzipped the tent flap. It was so rough that the material was stuck in the zipper’s teeth. I yanked and yanked, and with a screech, I tore the door apart and stumbled out.

“Nem, what are you doing? Don’t go. Please don’t go. You’re the only one I have! I love you.” I turned around to look at her peering out of the tent mouse-like. “You don’t love me, Freesh. You’re just someone with abandonment and inferiority issues. You’re obsessed with me! I can’t even deal that you pretended to be on MD all this time! This was supposed to be fun, and you turned it into some psycho sesh again. I could never be with somebody like you.”

She stumbled out of the tent, and while I put my shoes on, she sniffled between tears that flowed quickly down her face, leaving tear marks through the glitter, “And what, Nem, you’re perfect? You have some weird sexual fetish, you’re a slut, you’re a narcissist, you killed your . . .”

“What did you say to me? I killed my what? . . . You know what? Go fuck yourself!” We stood opposite each other; and I shoved her and shook her shoulders every time I said, “You fucking bitch! Stalker! Creep! Psychopath! You fucking mentally disturbed piece of shit!”

She stumbled back and almost tripped over a pebble, “Nem, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that! I didn’t mean it.”

“What about that Freudian Slip you are always talking about? You just shot yourself in your foot. You meant it all. I trusted you when I told you about the deaths of my dad and sister, how could you use it against me like that? You know what, Freesia? I’m so done with you.” I walked away, tripping over shoes and bumping into camping chairs.

“What happened to #BFF #Love?” Freesia wailed as she ran after me and grabbed my wrists.

“Fucking, get off me!” She pierced her nails into my wrists. I wrung myself free, shoved her one final time until she fell onto the sand. I ran out of the campsite. When I looked back, she was sitting in the sand, her body shuddering underneath her sobs.

Freesia

Strangle me. Strangle me while you kiss me. Unearth me. Unearth me while you dig for something remotely like me or some version of me. A twig, or a root or a handful of soil, damp in your nicotine-numb fingers. Bury me. Bury me under fallen leaves. From green to orange to brown, they will mutate along with the songs of hornbills and the prints of porcupines. I'll be camouflaged to a passer-by, but to you, I'd be as unmistakable as your favourite body mist. Unmistakable in my rot.

*

When I was alone in my room one night, I watched how the sky darkened with each step it took towards midnight. From navy blue, it slowly transformed into indigo. It was a dark and forsaken time with a new moon and the city that outshined the stars. Never had I not wished for dawn to come. I wanted it to stay dark. The day was just too bright.

As I lay on my bed, I went onto Instagram and stalked @nemthediva. Stalking her profile was something that first started out of curiosity, then it became a habit and finally, it developed into a radical religion that I did obsessively. I needed to see her in order to stay afloat. Our photos were still on her profile, but the latest three rows were filled with Nem and her old friends from art class. It seems that after our fallout, she had found her way back to them. Sometimes, I felt as though I was still outside the tent at the trance festival, abandoned. It was a moonless night as well. I couldn't accept how lonely, rejected and abandoned I felt. I was lonely before but knowing what it was like to be with Nem, this new loneliness was distinctly worse. Nem physically and mentally separated herself from me. Although we were anything but conjoined twins, I felt that as though we were and that our separation was inevitable for the sake of our own survival. But what if I didn't want to survive without Nem?

Nem ghosted all of my messages, and although she hid her last seen and blue ticks on WhatsApp, I still knew she read my messages. She also stopped coming to group therapy, and it had been a month since I'd seen her . . . in real life at least. I thought that she would've unfollowed or blocked me on Instagram, but she clearly wanted me to see how much fun she was having without me. In her photos, there were pictures of Nem and her friends at bars sipping on #TurkishDelightCocktails, then of them hiking Jonkershoek Nature Reserve, and of them having sleepovers at Nem's place while binge-watching Game of Thrones #JonSnowIsMyFutureHusband.

I was but a distant memory, locked away in the nooks of her mind. Our story was nothing, but an old and dusty scrapbook left on the floor for the termites to feast upon. Is this what she wanted? To throw everything that we had away? Just because I confirmed her biggest fear – that she was the cause of her sister and father's deaths? She loves me. She knows I'm the one for her. She just can't admit it because her head is fogged with denial and self-doubt. She always described

herself as a non-conformist and a rule-breaker, but is she really? Identical to a bad memory, she suppressed her love for me. She would soon suppress me so viciously that she'd end up forgetting that I even existed.

If I had to describe how I felt, severe jealousy, rejection and anguish wouldn't even come close. I choked on my feelings of abandonment and felt as though my ribs had been hacked apart by the spine, then cracked open, to which my shell was used as a casserole to make a broth of pain and jaundice that slowly bubbled in my organ sap.

I put my phone face down and walked over to my bathroom to fish out that lone blonde hair strand that was Nem's. She had left it the night she showered in my apartment. As I opened my drawers, I pulled out my cedar wood-scented candle. As I lit the wax, I dangled Nem's hair strand over the flame. It shimmered like desert sand as it teased the flame. A carbon copy of Nem herself. It twisted under my power, fizzled and spat at the flame. I could tell that it was screaming and hissing, like a golden adder. You shouldn't play with fire, that's what we all learn at a young age, but I guess Nem didn't understand that. It was time she paid for her ignorance. Her hair turned black as it twisted over itself and wilted down into ash. The reek of burnt hair was pungent and confident in its humiliation. I inhaled it deeply into my alveoli, deep into my bloodstream, and now Nem contaminated the tissues of my organs. We were more connected than conjoined twins could ever be.

I distinctly remember that it was a windy night. Nobody could hear my screams that slipped out from the deepest pockets of my soul. Besides, it was BA graduation day. Everyone was out having dinner with family or clubbing with their friends before they separated for the holidays. But I was alone in my room on this windy, indigo night, still dressed in my black graduation gown and squishing my degree in my hand, as angry tears welled up like old springs in my tear ducts.

