

*Pencil, ink marks and
highlighting ruin books
for other readers.*

PENUMBRA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

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by

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ABSTRACT

After failing his Post Graduate Diploma in Accounting Mangaliso Zolo takes an office job at a large insurance company in Cape Town. Anonymous and overlooked in a vast bureaucracy but with a pay check promising happiness and security, he slides into a series of personal crises that test his grip on what he believes in. When at his lowest ebb he leaves his job, grabs his bible and hits the streets his world closes in on him and he is eventually confined to a psychiatric hospital. *Penumbra* is a novel that explores the liminal area between faith and avarice, sanity and madness, modernity and tradition, friendship and enmity. It is set in contemporary South Africa, a society defined by alienation and excess.

PART 1

THE MOON IS DYING

This is not how things are meant to be. I walk past sickly people in the street. One's face is charred with pink lips which have been licked by spirits. He moves like a dying man. A cripple sits in his wheelchair in front of the BMW dealership in Claremont; he looks around absent mindedly with narrow eyes and coarse hair. I cross the main road and wait for a taxi a few yards before Edgars. It does not take long for one to stop. The driver must be in his fifties. I sit in the first row of seats facing the front. The seats are oily, torn and dark brown.

The driver is working here. The mechanics of the taxi industry: starting the day early in the morning, transporting workers to their offices, the gaartjie opening and closing the door, collecting money, giving change and ending at home eating supper in front of the TV. We all have to work. I look out the window to my right; see the moving tar sparkling in the mid-morning sun.

'The streets are empty,' I say to the driver. His bald head only twitches. 'Is it because of the strike?' I ask.

'The strike is only starting on Thursday,' a Muslim man sitting in the front says. He passes me his cell phone to show a message confirming this.

But why is he doing this? Why does he see a need to show me this message? Witches of old used to cast spells like this, by sending notes written back to front. One needed to read the note facing a mirror and would thereby curse oneself. The cell phone here is the mirror. And this man is substantiating a lie, twisting reality. I pretend to read the message and return his cell phone. Knowing this little fact about witchcraft has saved me.

We pass a tall white apartment building, Becket's place, in Newlands. This is where Kwanele stayed years back, where he saw his ancestor on the back of a book in his room. At the time I dismissed it as a psychotic episode. I'm not so sure anymore.

In the southern suburbs the neighbourhoods change names with you travelling straight. Newlands becomes Rondebosch. This is where I'm supposed to get off. But I just do not know where. We drive past Starlite. It is empty, being a Monday morning. I ask the driver to stop opposite Pick n Pay. Thandeka, a lady who plays keyboards for a local jazz band, walks past me. She is dressed in black: black pants and a black blouse. Her eyes are yellow. I watch her approach Van Schaik's book shop. She too is suffering. Maybe she's perishing from a lack of knowledge. She thins away from me.

I get off much further than I should have. I don't know how it escaped me that the Riverside Mall is further back. How can I forget a place I've been to so many times before? My brain shakes at this thought, wind blows in my bowels. I count my steps to the mall.

The Vertigo clothing store lies to the right of the entrance. I recognise one lady who works there. I overheard her a while back saying she had stopped drinking because alcohol made her fat. Inside the corridors are shadowy with a yellow tint from the lighting.

In front of a bottle store there is a blackboard with price specials written thick in white chalk with a red outline. The last time I bought liquor from this bottle store was in my first year at UCT. I was staying in Kopano. We had just finished writing exams. I bought two sixpacks of Black Label cans. That time has now sadly faded.

The manufactured coolness of air conditioning blows inside the ABSA student bureau. The receptionist has long and black hair, she stands behind a polished light brown desk. I look at her for a minute. This woman is beautiful with a glistening complexion. But there's something dark that lies in her spirit. Flies cluster in my chest. I approach her.

'Hi, I have resigned from my job. I would now like a reduced payment schedule on my student loan,' I say.

'You'll have to talk to a consultant for that. She's busy at the moment,' the woman says. I do not trust her. My nerves pick up speed as she talks. 'You can take a seat. I'll call you when she's ready to see you.'

I sit on the blue cotton chairs, take out my cell phone from my pocket and look at the time. It is now approaching eleven. I look down at the carpet.

'You can go in...' the receptionist shouts out. 'Go to the second door to your right.'

As I walk in the consultant is clattering on the phone. I sit down and watch her work. She's Indian and has short hair. She has a red spot between her eyes. She puts down the phone, looks at me, commands me to speak. I explain my resignation to her.

'Well there's nothing we can do. You have to face the consequences of resigning without settling another job first,' she splutters. As I think of what to say she continues: 'There is another option. You can contact Helen.' she says scribbling on a piece of paper.

I look at the paper and read: 'Helen Messaih.' The phone number contains '666.'

'You can call Helen here...' She says picking up the phone.

I get up and walk out.

'Where are you going?' she calls out irritably.

I do not bother to look back.

The door of a white taxi hangs open outside Pick n Pay. The gaartjie shouts: 'Claremont, Wynberg.' He runs after me, 'Claremont, brother?' he asks. I shake my head. I walk to the shining white tiles of Pick n Pay, join the line for airtime. A woman in front of me takes longer than necessary. Her endless questions irk me.

In the last days only those with the mark of the beast will be able to purchase food. My heart jumps. I get up and leave. I take deep breaths, push for calmness and stride to the main road. I should rather walk back to the apartment. I never get it right telling taxi drivers where to stop when going to my block of flats. I usually ask them to stop at Crescent clinic which is at least four blocks before my place.

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I see the darkness of Kenilworth. In this early hour the prostitutes are already in operation. They peddle death in the main road, teasing the passing traffic. There is a spirit behind these women. It is only today that I notice this. Closer to my tenement, standing against a wall two streets before my block is an Indian woman dressed in orange with sharp pointed ears. From the very bottom of my soul do I fear her. I cannot look at her for long. What would she say if she would speak to me? Her voice would probably throw me against the wall. Then she would laugh in a hideously squeaking way.

It is best I don't look behind. I keep walking. Stale air greets me in the flat. I push open the sliding window in my room. Only two windows allow air into this flat. I also open Tongai's window. His room is much smaller than mine. Having found the apartment I chose the bigger room. Tongai has a big sheet of white paper hanging on his wall, detailing things to do, these include: 'Apologise to Nhlakanipho' and 'Fast for restoration.'

The music of my life plays with me sitting in the lounge. I am disappearing into precarious existence. People have said many things to me. A former flatmate of mine once said that to him hell would be not being able to speak to those he loved. I scroll down my phone and call Ndlela. He whispers, 'I'm busy at work, I'll call you at seven.'

I get up to pour myself a glass of tap water. I once read Alice Walker say dying is like being pressed to pee and not being able to. I understand this. It is absorbing too much self righteousness and not being able to release. I have been bitter for most of my life looking for wrong in the world. In communist texts I was looking to condemn the world. I was born at five o'clock on the twenty second of the sixth month. This season shaped my character. Perhaps it's true that people born in a certain season exhibit similar tendencies. And each season calls for its own action.

The numbers of my birth hinge on moderation. The sixth month is the middle of the year; the twenty second day is even and the number five is balanced, half of the perfect number ten. This is perhaps the reason for my long standing indecision. Even when it came to God I doubted for a long time. What if I have suffered the sort of death Alice Walker speaks of? I go to the bathroom to pass water. In the privy I disappear into privacy. No one is meant to see me here. I die and come out again.

My phone beeps twice. It is a message from Paul inviting me to men's ministry at seven. I am now ready to attend. I text back to Paul: 'I'm coming.'

This is too presumptuous. Jesus could come before the meeting. Ndlela is also going to call me at seven. Is there any significance to this hour? Will I be judged? The number seven is perfect. God took seven days to create the world.

'Paul, I don't know what's wrong with me. I feel nervous. Where are you?' I say on the phone.'

'I'm at work,' Paul says.

'Where do you work?' I ask, hoping to go to his work place.

'I work from home.'

'Can you please come to my place?'

'Well, I have a job. I can't come right now.'

'Please Paul, do come.'

'No, you want me to do what you want. I'll see you at seven.' Paul says with finality.

The ANC wants a media tribunal. Maybe they are right. Behind the said self-regulation are people with agendas of their own. I do not buy into this willing buyer willing seller slogan. But the ANC has its own agenda: that of power trying to be God. People want to be God these days. I am heating up, my head is dizzy. I walk out of the clutter of the flat to the passage. On the ground floor a man sweeps leaves into a refuse bag. I need someone to talk to. I hurry down the black steps to the man. He is wearing a blue work suit and a green skull cap.

'Have you heard about the strike?' I ask.

'Yes, they are going to bring the country to a standstill. They are going to stop everything,' he says looking at the black bag.

'No, they cannot do that. Only God has that much power.' I say running out of wind.

'They can if everyone strikes...the teachers...the nurses...the police...everyone.'

This worries me. This man speaks with so much certainty. The children need to go to school. People need doctors.

‘Where are you from?’ I ask.

‘I stay in Khayelitsha; originally I’m from the Transkei.’

He says his name is Siviwe. It’s an ancestral name meaning ‘we have been heard.’

‘I stay here on the first floor,’ I say

‘Do you stay on your own? All the flats there are bachelors.’

‘No, ours is a two bedroomed flat. I stay with a friend. He’s at work right now.’

‘Oh, as far as I know all the flats there are bachelors. This is a very old building,’ Siviwe says.

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I rummage through Tongai’s room. There are clothes in his wardrobe. I could not have imagined him staying with me. There are indications of Tongai: there is a basket with laundry in the corner, books and pieces of paper lying on the floor. Siviwe must be mistaken. Tongai has a South African ID though he’s Zimbabwean. His is different from mine. The back cover of mine is in the front of his. It says he was born on the first of October. In the ‘Beautiful Mind,’ John Nash only realised much later that his best friend was not real. ‘You never grow,’ he said.

I do not want the TV on. I sit in silence in the lounge. I do not know the name of the church I went to yesterday. It is a Portuguese church, that’s all I’m certain of. When I told my mother last night that I have finally accepted Jesus Christ, she asked which church I went to. I said I did not know. This cast doubt on me. I went in the church and didn’t ask the name.

*

A purple cloth wipes the kitchen window. It is Siviwe. We should be humble when people are clearing our perception. I get up and go to him.

‘You see, this is a two bedroom flat...’ I say holding the front door open.

‘My friend stays in that room,’ I say pointing at the room.

Siviwe enters through the front door and peers inside the flat.

‘No, that room must have been constructed,’ Siviwe says.

Now he is the serpent. Though I have shown him the room he still has something to say. Siviwe is short. He grimaces his small face as he speaks. He has come to deceive. I leave him and return inside. Through chicanery each one of us can become the serpent. This revelation comes to me lying in bed. I sense a snake’s tongue licking. I want to spit. My spittle would be that of a cobra, venomous. The first step to deception is lying, once you lie you become like the snake. I do not want ever to mislead people. Those blessed with the word can easily galvanise people, invigorate them with rhetoric. They become the snake when doing this. From the waters in my eyes I feel the snake. Maybe it’s under my bed.

I receive a call from my mother. I step out of the bedroom and into the lounge while speaking to my mother. She says they are happy I have accepted Jesus. ‘You seemed worried last night,’ mother says.

‘You didn’t seem happy when I told you the news, asking me which church I had gone to.’

‘No, we were tired. For the past weekend at church we had restoration. We were sleeping very late. How are you now?’ mother asks.

‘I’m not well. I have this intense anxiety.’

She gives me scriptures. I write these on a piece of paper. They are all from Psalms. I read them sitting at a table in the lounge. From one scripture I plunge to the next. When the circle is complete I start again. The scriptures catch each other. I go around, again and again. The fear does not leave me. My throat is dry from the nerves.

*

Elio can tell me the name of the church in Parow. He took me there. Over the phone we agree to meet in Mowbray. After meeting with Elio I might as well go to Paul’s place for men’s ministry. I take my bible along for clarity. The spectacle of walking in the streets carrying a bible does not bother me. I leave the flat wearing a grey jersey and black denim jeans. I’m back walking in the same route I did earlier in the day. They want to stop the world with this strike. Halting everything even for a minute will bring forth judgement. We believers have a lot to pray for. I really have to meet with Paul.

I could fit into my suitcase, a body bag of sorts. In Claremont I fleet past the green of the bottle store. Chumani approaches me carrying plastic bags from Shoprite. 'It's high time you prosper gentlemen,' I say, as his name translates to prosperity.

'Are you OK?' he asks.

'I'm fine, just in a hurry to get somewhere,' I say, and leave him standing.

Elio and I we meet in the Mowbray taxi rank again just as we had done yesterday. He is wearing a black suit that has lost its colour. He has a small yet long head. When I ask Elio the name of the church he hesitates then says it is Baptista. He says he is going to church now.

'To do what?' I ask.

'To take the pastor's place.' Elio says.

This grieves me. I put out my right hand towards his chest: 'In the name of Jesus' I say, my breath escaping me, and walk away.

*

I have to take a taxi to town to get to Century City. As the taxi fills up I fear I will suffocate. They are going to fill up the taxi with people till I can't breathe. This is how I am going to die. I try opening a window. This might help as I could jump out if need be. But I cannot move the window. I implore the driver to stop in Observatory. This is where I died, Observatory, a long time ago. My life is now being played back to me. This is where I lost my virginity. She blew me a kiss that morning from a taxi, her caramel skin all wrinkly. I stood on the side of the road wearing my long, red Adidas t-shirt. I became one with her and all the men she'd known when we slept. She wore a black dress that night; had fish nets on her legs. She quickly agreed to leave with me. I didn't bother informing Nhlakanipho and Mpumelelo. We went to Cubana in Newlands. I bought her drinks and watched her dance. She'd make her way towards me and grind against my loins with a naughty smile. We took a cab to my residence in Observatory. But she did not want to have sex. I had to coax her. When I did pound her I realised later that the condom had split. I had semen on my pubic hair. She screamed 'See what you have done!' and went to the bathroom. I heard the sound of water falling on the tiles as I lay in bed. We went to a surgery in the morning situated in the backstreets of Mowbray. The doctor gave Sofia morning-after pills for preventing pregnancy

and gave both of us prescriptions for anti-retroviral drugs. I stopped at Nhlakanipho's place in Newlands, asked him to accompany me to a pharmacy. I poured out all my pocket money on the ARVs. We visited Kwanele in Valkenberg the same day. God saves us so many times without us realising it. I'm sure there are people who had AIDS and whose blood he healed. Between the time of infection and getting tested a miracle could happen.

*

I wince when passing street lamps with 'Safe abortion' posters on them. I march all the way to the taxi rank in town. It's about four and the taxi rank is teeming with people. There are boards above the aisles indicating the destination of the taxis. I can't find one pointing to Century City. I ask around and they tell me to join the queue to Milnerton. The line is long. While standing, the name Century plays in my mind. It is a complete number. Am I looking for perfection? I look at my tattered black wallet. I have R100 in it. There is symbolism in this. A fire burns in my mind as if I'm high on weed. I leave the line. I am alone walking in the busy taxi rank. What if I cannot touch any of these people? I see one middle-aged woman with extensions in her hair. I offer her R20 as to be part of life I have to give to people.

'Why do you want to give it to me?' she asks.

'I just want to,' I reply.

She refuses. I leave her feeling like a mad man. I really want to go to the fellowship. So I call Paul. 'How do I get to your place using public transport?'

'I don't know let me give the phone to my wife,' Paul says.

'Hey Manga, look there's a station that's just been built at Century City. You can catch a train.' Paul's wife says. I walk to the station and buy a first class ticket to Century City. I flash my ticket to a lady guard. She lifts the steel bar allowing me to go through. It is like an auction inside as a million announcements rush to my ears. I exit the station.

*

Back at the taxi rank I see a guy I used to work with. I introduce myself to him.

'I know you mfethu,' he says.

'But you don't know my name.' I reply, 'What's your name?' I ask

'I'm Ntobeko,' he says. This is a message. His name translates to humility. The message is for me to be humble. 'Were you at work?' he asks.

'No, I resigned.'

'Why, what happened?'

'Some things happened... I fell ill.'

They are all going to talk about this at the office. I was seen crazy in town. I quit my job and lost my mind. I can end up like the vagabond sleeping on the stairs. My story of Cape Town: how the city beat me. The wind pushes against my face. I amble to the blue of the tar in the main road. I call Paul again: 'I can't get to Century City,'

'Have you tried catching a train?' Paul asks.

'I can't. I get lost.'

'I'm still busy now. Lemme pick you up later from your place,' he says.

'It's fine, I believe in God.' I say and drop the phone. I pray for calmness. I end by saying, 'A man.' This feels like such an empty phrase evoking the uselessness of a man's life, how it ends and life continues. I think of Che Guevera saying: 'You are only killing a man.' A man is something that is destined to die. The elements to life are the sun, earth, fire and water. Black people are like the sun, shining and beautiful. Somewhere we must have done wrong. We have now been humbled to servants. We must take this with grace and not be bitter. Perhaps seasons later our beauty will return.

Paul calls back: 'What's going on with you, you just hung up. Have you taken drugs? I told you I'm going to pick you up and you say you believe in God.'

'No, I haven't taken drugs.'

'Where are you right now?' Paul asks.

'I'm in Woodstock.'