There was nothing to do, so I stared at my phone, and opened Instagram, the blue light filtering into my eyes. I refreshed the screen an uncountable number of times, but there weren't any new posts. I knew this was a social media tactic to make loners like me think everyone else is partying. What else would they do on a Friday evening? Just then, a photo popped on the screen. It was from Nem. She posted a graduation selfie wearing maroon lipstick, the next image in the series was of her and her friends jumping in their graduation robes, then the next was a photo of Nem kissing a girl with pink-and-blue hair on the cheek. I blinked and blinked and blinked, my hands shaking my phone out of my grip. It fell face-down onto the tiled floor. When I turned it over, the screen cracked in many directions, forming a spider's web, the screen now stuck on the picture of Nem and the girl. My heart stopped beating, I became dizzy, and there was a ringing in my ears. I tapped and tapped at my screen, but it was frozen on the evidence of Nem moving on.

I remember that at the base of the oak tree that Nem and I sat on, I had spotted some Death Cap mushrooms sprouting nearby. Back then, I would've never thought about ingesting them, but

now, their toxicity seemed less painless as opposed to being Nem-less. I lit more candles. I wanted to set myself ablaze. The jealousy was overbearing, overpowering, intoxicating; I didn't want to live if Nem wasn't in my life anymore. I couldn't wait for the side effects of the Death Cap mushroom anymore.

I limped to my kitchen counter, opened up a medical tin box, and released my pain pills from their captor. Pain pills can diminish emotional pain. Something that mushrooms could never achieve. Without Nem, I couldn't live anymore. And I could never face my conservative parents again after what I did with a girl and after I had an abortion. I didn't even know what my sexual orientation was anymore. They would label me an abomination and have no choice but to exile me from the farm. They were so stuck in their ways, with only sheep and chickens to converse with, what would you expect? Everything became overwhelming – going grocery shopping was the only time I went outdoors. I couldn't look in the mirror anymore, couldn't step on the scale anymore. My sadness engulfed me a little bit more every day, until it felt as though my limbs were filled with water and prevented from floating by my unbearably heavy head. I never felt happy anymore, I started to feel ugly, disgusting, fat. I was a disgrace, a waste of space, an oxygen waster. If I were to take the coward's way out, so be it.

I struggled with the child-lock lid that prevented me from opening the pills, but they finally spilled onto the marble countertop when I discovered the technique. I took a pill for Dylan. I took a pill for our embryo. I took a pill for my brother. I took a pill for my mom. I took a pill for my father. I took a pill for my horse. I took a pill for my psychologist. I took a pill for my lecturer. I took a pill for Nem. I took another for Nem. And another for her. Until I drank them all. I used to think that when I'd be taken away from this world, a Pegasus would carry me into the clouds, and we'd soar above all my problems. I fell off the chair and crawled to my phone, lying on the floor. It wasn't frozen anymore, so I dialled Nem's number and waited for her to pick it up. It was only after the fourteenth call that she answered, which surprised me.

"Freesia, I told you to stop calling me. We are done." She snapped.

"N-nem. C-can you hear me? I-I took some p-pills. I called to say goodbye. Farewell, Nem. Maybe I'll see you in another life." With that, I ended our phone call and laid my head to rest on the cold tiled floor.

*

I remembered things in fragmented, broken visions, ranging from early childhood memories to Nem's white dog hair covering my face. Right then an ambulance screeched owl-like as it came to a halt, a nurse then forced me to drink liquid charcoal. Other than that, I couldn't recall anything else until I woke up in a hospital with a drip attached to my hand. A psychologist and doctor came to evaluate me, and after they left, I saw Nem sitting on a chair in the far corner. Her hair was a wild mess, her makeup smudged, and she rubbed herself to keep warm. She looked beautiful, especially when she was sad.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I said.

Nem walked over, squatted on the floor and looked at me, “How are you feeling?”

I looked at Nem and noticed that she had a new tattoo of a mushroom on her collarbone, “Now that you’re here, I’ve never felt better.”

She was quiet, her face darkened as the fluorescent light above my bed turned off. It continued to fill the silence with its tapping sound, as it buzzed on and off repeatedly – like me, it too couldn’t decide between life or death.

“Are your parents coming?”

I sighed and shook my head no; it was too difficult to talk.

“How could they not be here?” Nem asked.

After a few moments of silence I replied, “They don’t know. You are the only one who knows about what happened.”

Nem took a deep breath and managed to ask the question that burnt inside and consumed her, “Why did you do that?” There was tenderness in Nem’s voice. It was as though she didn’t want to hurt me by asking, but it didn’t hurt me, I needed her to ask me. I finally understood why people adopted the sick role. I felt as precious as a jewel would before it was about to crack at the mercy of a jackhammer.

I looked away from her and glanced down at my white bedsheet and fiddled with the drip in my hand. It itched. “I think you know.” I said slowly and let my answer hang in the air.

“It can’t be because of . . . me?” Nem was cautious. I didn’t answer, and that already was an answer. She sat on the bed and cradled me, there was a frown on her face, and I held her forearms in return. I knew my situation grated her bones, I knew I reminded her of her sister, but I wanted to hurt her and bend her at my will as though she were a liquorice strip. Some would probably say that it was all emotional manipulation, but I called it the revenge of a mushroom forager. Quiet shaking started to happen; Nem was silently crying in my arms. The shakes rippled through her; it reminded me of a dead lake that finally gave in to the wind. This is what I wanted, what I needed, I needed some kind of emotion from her, I needed to know that she felt something more for me, than just her normal I’m-a-badass-and-cool demeanour kind of emotions that I was used to. There was a squeak and the door shoved open, the back of a nurse pushed into my room, her arms were square on either side as she brought my dinner on a plastic tray: bobotie with yellow rice and a bowl of custard. She set it on the bedside table and left as quickly as she came. There was a curry leaf inside of my bobotie, someone once told me that it meant good luck. The last few days had been emotionally draining. I didn’t have any energy to eat. Soon enough, I fell asleep in Nem’s arms, and her Britney Spears perfume seeped into my hair, but when I woke up, she was gone like the fog at dawn. One moment it was there, the next gone with the sun. I smiled, that suited Nem, she wasn’t one to stay in the sunshine, she was the kind of being that belonged to dusk, twilight, and the indigo night. But was she really empty of me? In the end, the night always needs the sun. I searched for my phone, went on Nem’s Instagram and stared at it until I fell asleep again.