'Just find any Mcdonalds or KFC and wait for me there.'

I go into Debonairs, sit down. A shop assistant stands in front of me wearing a black shirt. I call Paul and tell him I am at Debonairs. 'Ok, wait for me there,' he says. The assistant is

speaking but I cannot make out what he is saying. He seems menacing with a charred complexion speaking an exotic tongue. I force myself to calm down and stay on my seat. I have to wait for Paul. I need his help. But the fear climbs up the walls and pushes on my chest. I can't stay. I get out. I start drowning in the street. The street names keep changing. I see streets named after writers like Dickens. Is this the passage of a writer? In the afterlife will I be assembled with writers?

*

I receive a call from my mother: 'I have just spoken to bhuti Paul. He says you keep getting lost. He can't get a hold of you. Where are you?' I look at the streets in my vicinity. I am at the corner of Dickens and Victoria. I'm scared of telling my mother this. It sounds like the corner of Devil and Victory.

'What I love about you my child is that you speak the truth,' my mother says. 'I have just spoken to Ndlela's father, have you taken drugs before?' she asks

'Yes.'

'Which ones?'

'Dagga and cocaine.'

My mother sighs: 'Take a cab home, my child.'

Ndlela's father allowed me to join Ndlela at the initiation school. I was doing my first year then. One relative of mine poured oil over my head in a river, anointing me when we were preparing to return home having been made men. Ndlela is one of my dearest friends. Though he works in Joburg, we still keep contact.

*

I read the bible for equanimity. It isn't consistent. The verses become different when I read over them. Evening sets. The main road is boisterous with traffic in motion. What did I do? I regret standing up. Things were fine when I was drinking and smoking. Maybe I need to get a drink? No, I won't.

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I walk in the threatening darkness, imagine myself stranded in the night, lying in some corner. This night is going to have me all to itself. My legs continue kicking through my jeans. The inside of my thighs are numb. I am desperate for people, anyone to talk to. I call Tongai, he says he is with Caroline at Banana Jam. Caroline is a Canadian lady we were with on the previous Saturday at a braai in Observatory. 'Okay, I'm coming,' I say to Tongai. But Observatory, I remember when I approach the suburb, is the place of my death. I'm not certain I'll make it through or whether I'll decompose there. If I meet with them they'll shake my hand like people do at the end of a race. Banana Jam is in Station road. What will I say to Tongai and Caroline in this state? I decide not to join them.

No man knoweth the time nor the day. We do not know what will happen next. We do not even know the season we are in. Rasun, a friend of mine, had the habit of flipping a five rand coin when deciding on where we should go out to. He was close to the truth, for life is that precarious. I sent him an sms on Sunday on my way back from church with Elio, saying that God is great. Rasun responded: 'Dunsky come back to me when you've found the secret number.' I deleted the message immediately. All numbers say something. One represents beginnings, two stretches to infinity, the same holds with the other even numbers. The only stable number is 666. I cannot hold on to this thought.

I pass the bridge in Mowbray with the wind causing my eyes to water. There's a station building before Forest Hill with a grey stoep. Two old homeless white men used to sit on this stoep. During the day, the more vigorous one could be seen between traffic, imploring the drivers for a few cents. I stayed at Forest Hill when I was doing my Post Graduate Diploma in Accounting. This is where I spent most of my time with Kwanele. As students we drank together and shared plenty of cigarettes. He opened me up to communism. We were bitter, looking for wrong in the world. We were insulting God with all our grief.

With my busy head I wander down the road. Ahead of UCT the blue shuttles transport students taking them to their homes. All I can do is walk. I'm in a dream state with insane anxiety. I cannot make sense of it. I am running, rushing somewhere. The worst form of dying is to drown. You go through all the emotions, think you are going to survive, only to die. My feet pedal above ground. Stopping is one sure way to madness. I do not want to think of what is happening. I have to keep on moving. I glide through Rondebosch, flying in the night. Soon I am in Claremont, KFC, then the taxi rank. The last I ate was a piece of chicken this morning. My chest is burning and my throat is as dry as the pavement. I buy a bag of

apples and juice from the ladies at the taxi rank. I eat a green apple. My chest heats up severely, and I water down with juice. When thinking, hot coals rise to my throat and my thoughts ask each other questions, answer each other, the answers then break into further possibilities. There is no numbing my mind.

Carrying my bible in my left hand, the apples and juice in my right hand, I continue my journey. I am nearing my home. The street lamps colour the road yellow. A homeless kid shows me his brown palms asking for money. He stands outside the BP garage in Kenilworth. Without thinking I give him all the coins from my pocket. 'God bless,' he says. This is calming and reassuring. Where did this come from? Could he be an angel? It's probably because of the bible. The kid is just hustling.

A patient at Crescent clinic points at me. I see him in a window facing the main road. I feel condemned. He is blaming me for something.

Seeing our block of flats makes me hopeful. I can exhale. I am going to make it through this. The front door is grey with rusty brown spots. I sit on the couch in the apartment and catch my breath. The lining of the covering cloth is torn showing the yellow of the sponge. I put my bible on the table. Tongai's bible is also here, his is titled: 'Bible for life application.' These two bibles summarise my life, with Tongai's being the book of life. I sure am not going to find my name here. I flip through my bible, try reading some verses. When I reach Revelations I think I will not be able to go back. Why are there some parts highlighted in red? This could symbolise blood.

I did not think judgement would be like this. This is passive, filled with suggestions, yet with an air of finality.

*

I once held Mfundo's gun. My fingerprints are still on the weapon. I could be called in for questioning should Mfundo get arrested. With my claustrophobia I do not want to go to jail. Mfundo came in with me sleeping on a sofa in his flat. I looked up. Mfundo was pointing the gun at me. 'Mfundo don't scare us,' I said calmly looking at him.

'No, no, no there are no bullets. Look,' he said taking out the magazine. He then threw the gun at me. 'Put it under the sofa,' Mfundo said. I did as Mfundo had said.

Maybe Mfundo shot me that night. This is all a path to my place of rest. I am being shown my life and things that happened to me. There was also the night I broke the window in my room. I felt trapped, and I tried opening the door but couldn't. I was woken by Tongai mumbling that I would not be able to go anywhere. Next I was pushing on the window. Tongai later told me that I suffer from night terrors. Perhaps I threw Tongai out of the window that night. And the guilt made me shut the truth away. Tongai is dead; I killed him a long time ago. Such a decent guy, who never wanted to harm anyone, I murdered him. It is this sin that is eating me up.

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There are three strong knocks on the front door. I disentangle the chain. 'The people downstairs, guy...' Tongai says hurrying inside with his right hand pressed against his left. He is wearing a long shirt and green cargo pants. 'They say you are making a noise.'

Have I been talking aloud? That could be. I pour myself a glass of water. The flat is becoming smaller. The white burglar bars could keep me captive. With my chest jerking I go out into the corridor.

Our flat is on the first floor.

'Let's go downstairs, guy,' Tongai suggests.

'The body corporate say they are going to call the police.'

From downstairs a lady with dyed black hair brandishes her cell phone.

All this talk of going downstairs sounds like hell. Is this how life draws to an end, your friends, those who know you usher you to hell? Going downstairs means humbling yourself, lowering yourself to the level of the common people. That's what these guys are trying to tell me: I haven't been humble. I even told Nhlakanipho to keep his distance from me. I judged him. I was harsh on people.

Mpumelelo approaches me reeking of alcohol. He is wearing that grey coat of his. 'You guys have been drinking...' I say.

'I've been drinking.' Mpumelelo says with his right hand on his chest. Nhlakanipho looks right ahead.

I kneel down and pray. 'God is God. Faith is a gift. You take that first step of faith yourself,' breathless, I preach, to a cold stare from Mpumelelo.

'The book of Job!' I shout, turning my bible.

'Now you are speaking.' Mpumelelo shouts.

I remember a poetry reading Nhlakanipho, Mpumelelo and myself attended. One lady climbed on stage and said, 'The book of Job.' The poem was about someone who hated his job. Perhaps the cause of my strife was this quitting of my job, and I just did not realise that it affected me.

I'm terrified looking at Mpumelelo. I fall to my knees and pray. I'm stuck in the corridor. Satan awaits me on the stairs. Hell is at the bottom. The guys want to hold my hands in this gnashing eternity. Mpumelelo walks away, down the stairs. For a while I'm on my own. I continue reading my bible with my heart hammering my chest and my head. Nhlakanipho comes towards me, he opens his jacket. His cheeks are burning, he bites his mouth. I lean back and pray for strength as Nhlakanipho gets closer, 'In the name of Jesus,' I shout and release my hand with my eyes closed. I hit Nhlakanipho full in the chest. I look up to see him lying on the floor.

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There are cold lapses in time in which I presume Tongai, Mpumelelo and Nhlakanipho gather to strategise. I stand against a cream wall in one of the apartments. The sharp points in the wall prick my back. I see Nhlakanipho and Mpumelelo coming towards me. 'Look at yourselves. You guys are brothers. This is all because of Nthabiseng. And she was pregnant.' With me panting, these words just pour from my mouth.

Mpumelelo mumbles, 'We are going to beat you now.' But Nhlakanipho shakes his head, scolding his older brother. I look straight at Mpumelelo.

'We are going to call the police.' Mpumelelo warns.

Again, the lady from downstairs waves her cell phone.

'Call the cops. I do not fear man. I fear God.' I say, absolutely hopeless.

*

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They leave me in the cold with my brain frying. One tenant tries talking to me. He is wearing pyjamas. He looks like a dead man. He wants to invite me to the land of the dead. I ignore his utterances and walk to the far end of the corridor. Nhlakanipho comes back with more resolve. He harbours an unclean spirit. I have to pray for him and rid him of the demon. 'Come here,' I beckon to Nhlakanipho. He stops. 'Come here,' I say to Nhlakanipho. I walk towards him, Nhlakanipho turns around and sprints down the stairs. I run after him. But I cannot catch up with him.

Time stands still. A gush of blood rushes to my head. Kwanele said this happened to him when he was hospitalised. There's no point in me worrying about it now.

Tongai points at Caroline: 'Look, Caroline is around,' he says. She looks devilish in a scarlet skirt. I have nothing to say to her.

'When is your birthday?' I ask Tongai. He takes a sharp breath, 'On the first of October,' he says. Tongai once forgot his pin number which was his date of birth. He told me his biggest fear was getting Alzheimers. A relative of his suffered from the disease.

'Where do you go to church?' I ask Tongai.

'At Church on Main. You can come with me whenever you want,' Tongai says with his right hand stretched out.

'And the night terrors, how did you know about them?' I continue interrogating him.

'I told you, a lady I stayed with also suffered from them.'

Sydney, with his dark locks and penetrating eyes, walks in the corridor. 'You are my brother,' is what comes from my mouth. 'I love all of you guys, musicians. All of you: Thandeka, Kgotso.' Sydney carries the same struggle as Rasun, he is also mixed race. He could turn into Rasun. Perhaps he has come to deliver the secret number. I plunge towards Sydney, shove him far back.

*

'If there's one thing you should have realised from this whole experience it is just how much people care for you,' Tongai says to me in the parking lot at Groote Schuur, his right arm around my shoulders. Nhlakanipho is smoking a cigarette. He passes it to Tongai when there's only a quarter remaining. I hated this about Nhlakanipho; that he hogged a smoke.

‘You were there for me when I needed your help...’ Tongai continues.

‘Remember when I was locked in Tagores. You came and helped me out.’

This revelation pleases me. I look at them, Tongai and Nhlakanipho. These are my brothers.

‘You know I keep telling you I want to make films,’ Tongai says. ‘The first scene would open here,’ he says pointing at the traffic in a road beneath the parking lot.

*

We took a cab to Groote Schuur. I could not go on fighting. I had to meet with my destiny. Somewhere far off I felt a pot brewing for my demise. It was either me or someone else in my family who had to die. I am holding on to life, my heart scalding from a bewildering air. As we approach the main entrance to the hospital, I make it a point to walk behind Tongai and Nhlakanipho. I shake the security guard’s hand and introduce myself. He is wearing khaki pants and a maroon jersey. ‘I am Selvyn Rooi,’ he says. He has no front teeth. This name means red cell. Perhaps he is welcoming me to hell. Like a child, I follow my friends.

‘Who do you think you are?’ an old lady barks. She paces the floor, as wild as an animal, her hair short and grey. Is this my grandmother? Maybe it’s her. Life has devoured her into this. My middle finger is pricked. Hospital staff hover around me. This is a thorough diagnosis. All these things are done to judge me. The diabetes test was to see whether I was too sweet. Too much of anything is not good. Blood pressure measures my warmth. Was I kind hearted enough to people? All these things are to judge me.

Thoughts flow from my head, inform me of what’s going on. The water will turn to blood. The water is in the drips. I am drying up. I ask for a glass of water. Drinking does not quench my thirst. My friends are my witnesses, they attest to my character. And the doctor scribbles in his folder. Tonight Jesus has glasses, blue eyes and blond hair.

‘What happened?’ the doctor asks me.

‘I looked into the mirror and danced...’ I reply.

Nhlakanipho and Tongai’s heads drop to the ground.

'I realised that the world is selling us idolatry. I got tired of all these images: the TVs, newspapers, magazines, internet blogs. I got tired of everything. The last time I felt like this was in high school after I smoked weed with a friend.'

'Do you smoke dagga?

'I had my first joint when I was doing grade 9. I smoked with a friend of mine, Ringo. He is dead now. He was stabbed with a screw driver. I mostly smoked on weekends. I never abused it; not one to smoke every day. People just assumed I smoked more than I did. I only started taking drugs this year.'

'Which drugs were you taking?'

'I snorted cocaine for the first time when I started hanging with Mfundo. It also became cool. The self destruction. I wanted people to know I was on coke. One evening, on the day I had been paid, I spent almost two thousand Rands on alcohol and cocaine. Later that night I scored myself a prostitute. I bumped into that prostitute not long ago. I told her that I felt very bad for having had sex with her. She looked sorry. I became too full of myself. I could even make prostitutes feel bad. Tongai came in the room when I was with the lady. He knew that I had company. He told me that he took a good look at her. What sort of a person does things like that? Since that night, I haven't taken drugs, haven't had alcohol or smoked. I broke a window in my room the week following my encounter with the prostitute. I think it was caused by stress. I felt trapped. The last time I smoked weed was when you guys, Mpumelelo and Nhlakanipho, came running into my flat from Mfundo's. Since that day I felt nervous in the flat, I feared I'd walk in to find a gunman.'

'How much does cocaine cost?' the doctor asks.

'It goes for R400,' I reply.

'R400 a line?' the doctor asks, looking shocked.

'No, they sell it in grams. It is R400 a gram.' I correct him.

'How much did you get paid?'

'About nine thousand Rands a month. When I was young, I cursed God. I remember I was sitting on the lawn of our house in Alice. I cursed in isiXhosa.'

Nhlakanipho rolls his eyes at hearing this.

‘My grandmother once came and cut all my hair with a pair of scissors. I used to have bad dreams when I was young: running in town seeing people dressed in black with necklaces of horns. Before sleeping my grandmother used to rub me with pig’s fat to ward off evil spirits. I once dreamt of white women with black hair masturbating, they also had small penises.’

My speech is incredibly rapid. I am not thinking. My words cut Tongai’s and Nhlakanipho’s eyes.

‘My father I saw only once dressed in his Zulu outfit. I did not really see him. I only saw a photo. It was in his parents’ home in Soweto. One morning he kept on beating me for spilling food while I was eating. His mother shouted at him to stop. I did not want to cry but tears streamed down my cheeks. Tongai is the only person I’ve told that the last time I saw my father he wanted us to take a blood test. I was fourteen years old then. I refused to go for the test. He once took me to a graveyard in Zola and spoke to the ancestors. When I hear that song by Zola, Bhambata, I go crazy.’

Tsotsi usus’eka Bhambata namhlanje, sofa sibalandele baningi la siyakhona,’ I sing.

Tongai looks fearful as he exhales through his mouth.

‘What does that mean?’ the doctor asks.

‘We’ll die and follow them, there’s plenty where we are going,’ I reply.

When the doctor is done writing he will give the verdict: whether I will make it to heaven or not. Blemishes in my spirit keep surfacing I confess these to the doctor. In all fairness the process is just: first the body test, the perspective from my friends, and then the verdict.

‘When I was about ten years old, me and my friends called this one girl into the back room in my house. We took turns sleeping with her. I was young and I did her on top of her panties. I met her later in life, she looked like a prostitute. She died from AIDS. Guys always blamed me for Bulumko smoking weed because he first smoked with me. But then they started smoking everyday. Everyday after school they’d go to the park. He got expelled. I don’t think he even passed matric. Whenever I met him, he was unkempt.’

One at a time Tongai and Nhlakanipho go outside with the doctor. In these moments I keep quiet with one of my friends remaining and the lady nurse. I still have my bible in my hands.

What worries me is that I'm the only one with a bible here. Don't they realise that they need the holy book for referral? Before the doctor infers, I have to get it all off my chest.

The doctor returns to the room.

'I went to a Portuguese church on Sunday,' I tell the doctor. 'It was such a surreal experience. It was like the service was custom made for me. The preacher spoke of the issues I've had for a long time of doubting God. He said we should yield to the music of the creator. I went to meet the pastor in his office after the service. Holding his bible he asked me my name. It felt like he was reading from the book of life. At the flat later in the evening we were watching South African crime stories, I was scared watching the program.'