Nemesia

Pina Colada

There are no dates in my journal. I'm not going to adhere to something that has been socially constructed by humans. Dates don't exist, every day is new, and today is called pina colada. I've never even journaled before. I don't need to because my art is my journal. But the internet says that it apparently helps to write your thoughts down. So here it goes, these are my thoughts. Let's see if I become sane after this. I am so FUCKING ANGRY. How could Freesh be such a psychopathic bitch? How could she try to kill herself just because I didn't want her sexually? WTF man!! I seriously can't even deal with her shit anymore. I literally hate her right now. She is so fucking immature and annoying, who the fuck does that even? And then she tries to blame it on me? WTF she seriously needs help. She shouldn't even be studying psych, she just needs to go to a psychologist. No wonder she has no friends. I can't believe I was like her only friend . . . She is like white laced underwear – it makes you think 'innocence', 'purity', 'good girl', and 'virgin', but really, it's as though she clothed herself in that way, to bewitch onlookers. Psychopathic bitch. Irresponsible hoe. Manipulative witch. I never NEVER EVER want to see her again.

Okay, that felt good. The pina colada helped.

Cheap Red Wine

I never want to see that bitch ever again. If she ever comes close to me, she had better watch the fuck out. I'm not the little girl who used to throw eggs onto my neighbour's car anymore. Now I'm that girl that's going to slash your car's tyres and make sure you are stranded under moonless skies.

Gin & Tonic

They have preconceived ideas and make assumptions about me. They look at me as if I haven't experienced anything, I look back at them and only see ignorance. Prejudiced motherfuckers.

Purple Cosmopolitan

I wore a purple sequin dress; it makes me glitter and covers my disgusting dull body. My body is not disgusting btw, it's just dulled without sequins. If anyone knew how parched my skin was, I'd die. If anyone knew who I was without my makeup, clothes, perfume, Instagram, bracelets, necklaces, platform shoes, rings, nail polish, my mom's money, my art, and hair tinsels, they would be shocked. But I would be even more shocked. Do you know how hard it is to create a brand? I've been working on myself and my reputation for years, so I can't even *think* about being myself. And Freesh threatens all of me. Now that I think about it, she has a dark side, just like a sequin. And no, I haven't spoken to her since that night. It's been two weeks since that night . . . And no, time doesn't heal everything. And no, I haven't forgiven that ~~cunt~~.

Whiskey Sour

I cut myself for the first time with a rock today. I wanted to feel how she felt when she did it. And now I get it. Afterwards, I went to the clubs on Long Street and made out with a hottie with dreadlocks. He tasted like whiskey.

Raspberry Martini

My period blood is dead blood. When it seeps out of me, potential life seeps out of me. I know that I will never be a mother one day because I will be a bad mother, I am too selfish, unstable, and harsh, everything opposite to what children need. I am one of those people who were an accident to begin with, there is nothing for me here. There is no actual point to my existence, I'm not like Freesh who actually wants to help people, I honestly think that there are too many people in this world. There is nothing for me to do, except paint and hope that that gets me by. I hate my period but love it at the same time. For one it shows that I can bear life, but when it erupts, it expels life. Of course, I've painted in my period blood, you can't call yourself an artist if you haven't. Some people think I'm fucked, but if you aren't, then you are just the same as all those robotic people out there. I don't want medication for my premenstrual dysphoric disorder, because I've taken it before and it has left me uncreative and boring, it goes against my entire values, and without them, I probably would've joined Freesia on the other side by now.

Strawberry Daiquiri

Me and that girl, that Freesh used to call 'Harley Quinn', had sex last night. It was at a techno festival, and it happened just randomly somewhere on the grass in the campsite. Even though I was on MD, it wasn't the same as the night with Freesh. Three Strawberry daiquiri's down, three more to go, and then I can forget.

Lemon Drop

It's been 5 months since the incident, and of course, I still haven't spoken to her. But she is a vile jackal inside my neck, that I can't wring myself free of. The truth is, there are three jackals: my dad, my sister, and Freesh. I act as though she is dead to me, and she is, I want to believe that she is. But I'm not gonna lie, I stalk her on Instagram every day. She puts no stories up and posts no photos, but of course, she wouldn't – she hides in the shadows, and I don't even know which shadow she is hiding under now. I don't know where she is, what she is doing, or how she is. She makes me go crazy. And I can't stop thinking about that night with her at the trance party. It was the best ~~fuck sex intimate moment~~ night of love that I have ever had. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The only good thing about today, was that someone bought my painting for 10K! Holy shit, right? It was the one I made of Freesh cooking those mushrooms that we picked together. It was called: In the home of the mushroom forager.

Galaxy Magic Mule

If I was a witch, I'd curse you. You chose the wrong bitch to fuck with. I hope you enjoy your time as an albino-naked-dog, kissed in aggressive ringworms.

Blueberry Mojito

I've been working now as a professional freelance artist for a year and a half now. I've made lots of money, I've held art exhibitions all over Southern Africa and Europe, my Instagram followers have soared, I've fucked hundreds of guys and a couple of girls, I've taken E, MD, magic mushrooms, weed, cocaine and crack all in the same week, I go to therapy every month, I've even learnt to forgive myself about what happened to my dad and sister. I buy tons of clothes, I've even bought my own apartment in Cape Town, I've gone travelling, and my mom and I have even forgiven each other, but I still, I still, I still . . . I still can't stop thinking about her. Freesia. Freesh. Freesia is stuck to me like glitter glue in blue. She is the subject of all my portraits. It's not even her that I paint, but she is everywhere, and I can't escape her. Her mouth becomes the mouth of my model, her heavy-lidded eyes is in every painting I paint. I fucking hate feeling like such a lil bitch. If I go back to her that'll confirm that I was a coward all along, but if I don't, it'll mean that it meant nothing at all. Fuck my fucking life right now. She is my poltergeist. I've achieved everything but why does she still haunt me?

Tequila Sunrise

All those bitches can never compare to Freesh. There is no one like her out there. I hate them all, and I can't believe that I am finally admitting this to myself (I feel like a real dumb bitch right now), I just had sex with millions of guys from Tinder to fill my inner void, to punish myself because I hated myself. The only time that I didn't hate myself was when I was with her.

Grey Ghost

Things are not black and white between me and Freesia. She is my grey space. Grey is not even something you would ever catch me dead in, and I would never allow grey to touch my paintings. It's an uncharted territory kind of colour, and that is Freesia for me. She makes me scared; she makes me unafraid to be myself, she makes me catch a breath every time I look at her. But the thing is, I can't be friends with her because I would hurt her, she is a butterfly with a broken wing, I can't be the glossy starling that kills her with one snap. A butterfly wants to be a bird, a butterfly will never be able to keep up with a bird. They fly at different heights, speeds, and times.

Tuesday

It's been 5 years since I last saw Freesia. And I've only realised this now: white, purple, red, blue, yellow, orange, and grey, are all the colours that are listed in my journal. It is also all the colours that the freesia flowers bloom in. And I would finally use grey paint to shadow a white freesia flower. I googled freesia flowers and they are described as "A fresh lemony scent with hints of baby powder. These flowers turn at right angles to the sun." All of my journal entries are at right angles. What. The. Actual. Fuck. Today's also Tuesday, the day when Freesia and I first met. I hate to say it, but Tuesday is a day that I will allow into my life. Did this journaling thing help me? It's only made one thing clear, and that is Freesia.

One Year Later

Freesia

I lit a candle and placed it on my windowsill. I do this every night, ever since I tried to commit suicide seven years ago. At first, the flame was reluctant to create a substantial light, it faltered in the breeze and swayed to the rhythm of my breathing. It was as though it was afraid of growing into whom it was supposed to be. A flame is not a flame without light. Or was it challenging the very notion of what it was created for? It is so much more than a mere flame, it was safety, companionship, and a limited love, reminding us that nothing is everlasting. I cupped my hands around it to shield it from the elements, it shuddered under my protection, but after a while, the flame became curious and grew larger every time it felt appreciated. Soon, its warm glow kissed the walls around me and poured golden warmth all over my body and hair. I finally sighed and was shocked to see that I was holding my breath all along. Into the kitchen, I went and put a teapot to boil on the gas stove. As I looked out of the window, I realised that I felt as though my life has been on pause ever since I last saw Nem. All that I have been doing was waiting for her. I've never left Stellenbosch because I needed her to find me. And so, I light a candle every evening so that she can find her way to me. I know it's absurd because she doesn't even know where I live, but she knows where we met, she knows where she painted me, she knows where we picked mushrooms.

I live in a small cottage not far from where we picked mushrooms in the rain all those years ago. She didn't know this then, but her makeup wasn't waterproof, so with all her sweat as we climbed higher to find those mushrooms, we also delved deeper into the fog - a recipe for nakedness. To this day, I have and never will never forget how vulnerable she looked with a naked face. She was more beautiful than ever because I saw the true architecture of her face for the very first time. Her mask had leaked away, and her true form was exposed to the earth, sky and trees. It was also the last time that I ever saw her truth. She always thought that I was ethereal, but it is her that was ethereal, standing against the rain, with fog draped over her body like a blanket. The kettle started rumbling to life, snapping me out of my thoughts of the past. But I didn't want to snap out of it, I didn't want to practice mindfulness, and so I closed my eyes and thought of Nem. Her face reappeared in the fog of my neurotransmitters, and if I thought harder, I could still see the dew drops in her blonde hair, her lips that were always slightly chapped, and the baby hairs on her cheekbone.

My cottage has a kitchenette, a living room with a fireplace, a bathroom with a freestanding bath, and one bedroom with a double bed. It is modest, but I like how it represents my humble nature, it made me feel safe, it was a little shelter that took me back in time to when a world was sweeter than honey. This world that I live in today, is the opposite of honey, it is more like a block of tar, and my career proves that to me every day. I recently finished my master's in counselling psychology, where I focus on helping women who have lived through abortions, rape, suicide attempts and sexual identity crises. It gives me meaning to translate what I've been through to help other girls and women like me. It took me a long time to come to terms with my dormant sexual identity, and it was difficult to express myself when I grew up in a home that was against the LGBTQQ society. I never needed my parents to understand, I just needed them to accept who I

was. It is in the safety of my own tapestry of skin that I thrive these days. As soon as the kettle starts to scream on the gas stove, I pour the bubbling water into my teacup and leave the teabag in so that it can become potent and walk towards the chair in front of the fireplace. For a while, I watch the teabag bleed and wonder sometimes what it truly feels like to just let go. Have I really let go of everything?

No.

My eyes slowly crawl up above my fireplace to where my enclosed heart lies, the painting above my fireplace. Every time I don't want to look, but my eyes have a mind of their own. Above my fireplace is a painting of me titled "In the home of the mushroom forager." I bought it through an alias when Nem put it up for sale. She captured something in me in that painting, so I thought that it was best to keep it with me instead of it going to a stranger who wouldn't appreciate it in the way that Nem and I would've. I was a little hurt that she was planning on selling it . . . how could she do that? My thoughts were going into a negative spiral, so I left my cosy seat and stepped out into my small garden. The wooden deck was slippery with rain, and as dark as a pirate ship at the bottom of the ocean. My garden flourished in native fynbos: king proteas, pincushions, and ericas to name a few, and I have a pot full of bright and colourful nemesias. I like to think it's a happy coincidence, but that would be the biggest lie of my existence.