'Yeah, what was going on?' Tongai interjects.

'I thought that guy who had raped was going to turn to me. In the end I feared his face would transform into mine. I was also concerned that you, Tongai, were going to die. While in bed I had flashes of my life. Throughout my life it seemed everything had been a battle between good and evil. Is that what happens before you die, your life flashes back?' I ask the doctor.

The doctor shrugs.

'I remember how I mistreated Nhlakanipho, how arrogant I was. At least Tongai was humble enough to apologise. I was walking with Nhlakanipho at about five in the morning, I was angry with him, I told him not to walk with me, to go home. I felt he was not fit to walk with me... That was my problem, I judged people too harshly... You, you speak ill of people...' I confront Nhlakanipho.

Nhlakanipho scratches his head.

'Why are you looking down? That's what you do. You never have anything positive to say about anyone. You gossip about everyone even your own brother, Mpumelelo. That day when you were at my flat and you left thinking I was not in a good mood, what really happened was that I realised that your heart was steaming with hatred. I dreamt we were fighting that night, I was pushing you in the corridor, yelling "In the name of Jesus." But I did not even believe in God at the time. When I woke up I sent Nhlaniipho a message asking him to keep his distance from me. He agreed saying: "Very well then." There's so much about Nhlakanipho that tired me. This desire of his to be the king of the castle, whatever is on offer on the table, whether it's food or liquor or cigarettes or attention he wants the biggest

chunk of it. Who gets drunk and wants to be the centre of attention? Spending time with Nhlakanipho became dreadful. He'd dump on me... all the problems he had with people. By the time he was done, I'd feel drained. I realised that I didn't need this in my life. I did not have to go through it, it's not like he was someone I worked with whom I'd have to interact with.'

The doctor with his white coat nods in agreement.

'I did not show up for my last day of work. That was very rude of me. My contract was due to expire at the end of the year. I did not want to go back to Metropolitan anyway, so I resigned. I felt wasted there. Every day was like detention, just waiting for the day to come to an end. It's funny, afterwards, even though I was not working, I felt my time was better spent. I could do the things that I really wanted. I started writing a story. Nothing gives me better pleasure than writing. I deleted the story five chapters in. I allowed Tongai to read it once and immediately I regretted it.'

'But I told you it was good,' Tongai says in a gentle tone.

'Why did you regret showing it to Tongai?' the doctor asks.

'He was not being sincere. He reacted like we were in a hip hop gig, shouting "Blaka blaka." I had decided a long time ago not to share my work with Tongai and Nhlakanipho. With young people there's a lot of competition. It's hard getting an honest response from them. Guys could easily feel threatened.'

The doctor's hand does not stop moving, he writes down everything I say. The lady nurse looks at me with sadness. In the hospital we passed what looked like a waiting room. The people there looked like they were mourning.

'What was this story about?' Nhlakanipho asks

'It came from the theme of success. I looked at the world around me and how people measured success. To me it felt empty, the dry notion of getting a job and almost worshipping money. I was also fascinated by Mfundo: how someone could make a living out of crime; once money was in his hand it did not matter how it got there. But I deleted all of it. I thought, who am I to be telling people how to live their lives... Maybe I was trying to make a name for myself.'

Nhlakanipho slowly nods at my last statement.

‘I hate this about Nhlakanipho, the condescension. Look at how he nodded when I said maybe I was trying to make a name for myself. He has a sharp nose for other people’s weaknesses. Nhlakanipho once told me that the real poets do not get published, that the ones who perform have been told that they are good.’

I am running out of breath. My heart is beating fast. I think that tonight I have to die. But life is precious, I have to fight. I used to think very little of people who feared death. But life has to be cherished. I cannot give up.

‘That lady you invited to the flat was a sangoma,’ I say to Tongai.

‘Normal life coach...normal life coach,’ Tongai grunts with a slight grin on his face and with his right hand above his left.

‘Barefoot with dreads,’ I remark. ‘From the very first time Tongai asked me not to be around the flat, I became suspicious. I had this feeling that he was going to invite a faith healer that would spill water all round the flat.’

‘Do you think you have any special powers?’ the doctor asks me.

‘No, no, I refuse that. God is God,’ I reply in consternation.

‘One Saturday Tongai came in to the flat with a full fried chicken. He offered me some but I refused. I feared that fat would clog my creativity. He seemed disappointed and said, “why don’t you want my chicken?” I did not want to seem disrespectful so I cut two pieces for myself. When I was done eating I asked if he wasn’t going to eat. He said he was not hungry. The following day the chicken was not in the house anymore. I started seeing strange things at Tagores... That’s when this started, when I ate the chicken...’

No one else speaks. Tongai does not say a word. There isn’t anything else that I can say.

The lady nurse says: ‘No, another one.’

It seems people are dying. And it is all because of me holding the doctor up from attending to other patients. The doctor also seems restless. He wants me to make up my mind. If I sleep here, I do not believe I will wake up. There is a freezing air in this hospital.

After moments of quiet the doctor advises, ‘I strongly suggest that he stays over.’

I fear being hospitalised. This will surely lead to Valkenberg. But I certainly need help. I cannot sleep on my own at the flat. I grope for my bible, read the verses I turn to. They all stare at me coldly. The doctor grows impatient. 'Look, you have to decide,' he says. I understand, he is needed elsewhere. The lady nurse sighs, another patient has been admitted. I close my eyes, say a quiet prayer: 'Lord I cannot go on fighting.'

*

In the morning I lift up my head from a white pillow. My nose is dry from the morning draught. My arms dangle in blue hospital robes. I am alive. A drip is connected through my hand. I should quickly get out of here. I rip off the drip with my teeth. As my feet touch the cold floor, five security guards surround me. I try pushing them off. But there's no point in fighting them. I can't. They lift me onto the bed. I watch them knit a straitjacket in my arms and tie me to the steel of the bed.

*

I scream when I wake up. A security guard runs towards me.

'What's the problem?'

'Could you please untie me? I want to go to the toilet.'

'What do you want to do?'

'Number two...'

He just stands there. I press through, wet my robe, and leave a salty smell.

*

'Ahhhhhh!!!' I yell when I wake up. The same security guard comes to me again.

'What's the matter?'

'I need to use the toilet.'

He just keeps quiet. I wet myself again.

Moments later I wake to them untying me. I try by all means not to get too excited. My mother is standing beside me. 'He is going to be fine now...' the matron says, injecting my arm. Drops of water dribble off the tip of the needle. I do not feel anything in my arm.

I stretch my left arm around. The straitjacket has left a sweaty, swollen mark. I walk around the hospital floors to make sense of everything. When I see the doctor that attended to me the previous night I ask him, 'How's my case looking?'

'You spent all your money on drugs and lost your job. That's what precipitated this condition. If you take drugs again, you will end up on the streets,' he says.

I smile and nod.

It is chilly in here. I do not have anything on my feet. I walk back to my bed.

'Your nails are too long,' my mother says. 'Do you mind if I cut them?'

'No, you can.'

My mother clips off my toenails with me lying on my side.

'Mr Zolo, please follow me,' a security guard interrupts.

The security guard takes me past a white burglar door to the psychiatric ward. One patient has his arms stretched out, spinning around.

'You are going to meet people worse than you. Please try not to panic,' my mother whispers. She is prohibited from going beyond this point. The patient is directed to his cell by a male nurse. There is a TV playing and the patients sit around it.

I sit alone on a plastic chair. The psychiatrist is attending to a man, probably in his thirties.

'We are going to have to take you to Valkenberg,' he says. The man breaks into tears, rubs his eyes, looking down. 'We are doing this to help you.'

The psychiatrist is wearing a cream sleeveless jersey and brown chinos. He is affable when he interrogates me. I answer all his questions satisfactorily. I notice when he tries tricking me.

'You are from East London right?'

'No, I'm from King William's town,' I tell him.

‘What’s the one thing you want to do more than anything else?’

‘I want to write.’

‘Oh a writer... an artist...’ he mutters in his German accent.

‘Is there anything else you haven’t told me?’

‘Like what?’

‘Have you taken drugs?’

‘Yes, I was afraid of saying I had taken drugs.’

‘Like Tik?’

‘No, I only took cocaine and weed.’

‘Ok, it seems like you are fine. We are going to discharge you. You don’t need any medication.’

‘You must write whether you get published or not,’ he advises me.

I nod.

My mother hugs me when I tell her I have been discharged.

My bible is in a transparent plastic cover like a piece of evidence. I get it from one of the nurses. ‘You really looked like you were going to die last night,’ the nurse says.

*

I sit on the bed having dressed up and taken a shower. Nhlakanipho calls me.