As I sip my tea on my deck, a flock of hadada's fly over me, their wings barely missing my scalp and they call as they go home to roost. I look up as they fly above me, their black silhouettes powerful against the twilight sky, their wings flapping harder and faster as they fly together towards their ever-nearing futures. Don't they know that the faster they reach their futures, the faster that their lives end? I almost drop my teacup as my stomach gave a sudden lurch, sand torted to quench and cramp. I doubled over and started to feel very nauseous and uneasy. I tried to concentrate on the hadadas, but their voices grew fainter and fainter until they were gone. Have they already reached their end? I took deep breaths, one, two, three, but they didn't help. Why do I even recommend this to my clients when it doesn't even help me? I ran out deeper into my garden, I needed fresh air. After a few minutes, I still didn't feel any better. Should I phone the ambulance? Or have I just triggered myself from something in my past? Maybe I should've steered my thoughts away from Nem before I got in too deep into her memory. There wasn't enough air in the garden, so I unlocked the back gate and ran up into the conifer forest. I needed the wisdom of a tree, I needed the touch of pure fog on my face, I needed the clarity from a protea, but I knew what I really needed. As I ran deeper and deeper into the forest, my heartbeat faster and faster until it was racing against my legs. I scratched trees as I ran past them, I wanted them to prick me so that I could forget my thoughts. I climbed on all fours up the mountain and tried to breathe, but it was only when I was about 1 km away from my cottage did, I stop and attempted to suck in the wild mountain air, filled with bee wings, bird feathers and empty sunrays. I sat down at the base of a tree; into a heap of pine needles. That's when I noticed that I wasn't wearing any shoes, so a few of the pine needles pricked my soles until dark red blood seeped out of my feet. I leant back and tried to calm myself by thinking of my horse, Escape. After a while I felt strangely better, it must've been a mildly poisonous mushroom that I overlooked when I foraged the red pine

mushrooms this morning for lunch today. Odd, because I would never overlook something that could be lethal. Have I become reckless? Or less anxious over the years? I sighed, pulled the pine needles out of my feet and slowly started to make my way back home to my cottage. I felt like a ghost as I walked through an avenue of tall trees in my long cottage core dress at dusk. I was shocked to see that I had run so far away from home, I never even noticed the burning of my thighs until now. The clouds hung over me like grey dementors, and the trees stood like sullen tombstones.

My hair irritated me, so I bent down to collect it in one piece. I ran my fingers through its waterfall feeling and felt soothed as the silky strands grazed my fingertips.

Try to focus on the present moment. List one thing that you can touch.

As I rolled myself up vertebra by vertebra, I kept my eyes closed as I twisted my hair and twirled it into a tight bun at the bottom of my neck. As I opened my eyes, my heart stopped, I gasped, and my stomach clenched in angry badgers. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, or who I was seeing. "Nem?" I whispered softly into the fog.

Nem stood in the pathway and looked the same as ever. Her hair was straightened, and she had two small plaits that ran alongside her face on either side. She wore a fluffy white coat that came down to her ankles, and glitter on her eyelids. She looked surreal; she looked like the fairy of the forest.

"Nem?" I repeated louder this time, unsure whether she heard me. If this was a ghost it would be frightened of my loud voice, I thought.

It wasn't a ghost. It was Nem. And she stood right in front of me.

Nem, smiled and placed her hands into the pockets of her jacket, "Uh-huh that's me."

I couldn't believe it. How did she know where to find me? Why today of all days? Is this even real? Did this mean that she wasn't angry at me anymore? Seven years had gone by, and nothing changed for me, I was still madly and deeply in love with her. I saw my reflection in her eyes, I was surrounded by fading light, and fog. If I didn't know better, maybe I was the fairy of the forest? Or the wild woman running around in the mud. There was about a meter between us, but it was still too close to her. She gave a magnetic pull, and her energy was all-encompassing. The birds stopped singing, the wind stopped rustling, and my heart pounded too loudly. She moved toward me slowly, placed her arms around my neck and hugged me. She felt the same, she still smelt like Britney Spears, and she still breathed at the same intervals. At that moment, I felt like a little student again, clumsy and shy. She broke down all my walls, and I liked it that way.

As she pulled back, I asked, "How did you find me?"

Nem stared straight into my pupils, "I had a feeling that you would still be here, and I knew you loved this forest, and also I just searched you on your LinkedIn account."

Of course, that's also a reason why I got LinkedIn, it was a more 'natural' way for her to find me in our cyber world.

I asked the question I had been dying to ask her, "Are you still angry with me?"

She tilted her head back, "I was, but then I realised something."

My head grew lightheaded, and I started to shake, "What did you realise?"

Nem kept on looking at the grey dementors in the sky, “That I was angry because I couldn’t admit the truth to myself.” She slowly looked down at our feet and returned her gaze towards me, “the truth is that I love you Freesh. I have from the moment I painted you. The feelings just got too real after the trance party, and I couldn’t deal with them at the time cuz I had a lot of shit goin’ on an-”

I placed a hand on her arm, “Shhh, say no more. You don’t have to explain, I think that I already understand, Nem.” We stood in silence and stared at each other, until another being slowly started to consume the night.

“The moon.” We both said it at the same time. We looked at each other out of the corners of our eyes and laughed. The full moon crawled up into the sky, towered over the forest, but was probably watching something more interesting than us, I thought. It slowly started to patter down and rain, the dementors had given in. We both muttered silent complaints, Nem complained about her makeup and hair, and we both laughed again, in that sense she hadn’t changed, and I liked it that way. Nem, took off her coat, drew me in and held the coat over both of our heads as we ran through the mud back towards my cottage. The rain grew stronger – it didn’t want us to be outside anymore, each raindrop fell harder, faster and pierced deeper into our veins. We finally reached my back gate; it was dark and covered in fynbos that attempted to hide my secret existence on the mountain slopes. I brushed them aside and they croaked as they bent under the weight of the raindrops. When I reached the lock, I gasped as the metal shocked me, reflecting the static energy of Nem and I, back into my body. I fumbled with the lock, but because of all the rain, I couldn’t unlock it.

“Freesh, come on hurry the fuck up! My hair is getting soaked!” Nem yelled in between squeals of laughter. I started laughing too and this time we couldn’t stop. We laughed against each other, in full view of the moon and exposed to the rain. We slowly stopped laughing as more rain filled our mouths like potholes. Then Nem held my head to her, slowly touched my jaw and looked deeply into my eyes. I looked so deeply into her blue eyes that I saw translucent jellyfish bouncing around her pupils. My hand worked at the lock the entire time, but I still couldn’t unlock the gate for some reason. Nem ran her hand down my arm, down to my hand that was working at the lock, she grasped my fingers, and with her other hand she pulled the back of my head towards her, and our lips touched. I couldn’t hear anything anymore, and the rain didn’t matter anymore, I only felt her soft lips on mine. She pressed her lips into mine, our lips locked, and we kissed. At first it was hesitant, we were both testing the waters, but through mutual feelings, we kissed as deeply as though it was going to be our last kiss. Her lips were wet from the rain and tasted a little metallic. I’ve wanted this for years, and every day since I met Nem. I couldn’t believe what was happening, after seven years we randomly find each other on the slopes of the mountain and kissed. Is this real? Or am I just pessimistic by nature? But don’t I deserve to be happy? Don’t I get a happy ending like everybody else? My heart fluttered and I became shy again, but Nem pushed on, kissing me harder and grabbing both sides of my face. My hand reached for the lock again and this time, it opened, and we stumbled into my garden. We both ran to my back door and as I ushered her in, I quickly locked it behind us. Nem threw her coat on the floor, pushed me against the door, and

started unpeeling my jersey off me, she pulled it over my head, tossed it on the floor, and grabbed both of my arms with her hands, “You are so beautiful, Fresh” she whispered to me.

I smiled and slowly pulled her shirt off, she wore a purple unpadded bra, which made her nipples stand. I unclasped her bra and let it slip to the wooden floor that was covered in puddles of water. She was the most attractive woman that I have ever seen in my entire life, she was also the only one. I brought her towards the fireplace, it was already ready with the logs, sticks and newspaper. I opened a drawer, found the matchsticks, moved towards the fireplace, and as I was about to strike the match, I looked at Nem, her eyes never left my face the whole time. I lit the fire, and soon enough, the fire filled the house the way food fills an empty belly. Nem pushed me down onto the carpet in front of the fire, and we both took off the remaining clothes on either of our bodies. She grabbed my bun, unravelled it and twisted her fingers through my hair. We kissed and I never wanted it to end. She felt like fire against my cold body, I was the snow princess again. I felt every part of her body, I knew every corner, I knew all of her tattoos, I knew how her breathing turned as she reached an orgasm, and she knew how I quivered as I reached mine. Smoke filled every room, its plume creating a haze and making our moment feel like love from the ice age. This was the definition of vulnerability and trust, so intimate is this moment, that it can never be compared to anything else, no rare bird, chest full of treasure, or new lands, could ever compare to what making love with the love of my life felt like. As the fire burnt, the logs released their energy into the universe, the moon rose higher, and as the owls hooted, we made love on the floor in front of the fire. We whispered, I love you’s to each other, and fell asleep in each other’s arms. It was there, where our love was carved into the mountain, and some carvings can never be altered or fixed without completely destroying it.

My alarm went off. It was 07:00. I rubbed my hands together to create energy and placed them over my eyes, but I only really woke up to the smell of pancakes, and smiled, Nem was making me breakfast. I rolled out of bed, jumped in the shower, and as I looked at my face in the mirror inside my shower, my face was streaked with mud, my hair rain-fuzzed and smelt of smoke - evidence of our mud endeavour last night in the rain and our lovemaking in front of the fireplace. It was the first time ever where my heart felt truly fulfilled, and I smiled into the shower water, this is what happiness is supposed to feel like, and I could finally say it, I am gay, I am in love with the most unique woman that I have ever crossed paths with. I am so happy, so happy, so happy. I stayed in the shower for a bit longer and thought about what I was going to say to Nem in the kitchen. How were we planning on moving forward? She could move in, and we could save up some money to build an artist studio, or we could rent a place in town for her art nearby to where I worked. Were we going to have a wedding? Or were we just going to become life partners? I washed myself with homemade farm oat soap from my mother, turned the shower off, stepped out, dried myself, put my makeup, and work clothes on. As much as I wanted to cancel my workday today, I couldn’t – there were too many clients in need of my help. One, in particular, was battling with her sexual identity as well, I needed to be the person to her that I needed seven years ago. I

was still in the bathroom when I looked at my phone, it was 07:45. I was late! My work started at 08:00.

I quickly called my secretary, “Morning, Rozelle, can you please inform my 08:00 client that I am running a bit late today?”

There was a sharp inhale, “*More, more, doktor, sho maar jy moet maar vining kom, sy huil en lyk nie soe goet nie. Maar dis reg.*”

“Tell her I’ll be there in 20 minutes!” I hanged up, grabbed my handbag and rushed into the kitchen.

“Nem I hav-” As I stepped inside the kitchen, Nem wasn’t there but there was a stack of pancakes in the kitchen table topped with butter and maple syrup. The back door towards the garden was open, Nem was humming a lullaby and exploring the garden. I took the plate and decided to take it with me to work. My phone started ringing, I picked up to hear soft sobbing, “Hi Freesia, I was just wondering if we were going to have our therapy session today? It’s 08:05 already and I must leave ten to nine to reach my class on time.”

“Hi, yes, I will be there soon, I am on my way. See you soon.” I put the phone down and shouted in the direction of the garden, “Nem, I must leave for work! I’ll be back at 6pm.” There was no time for me to hug her, I was seriously late, and my livelihood depended on the satisfaction my clients have with my service. I jumped into my car and raced through all the four-way stops and a few red lights, I’ll deal with those problems later, and if they ever arise. I finally reached the office and ushered my client inside.

All during my session I tried to concentrate on my client, but no matter how hard I tried to pay attention to her, I couldn’t but help thinking of last night with Nem. This has never happened to me before where my personal life infiltrated into my work life, but probably because I never had much of a personal life until now to begin with. I brought myself back to the present and listened to my client, for that was all she wanted, to be listened to. Our session came to an end, and we rescheduled for next week. I went back into my office and decided that I was going to ask Nem to paint a painting for me so that I could hang it in my office. As I sat down and prepared a clean sheet of paper for my new client, I also collected my thoughts and set Nem aside for a while, because if I wanted us to have a flawless future, I would need give my all in my work. There was a knock on the door and Rozelle brought my new client in. She was an elderly woman of about 70 years old, had short grey hair cropped into a bun, wore a cream-coloured coat and turtleneck, just by looking at her, I could tell that she was a professional woman and had also worked in the healthcare industry. With a rise from my chair, I brought out my hand for her to shake, but she didn’t return the offer. As a psychologist, I’m used to any kind of reaction, so I thought nothing much of it, and decided that she was probably a germaphobe.