‘Tongai took your wallet and your cellphone for safe keeping,’ he says. ‘How are you feeling now?’

‘I’m much better,’ I reply.

‘I can tell you’re fine now,’ Nhlakanipho says.

‘It was a spiritual battle,’ I say.

‘We’ll talk later,’ Nhlakanipho says.

Heavy drops of rain shoot down with a bitter wind against them. The cold creeps into the wooden shelter for the security guards where my mother and I wait for Tongai and the apartment keys. He gets out from a colleague's car and runs up towards us. He has a blue cap on his head.

He smiles and presses his right hand against his left when he greets my mother.

*

I know where I have been. I did not lose my job because of drugs. My head spun with spirits. And the doctors won't acknowledge it. The seed of destruction must have been planted in the church I went to that Sunday. My mother says she's heard of people who've attended Universal Church and then were not able to make contact with their family. They would even be in the same place but would not see each other. 'The devil is now using the church to mock God,' my mother says.

My mother tells me that her father died from a heart attack. I was born two years after his death. My mother was eighteen years old when she had me. We have a picture of my grandfather in our house. I have never been able to ask how he died. My mother says that my father has never had direction. She hoped that I would be stable spiritually before connecting with him as he practises ancestral rituals. It was a couple of years ago that my father contacted me after not having heard from him for more than ten years. I know my life through the walks that I have taken.

They all come in the early evening to see me: Mpumelelo, Nhlakanipho, Tongai and Nhlakanipho's girlfriend. It is the first time I have seen Nhlakanipho's new girlfriend, Lesego. She looks dry with thin hair. Mpumelelo is yellowy wearing his grey coat. I smell brew from Mpumelelo's mouth. I look him in the eyes, shake his hand, he nods with fear all around him. I sense Nhlakanipho's heavy eyes from the side. As I approach Lesego I become aware of my clothing. I have baggy shorts and skater takkies on. She puts out a feeble hand and nods nervously.

I offer everyone something to drink, Mpumelelo jumps up first. 'I want some,' he says with his right hand on his chest. I pour each a glass of Tropika Cabana. The gathering is awkward. No one mentions my breakdown. Nhlakanipho drove to my place. He has hired a car for the weekend. Moments later, Nhlakanipho gets up, his stretched belly protrudes through a golf shirt. He is wearing black sandals. 'I have to take Lesego home,' he says. I see them out the

flat. Mpumelelo stops, looking like he has forgotten something, he goes to my room and bids my mother goodbye.

*

Tongai says that I was extremely strong on the night of my breakdown. My remembrance of the events surprises him. 'That's the part I find very strange,' he says. I confide in Tongai that I thought judgement was nigh, that I feared the Armageddon was to take place at seven as people wanted to meet with me at that specific hour.

'I understand why Kafka wanted to have all his writing destroyed after his death,' I say to Tongai. 'It was a matter of the heart, only he knew where his heart was the time he wrote those books. Leaving lasting works when you know your heart was not at the right place would be hell. Those who went ahead and published his writing were wrong.'

'Hayi, the dead have no rights!' Tongai burst out. He then swiftly put his hands together and assumed an apologetic countenance. I read his regret at the brash utterance. Tongai often makes remarks and then says he's sorry. Apologies are a part of his nature. Night calls us to slumber. I sleep on the couch, my mother in my room.

*

Tongai dashes out to work in the morning. He works half days on some weekends, just till twelve o'clock. He is an intern at an advertising company in town. A while back he had to package CDs that were going to be distributed to taverns promoting *Three Ships* whisky. I assisted him on that Saturday, and how tedious it was.

A faint sunlight smiles through the window in my room. I vibe to Gil Scott Heron, peaceful melodies transport me to a land of spirits. Since the beginning of this year I have acquired the habit of recording life in a journal. I have to write about the madness of the past few days, but my journal is not on my desk. I ransack my room looking for it.

'Have you seen a black notebook?' I ask my mother

'No, I haven't.'

'This is very strange, I usually keep it on my desk.'

I call Tongai from work. 'Do you know where my diary is?'

He takes a few breaths before answering. 'It's at my mom's house. Me and Nhlakanipho, we were looking for clues as to what caused your breakdown,' he explains.

'No, I don't like what you did. So you read my diary?'

'No we didn't, serious...we didn't.'

'I don't like what you did.'

'The diary is in my bag in the lounge,' Tongai finally says.

I find the note book in the bag. I no longer have the urgency to write. I wonder what they saw in my diary. I'm even afraid looking at what I have written in it.

My mother placates me saying that when someone has gone through an experience such as mine it is only natural for people to look for clues. She calls Tongai to apologise on my behalf. Tongai tells me that he'll be watching rugby later in the afternoon. At about three I join Tongai at Cafe Sofia in Rondebosch. He sits with intent at the table wearing the round glasses he recently bought. His previous pair were lost during a drunken night. Tongai has a glass of draught in front of him. For this game, South Africa against Australia, he supports Australia. I find this odd. Black guys usually support New Zealand when they don't favour the Springboks. I am not interested at all in the match. Even though I attended a boys' school where rugby was a religion, I have never had a liking for the sport. To Tongai's pleasure Australia wins the game.

Nhlakanipho and Mpumelelo have gone to Mzoli's in Gugulethu. They join us later at Cafe Sofia. Mpumelelo orders a beer. Nhlakanipho is still trying to stop drinking. He has orange juice. 'You know what I observed at Mzoli's...' Mpumelelo commences. 'Everything depends on money...You know the chicks look at what the guy is drinking...everyone goes there with a car.'

Nhlakanipho shakes his head, not impressed by what his older brother is saying.

Not able to contain himself any longer, Nhlakanipho yields to the craving and calls a waitress for a beer. I keep quiet, not paying attention to what the guys are saying. With a car for the weekend, Nhlakanipho wants to make the most of this mobility. He suggests that they go elsewhere. As if he can read my mind he offers to drop me off at home.

*

I lie on the couch tucked under a duvet. I had been reading *Nausea* by Jean Paul Satre for a while. Now, I cannot absorb the book. I find the feelings of the meaninglessness of everything stale. When I told Rasun I was reading *Nausea* he said he didn't like the book. He has always had more of a penchant for life.

The creak of the door wakes me from my sleep. It is Nhlakanipho and Tongai. They take a seat on the other couch to my right. Nhlakanipho's eyes are bloodshot.

'You know what we have realised from this whole experience of yours... is just how sadistic we can be...' Nhlakanipho coolly says caressing his belly.

I scoff at this statement. My reaction is almost reflexive. Nhlakanipho does not take this further. For several heart beats, we sit in silence.

'I even regret hiring this car now...' Nhlakanipho says. 'There's no way they won't notice the scratch.'

'You have to explain it to them,' Tongai advises.

'What were you doing with this car anyway?' I ask Nhlakanipho.

Nhlakanipho does not reply.

'I was trying to sleep gents,' I say. Tongai walks Nhlakanipho out. Nhlakanipho mumbles goodbye to me.

*

As we pack in the morning, I make it a point to take all my diaries with me. Tongai accompanies us in the cab. He is on his way to church carrying his big brown bible in the back seat. He gets off in Claremont.

*

As soon as I had settled at home I sent Tongai a message saying that I arrived safely. His response was "Blessings brethren," which he has never used in relation to me before. I swallowed this phrase with suspicion.

Things seem smaller at home, the TV, everything. There are five of us in our three bedroom house. My grandmother, my mother, my aunt and her daughter, and myself. We have a house

minder, Ma'Dlomo. She comes in weekdays to clean. My grandmother cooks in the evenings. Before going to bed we convene in the sitting room. We each read a scripture from the bible and we close in prayer. I used to try to find something vilifying in the past, I'd read a verse about the Israelites being God's people. When it was time to pray I would just kneel and close my eyes, wait for them to finish.

The only chore that I do is to buy the newspaper and bread. Whilst on one of my trips to the store, I hear a whistle from behind. It's a friend of mine, Luvuyo. He has come out of Diva's, a liquor den. He asks me to buy him a beer. I'm no longer working, I tell him. I sense disappointment from him. It feels like he expected more from me.

'Come chill with us, inside,' Luvuyo suggests.

'There are some loose ends that I have to tie up,' I say.

This town carries pieces of me. We used to attend a church youth program on Fridays when we were in high school. For Bulumko and me, it was an opening to smoke weed. We'd go there stoned. At this age I lost a lot of weight. People kept on asking me if I was well. I was finicky about eating before sleeping. I'd lie in bed thinking of all the food I had had during the day. I'd be pleased the less I ate. I started gaining when we moved to King William's Town from Alice. By the time I was doing grade seven I had become a lump of fat. That's how the silence began. Gradually I spoke less and less. I was shaken by my mother not recognising me when she had come down from Joburg for the holidays. I was skeletal. From that moment on I started eating again.