“Hello, I’m Freesia, please take a seat,” I said as I sat back down.

The woman only answered after Rozelle closed my office door, “I know who you are.”

I frowned; I was not used to being spoken to like that by a client. Normally they are nervous, but never so curt.

“What can I do for you?” I asked, attempting to be helpful, and trying to hide my submissive nature that tried to come out.

She folded her hands onto her leather handbag, “I’m actually not here . . . as a client”

This piqued my curiosity so I shifted in my seat to get comfortable, “What are you here for then?”

“I am here about,” she shuffled through her handbag and pulled out what looked like to be a stack of papers that were tied with a ribbon, “I am here about these things.” She said as she placed them gently onto the coffee table.

I glanced at the stack of papers, they were worn out over the edges, someone had been fingering them for a long time, “Okay, I am very confused? Are you here for a therapy session or . . .?”

Although she wore those nerd spectacles, it felt as though there was no glass between her eyes and mine as her piercing gaze undressed all my walls, which was a feeling that only Nem was able to ignite within me, “I’m here about Nem.” She said.

“N . . . Nem?” I stammered and I could feel my face blushing.

“Yes.” She said.

I tried to take charge of this situation, “I’m sorry I don’t know what you are talking about. I need to inform you that I cannot disclose any information about my clients to other people.”

She smiled, then leaned forward in her chair, “But, you and I both know that Nem is not your client. I am her mother, and I’ve come to you because you two had history if I am correct?”

This was an awkward first meeting of Nem’s mother. Nem never spoke much about her, other than they weren’t on such good terms, but I wasn’t sure why exactly, “You could say that yes. Well, I am very pleased to meet you Mrs?”

“Never mind my name, Freesia I’ve come here to tell you that I went through Nem’s things and that’s when I came across her personal items, such as what I had just dropped on the table.” She leaned back in the chair and placed a finger on her temple. Bystanders would think that I was the client and she, my therapist.

She continued to speak, “As you can imagine, Nem has lots of messy things in her room, but I thought it was odd when I found something that was so neatly placed in her bedside table. It was very . . . suspicious if you will. So, I had a look and I saw that it was about a person called Freesh or Freesia that studied psychology, and I can only imagine that it is you since you are the only person in the whole of South Africa with that name. When I saw that you hailed from Namibia on your LinkedIn account, I connected the dots and realised that it was you.”

I felt very uncomfortable that Nem’s mother had sneaked through her personal belongings, and I felt a surge of over-protectiveness engulf me, “Okay . . . I am not sure why you are telling me this?” I tried not to show it, but my voice didn’t hide that I was growing increasingly annoyed.

“My dear girl, I am telling you this because Nem wrote very intimately about you in her diary and there is a letter dedicated to you. I thought that it would be good of me to give it to you.”

I started fidgeting in my seat, why would Nem’s mother treat Nem as though she were a child, “Maybe you can put them back in her bedside table and Nem will give it to me at her own time?”

To my surprise, Nem’s mom gasped, “What are you . . . Nem can’t . . . I’m sorry, are you aware about the situation with Nem?”

I felt a twinge of fear, “What situation are you talking about?”

“Oh my, my dear Freesia, Nem . . . Nem passed away a year ago. . .” She said very slowly.

At that moment I just continued to stare at her and was wondering if she really was a client pulling a game on me. Then she continued, “I’m sorry I thought that social media broadcasts this type of information to you young people. And given the intimate nature you two had, I assumed that you . . . that you knew that Nem died.”

“Uh . . . uhm I think you must be mistaken . . . Nem was with me last night. But I’ll be sure to let her know that her mother came by and introduced herself to me.”

She started to look increasingly uncomfortable and glanced at the door and at the clock on my wall, “Freesia, Nem died in a car crash a year ago yesterday. She couldn’t have been with you.”

I wanted to call security because this was making me flustered, but for some reason I wanted to know more. Nem’s mother was just confusing Nem with her sister that died in a car crash, “A car crash? What?”

Nem’s mother glanced down and closed her wrinkly eyes. When she opened them again, her eyes were glazed over with tears, “Yes . . . she was on her way to see you, I believe. They found alcohol in her system, which isn’t surprising. I am very sorry that I didn’t know about you sooner, otherwise I would’ve invited you to the funeral. I would tell you where her grave is if she had one, but she was cremated, and her ashes were tossed into a pod of dolphins at Cape Point.”

I just stared at her. Was she deranged, or was I? Nem was with me last night, Nem made pancakes for me this morning.

“Freesia, if it’s any consolation, Nem was a unique girl, but she was deeply confused and unhappy. She blamed herself for a lot of things and found it immensely overwhelming to control her feelings and behaviours. I am very sorry for your loss Freesia. The bunch of papers are for you. I’ll be leaving now.” With that she got up and left as soon as she had come.

I sat in silence, listening to the spiders crawling along the walls, listening to the bumblebee that thumped against my window. Nem, isn’t dead. She can’t be dead. I just saw her yesterday. She made pancakes for me this morning. We made love last night. Her mother is just a psychopath that is trying to gaslight me and make me question my sanity. I picked up my phone and texted my neighbour.

Hi Shelly. I just want to know if you saw anyone in my house this morning?

There was a knock on my door, Rozelle came in to tell me that the previous client, Nem’s mother, didn’t pay. I told her I’ll handle it, even though I wasn’t planning on ever contacting her again. I fidgeted as I waited for Shelly to reply. Why was she taking so long to answer? She is always on her phone? What could she possibly be doing?? Finally, she answered.

Hiya! Just the cleaning lady. Is everything okay?

Right the cleaning lady came every Wednesday, but she wouldn't make pancakes for me. I texted back.

Did you possibly see me with somebody last night?

This time she answered quickly.

Freesia, well when I walked my dogs last night, we did see you running through the forest, but you were alone. There was nobody with you.

How could she not have contacted me if she saw me running around by myself in the forest with no shoes, or warm clothes, and in the rain?

Was I running around by myself?

Yes, you were. But Freesia, it's nothing shocking, we've seen you do that before. I always thought that you must've eaten those mushrooms that make you hallucinate.

I set my phone face down on the table. What was happening to me? What was going on? Can I trust what everyone around me was saying? I know I was with Nem last night; it was so real; it could have never been a hallucination. Why would I 'hallucinate' about her only now after all those years? It didn't make any sense. I grabbed my handbag, threw Nem's package of papers into it and ran out of my office.

As I passed Rozelle, I yelled, "Cancel all my appointments today! I have an emergency."

There was no way I could trust what Nem's mother said – she was not a good person. I couldn't trust Shelly either – for one because she is constantly eating magic mushrooms and because she hardly walks her dogs. There was only one person that I could trust and that was me. It was time

to go back to my cottage to make sense of everything. I raced through Stellenbosch and passed places that Nem and I had walked over, passed the tree that we sat in outside her flat, passed my old flat where she painted me, everything in this town screamed Nem. Nem was everywhere here. And I was her shadow, forever beside her, next to her, beneath her. As soon as I parked my car outside my cottage, I jumped out and ran inside. As I opened my door, everything was spotless – there was no mud, no plastered footprints on the floor, the fireplace had new logs assembled that were ready to be burnt, my bed was made, and the dishes were done. The cleaning lady had wiped any evidence of yesterday. But most of all what I noticed the most, was that everything was empty. There was nobody here, Nem wasn't here. A house has a different feeling when there is nobody inside, it echoes, it feels lonely.

I ran into all the rooms to make sure, “Nem! Nem! Nem are you here? Nem where are you? Nem. Nem Nem? Why are you not he-” It was at that moment when I decided to reactivate my Instagram account and to stalk Nem on Instagram. I searched @nemthediva and scrolled through her page, by the looks of it she still had lots of posts. I clicked on the most recent post and to my shock saw that it was one year old. This can't be happening, Nem was always so active on Instagram, so I searched photos that she was tagged in and that's when I saw everything that I didn't ever want to see. There was a post that an art gallery made of Nem, it was filled with 87 comments.

@cray.cray.rach: R.I.P Nem. Your vibe will forever be missed.

@itsmelily: Such a sad day today! The death of a beautiful artist.

@thatartgirlwhopaintsfrogs: Nem, this world will never be the same without you.

@trixbellhelm16: I used to think, Nem, was a bitch, but when I got to know her, I thought otherwise. We will meet again, Nem.

@princess_amy_: I am heartbroken! How can so much potential leave this earth!?!? The worst part was that I heard that Nem was driving somewhere to tell the love of her life that she loves her. I can't believe this. R.I.P Nem, I will always think of you.

My phone slipped from my hands and fell onto the floor with a crack. The screen cracked but that was the least of my problems. I couldn't breathe, I thought I was getting a heart attack, I felt like I was drowning in oxygen, my heart started palpitating, my head grew hot and dizzy, I arched my back until it hit the wall and I released a sound that came from my stomach, I screamed until I was sure I would get a seizure. I slumped against the wall, fell onto the floor and sobbed into the wooden floor.

It must've been dawn when the wind started. Outside, the eucalyptus tree swayed and bent under the force of the wind. If I were that tree, I would just let go. Uproot me, my roots are rotten, and my trunk is deformed. There is no point anymore. I tried to move, but an intense pain stopped me. It was my heart. It must've burst inside my body because I couldn't feel it pumping

anymore. My bag was slumped next to me, my only companion in this empty home. My hands moved inside my bag and found the stack of Nem's papers. I unknotted the ribbon and picked up the first sheet, it was a list of alcoholic beverages with a piece of writing underneath, this was Nem's diary. And then I found a letter with my name on it.

My darling Freesh,

It has been a while since we last spoke. It might have only been a few years, but they feel so far away. As far away as when mammoths and small horses trotted along the ridges of our homelands. As far as a time when earth was blanketed in soft faux fur, a time where the burning planet didn't strike so furiously. A time when we were frightened of the moon. Where are you now? Someone told me that you are somewhere between clouds and desert water. But I can't remember anymore. It must be the fever. The kissing fever. Freesh, I think you will know what I mean when I say that I want to share an unclean injection with you, and I would want it stuck deep into our bone marrow. I wouldn't mind sharing a dirty needle with you, I want your blood. Your platelets, your red blood cells, your DNA, your viruses your AIDS. I want all of you in me. It doesn't matter what it was.

Your artist

My Darling Freesh,

You know, I used to fantasise about you and me. I dreamt of running away with you. It might seem like a teenage dream, but back then, I was a 'young adult' and so were you. I thought that we could live in our own glass world, deep inside an untamed forest. Away from everyone and everything. I dreamt that we would build a cottage, keep a few sheep for milk and wool (even though it would be expected for them to be dragged off into the trees), and grow a vegetable garden. Our home would be a sanctuary in this cold world. If you got sick I would paint you better. I don't know where you are, and nobody can tell me. I don't even know where to post this letter. I spin my fingers along Namibia and South Africa and choose a town, in the hope that you are there.

Your wild artist

Freesh,

There is no other way to say this. I love you.

Nem

My Freesh,

I am obsessed with you. I love you. I want to be with you forever. My Freesh, I am coming to find you tonight. It's a Tuesday, the day that we met in group therapy. There is an evil wind from Antarctica, but I will drive through it to be with you. And I know you love me too. We are meant to swim together, smile together, dance together, kiss together, paint together, travel together. I am you, you are me, our destinies are intertwined. Let's not wait another moment, I am sane now (I think . . . you know how batshit crazy this bitch ova heeah is). I want to do this with you. Freesia and Nemesia, we were two flowers afraid to bloom, but now we can bloom together.

Yours forever,

Nem

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I watched her through her window. I shone bright and voluptuous and spilt my moon glitter over the pages of Nem's letters. I helped her read, I helped her see, I helped her friendless soul heal. I

wished I could tell her that there was another side of the moon, where the stars come down and walk along my parched face, where cosmic breaths are deeper than the ocean, a space where the earthy and the otherworldly collide in the limitless vastness of space. I wished she knew that she wasn't friendless, for I, me . . . I have been watching her since her lonely birth on the hot sand.

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