My grandmother has been retired for close to ten years now. She basically raised me. She is the only parent I really know. In this house she beat me, disciplining me when I was naughty as a boy. When I neared falling to the other side I realised just how much I loved her.

A childhood friend, Siyabonga, lives in the street below mine. He was with Ringo the night of the stabbing. For many years he has been applying for jobs. He did a couple of semesters at the University of the Free State but left when his father was suspended from work and could no longer pay for his fees. Together we laugh about our age mates in government who fart from far as they have inflated bellies and behinds. These working men frequent a tavern close to the train station on weekends. They carry trays full with meat and alcohol. The horizon is purple as we sit in front of Siyabonga's house. When he asks me why I quit my

job, I tell him that I got tired of working for coloreds. That's how it is in Cape Town, I explain. Soon the sky darkens, the conversation dries up and we part ways.

*

We take turns on Sunday morning in the bathroom preparing for church. The hot water runs out after the first two people have bathed. I have to heat my water on the stove. I'm very fussy about bathing. I cannot wash with cold water as it gives me a neurotic itch. We leave my aunt behind at the house. We drive to Bhisho in my mother's BMW three series. There are urchins in the parking lot outside church who busy themselves washing cars. My mother raises her hand, signalling to the young man who usually scrubs her vehicle. He runs towards us carrying a bucket and a sponge.

My mother and grandmother walk to the chairs closer to the front in church. I take a less conspicuous position at the back. Our pastor is a light skinned man in his mid-thirties. He wears a three quarter gold suit similar to the ones the preachers on TBN wear. He used to attend our fellowship in Alice when he was still a student at Fort Hare, my grandmother tells me. I must have been five years old back then. His passionate singing draws me into the worship. I join in to sing. I have never been much of a singer. I was always told that I was out of tune. The preaching loosens wires in my throat.

'You should brace yourself for stormy times when you ask God to make you right,' the pastor says. 'As you come from that period your return will be multiplied tenfold. But don't expect God to reward you the way you want him to. See, God is a God of covenants, he sticks to his agreement. Samson had long fallen off. When he was with Delaila he had already backslidden. But God's word was: No meat and no wine.'

The pastor looks into the distance after saying this.

'Do not wish to be in another person's position. You do not know that person's struggles. Why you were born, where you were born, do not question those things. See, people in the world want to have certain achievements and things at certain times in their lives. What they forget is that there are also God's seasons. There are seasons that God sets in your life. When those seasons come, you better be prepared.'

Do not curse God when he is purifying you. Accept the challenges that come your way. If this is your will God then let it be, you should say. Remember God says, 'My grace is sufficient,' the pastor lifts his right hand upright and stares afar.

Sweet tears stream down my cheeks. My time is still coming, life ain't over. I might not have the accessories that some of my age mates have, but my turn will also come. Our pastor has been working hard for a long time. Week in, week out he finishes with his jacket sticking on his sweaty back. As a university student I doubted him when he said circumcision was demonic. In those days I was into black consciousness and saw him as demonising African tradition. My acceptance of Christ has required me to get out of my mind, for spirituality is not an exercise of intellect. It's like Paul says: 'These battles are not of the flesh and blood.'

At the end of the service the pastor calls people who are interested in joining a transformation programme to be held in East London to stay behind. I have been humbled. Work is work to me, irrespective of titles or prestige. This initiative would allow me to make a contribution. I write down my details in the roster passed along. The only problem is that I'll be heading to Cape Town in a couple of weeks' time to clear the flat. I'll have to miss the first session.

*

My mother says Tongai is a very sweet boy. She prays for Tongai and Nhlakanipho asking God to forgive their sins. She even wants to call Tongai to find out if he's well.

'Your friends were very worried about you,' my mother says. 'Nhlakanipho almost cried when he explained that they did not have a choice. They had to take you to hospital.'

PART 2

A TURN UNDER THE SUN

I came back to Cape Town early in January carrying two bags: one bigger with most of my luggage and a smaller one with my shoes. I could finally exhale back in the city. For the two weeks I had been at home, I did not drink and did not smoke. I never wanted my mother and grandmother to find out about my debauchery.

Coming out the airport I bought a packet of ten cigarettes. I ran about trying to strike a deal with the cab drivers. They were all resolute on the same price of R 100, which I thought was extravagant. I settled for riding back to my commune in an old Mercedes Benz.

‘Could you please take me to Observatory...Dove Street,’ I said to the driver who was leaning against his seat. He got out the car, avoiding the trolleys on the pavement and packed my bags into the boot. It was about three in the afternoon as we drove out the airport, peering into the sunlit Saturday streets. We sat in silence in the car. I was glad to be back, but also nervous about returning to work.

The cab driver stopped the vehicle in front of my place of abode: 1 Dove Street. I dragged the bigger of the bags on its wheels and carried the other one around my right shoulder. Lulu was smoking a cigarette in the porch.

‘Hey Manga,’ Lulu said coming out to hug me.

Lulu was one of my three housemates: a generous soul with a ready smile.

‘Let me just put my bags down and I’ll join you.’

I opened my bedroom, directly opposite Lulu’s. I looked at my thin bed, one woman I had spent the night with complained about it not being a bed but rather a plank of wood. The room was hungry for air. I pushed up the window and went out to Lulu. She was killing her smoke. I took one cigarette from my box.

‘So how was home?’ Lulu asked.

'It was fine...just the break was too short.'

'I heard there's an open mic tonight...'

Lulu knew I attended poetry evenings. None of my housemates were into that scene. I found life under the breath of expression, some wholesome fulfilment which carried nothing tangible. On some moments I had read some of my work to healthy responses. I nodded at Lulu's comment, knowing that I would certainly be attending the event.

Open mics usually started at sevenish. I got out my room a few minutes after seven. The event was taking place at Obzone in lower main Observatory. I strolled under the shadowy trees. The night smelt precarious. I walked right up to the venue, paid my R 10 and entered. The host was announcing the next act. I had gripes with a lot of the young poetry. It felt predictable and even forced. I went to the balcony to take a breather. One brother unhesitantly passed me a badly rolled joint that was flapping at the bottom. I took two tokes and returned the spliff. The guy had a portable digital camera with him. His name was Moses. He was from Gugulethu and had studied at AFDA.

The live band transfixed me in the night. The lady vocalist spoke to crawling children then shattered glass when she raised her voice. Then I travelled with the horns to an eternal wilderness.

I left Obzone before midnight. My mouth was bitter from the beers I had been drinking. I narrowed down the streets back to my boarding house.

*

I trudged in at work around eight thirty on Monday morning with my backpack on, climbed the elevator to the fourteenth floor. The time I entered the office most employees were already in. I passed them nervously and greeted my colleagues in my section and sat in my cubicle. I surfed the net for two hours and then it was tea at ten. I filled a mug one lady gave me, with the soggy tasteless coffee from the machine. Again, I was on the internet.

I had come to this job after failing my Post Graduate Diploma in Accounting. I did not have the will to repeat the Diploma. The truth was I had never liked Accounting and had enrolled to study the subject after seeing the high salaries earned by financial managers in the careers pages. I had spent the year that I failed drinking every weekend and not touching my school work.

*

Then the weeks started piling up with me not doing any work at the office. I found myself drinking even on weekdays from this misery. As graduate trainees at Metropolitan we were meant to work on high level projects using our fresh knowledge from university. I hounded my manager for a piece of the action. She kept on promising but never got back to me.

From my veins I had a desire to be a serious writer. So in one bored afternoon in the office I looked for writing workshops in and around Cape Town. I found one in Rondebosch and sent an email to the woman responsible, expressing my interest. She got back to me in no time. They are starting on Thursday, she said. I had to pay eight hundred Rands for the four sessions.

*

Past five on Thursday afternoon I ambled up Polo road to catch a taxi in the main road. I got to the woman's house in Rondebosch with ease. Inside the other learners were already seated. We went around giving our reasons for writing. A white middle aged man said that he was fascinated by sangomas, and wanted to write about them, merging western medicine with African practices. A thudding sound came from the ceiling.

'There are so many spirits in these old houses,' our instructor said. 'Imagine how many people have stayed in these houses.'

An eerie sensation pricked on my cheeks and on my back. I did not believe in God let alone spirits. I did not know white people could be this superstitious.

'I have been inspired by people like Zakes Mda,' I said on my turn. 'I have always wanted to write about my world and tell it the way that I see it. In the past I have written poetry and have performed in various subculture events.'

'Oh, so you already know you are creative?' the instructor asked.

I nodded in agreement. One book she suggested was *The Artist's Way*. She gave us an assignment for the next week titled: 'The view from the window.'

*

Sitting on my chair in the office one afternoon, staring out the window, I saw the dusty children play in a street teeming with life. I took out my notepad from my back pack and began writing: *The girls are skipping rope. They are not bothered by their pallid legs. I have sore tonsils. I thirst for the outdoors, begging my grandmother to let me go out just for an hour. She does not budge.*

Our instructor liked my piece immensely though it was the shortest, when we returned to her place the next Thursday, saying I choose words well. On payday I bought a copy of *The Artist's Way*, and began writing morning pages as suggested in the book.

*

I was hopeful when one company I had applied for an internship with got back to me for an interview. I arranged to meet with them during my lunch break in a couple of day's time. All I wanted was to work in any place where I would be making some sort of a contribution. Just sitting and earning my salary at the end of the month was skinning me. It was a bonus that this opportunity was even in my field of study: Finance.

I waited in the foyer of the company on the day of my interview. The receptionist let me through to the board room. The two partners, an accountant and a senior researcher, rounded the rectangular table. I sat on the short side of the table facing one of the partners.

'Your marks are good,' the accountant said looking at my transcript.

'But...then... what happened at the Post Graduate Diploma, you failed just about every course?'

'I got tired of accounting, it was not what I wanted... my failing was not a case of a lack of ability,' I said.

'This does not look good, starting something and not finishing it,' one of the partners added.

'Accounting is not what I wanted to do.'

'Do you think accounting is not relevant to this job?' the same partner asked.

Now in a corner, I kept quiet.

'You are currently working at Metropolitan,' the other partner remarked.

'Ja, I want to leave. The programme is not well structured; there isn't work for us graduates.'

The partner nodded thoughtfully.

'Why do you want to work for this company?' the same partner asked.

'I researched how it was started by...' I held myself from saying black guys. 'This company is more related to my field: finance.'

'Look it seems like you do not know what you want,' the partner said.

'Do we ever?' I said softly.

'Look, you speak well and you look smart, but that does not count for anything. You must stick it out at Metropolitan, even if it means being a skivvy. Appreciate that you are getting advice from successful people.'

I got out of there and bought a cigarette in the street, inhaled the smoke and blew out the arrogance of the wealthy.

*

Then I began descending. Mfundo walked into Nhlakanipho's sitting room as we were sharing a six pack of beer, one Saturday afternoon. He was dressed casually in a shirt and a cap. Nhlakanipho had told me of Mfundo in the past. I knew he stayed downstairs from their flat.

'I have some beers downstairs,' Mfundo said on his way out.

'Don't be surprised if he comes back with coke,' Nhlakanipho whispered, pulling at his nose.

Mfundo came back with champagne for himself and a six pack of beer for us. He pulled out a note with cocaine wrapped in it like a Grandpa, scooped the white powder with a bank card, snorted up his left nostril, closed his eyes and then sniffed up his right nostril and passed the note to Mpumelelo. Nhlakanipho and Mpumelelo snorted. I declined.

*

'I told my mom a long time ago, "those white boys you sent me to school with are now working in their uncles' companies. This is my life, drinking in my backroom, money from stealing car tapes," Mfundo said. 'When she asked: "what if you get arrested?" I said I'll see

that when it happens. When I got locked up, she was my first visitor in Pollsmoor,' Mfundo spoke fast, sounding like he had a blocked nose.

'See, my younger brother he works as an accountant. That laaitie, he was so full of kak, the time he was at UCT. These degrees don't mean anything because he's now working for someone else. What really matters is being able to read people, like I can see Nhlakanipho he likes nice things, you Mangaliso, you are quiet and observant. Mpumelelo, he talks a lot and probably also lies a lot. Everyone is doing it for themselves nowadays that's why I feel sorry for cops that don't want to take bribes. Look at Jackie Selebi,' Mfundo said laughing.

We joined in the guffaw. Mfundo controlled the conversation and we listened. Thirty years of age, he looked much older with a hanging belly disproportionate to his small legs. He grew up in boarding schools, first in Grahamstown and later at Rondebosch Boys' after getting expelled. He had a curious taste for politics speculating on the underworld of the ruling party. Mfundo related with Nhlakanipho on this level. Since our high school days Nhlakanipho has had a keen interest in politics. This went on to inform his social persona. He often called people 'chief'.

As night fell Mfundo suggested we visit one of his grootmans. We took the remaining beers and champagne along. Nhlakanipho and I sat in the back seat of his BMW M3. Nhlakanipho held Mfundo's champagne. Mfundo had assigned him to refill his glass while he was driving. Mpumelelo was in the passenger seat. They got along handsomely with Mfundo.

We filled the car with petrol at the Engen garage in Newlands. There was a white lady parked next to us, her son helped the petrol attendant by holding the pump.

'He won't be a doctor,' Mpumelelo remarked from the front.

The lady chuckled acknowledging the attempt at humour.

From the garage we drove down the main road with Mfundo gyrating to the house music he was playing. 'The problem with these fuckers is that they are lazy. You can try to give them something...' Mfundo said as we passed vagabonds in the Liesbeeck River. Mfundo pulled his mouth, shaking his head. 'Me, I can get told to get five cars in one night and I won't ask any questions.'

We stopped opposite the Spur in Newlands. They continued stuffing their noses with cocaine. I noticed a police car driving past us. A few minutes later the same police vehicle drove back. I pointed this out to Mfundo.

‘Don’t worry, that’s a Bon Jovi, they understand protocol. The difficult ones are the police vans,’ he advised.

The car stopped adjacent to us. A white man dressed in blue with a bullet proof vest came towards us. Mfundo folded the note with cocaine and pushed it into his wallet.

‘What’s going on here?’ the policeman asked outside Mfundo’s window.

Mfundo lowered the tinted window and smiled at the officer.

‘Oh Mnyamana it’s you,’ the policeman remarked.

Mfundo laughed, squeaking through his throat, nodding.

The officer left after an exchange of pleasantries with Mfundo.

‘This one... he really understands protocol,’ Mfundo said. ‘I once had a case. When I walked into court, the magistrate started laughing. When they asked the magistrate why he’s laughing he told them that I used to teach him Maths. I got off that case scot free. So you never know when you will need someone.’

Mfundo received a call from the gentleman we were to visit.

‘We can go now,’ Mfundo said. ‘I was waiting for the call, it’s protocol. Had he not phoned me it would have meant he did not want us there.’

We drove to a suburb in Table View with Mfundo’s car snaking in between the narrow streets.

‘This is a place for the emerging blacks, the ones that are not that wealthy yet,’ Mfundo said.

We parked outside a face bricked double story house. There was a Mercedes Benz sandwiched between two trucks in the yard.

‘This is how it’s done. You put working trucks in the front,’ Mfundo muttered.

The gentleman we had come to see, Bra Menzi, came out wearing a t-shirt and jeans. His skin was taut with rocky jaws. His upper body well built, he clearly worked out. Inside his wife was rocking their new born child in the kitchen. We each introduced ourselves to her and went upstairs to Bra Menzi's bedroom. It was a capacious space floored by a furry brown carpet. We watched a game of football on the 102 cm plasma screen. Bra Menzi brought us a bottle of Verve champagne. Nhlakanipho filled his glass showing great excitement.

'I really like your house, grootman,' Nhlakanipho said.

'Thanks mfethu,' Bra Menzi replied.

We had to go to the balcony to smoke. There we were careful not to drop ash on the floor, and we kept the cigarette butts in the packet. With all the cocaine the guys were taking I did not see any change in their behaviour. When Mfundo came with another batch I had some cocaine. The white powder went up my nostrils leaving my throat dry. I struggled to wet my larynx with saliva. My heart started beating faster than usual. I sat in great discomfort on the couch.

Bra Menzi stayed inside while we dabbled with drugs at the balcony. He was most inviting. When the bottle of champagne was finished, he took out another one.

'So, gents where do you stay?' Bra Menzi asked.

'I stay in Observatory,' I said.

Nhlakanipho quickly added: 'We stay upstairs from Mfundo's place.'

Bra Menzi nodded at Nhlakanipho's statement.

Mfundo spent a lot of time outside with an associate discussing their affairs. He said that there was a war going on and that it would be dangerous for us to go to the location with him. We cut through the night streets back to Newlands.

*

Mfundo's girlfriend who was visiting for the weekend with their five year old daughter had prepared macaroni and mince in Mfundo's apartment. We served ourselves portions. Mfundo had what he called his magic bag slung over his right shoulder, a pouch with innumerable bank notes. The apartment was carefully decorated with animal skins on the floor. Mfundo

sauntered out of the flat, waving his waist. He gave us each five hundred Rands from his bag to go out. 'You are now part of the family,' Mfundo said in a gentle tone before going back to his apartment.

*

After getting up from my place on Sunday, I was still on a high. I tried telling my housemates just how seductive crime can be. But they seemed bored as soon as I started speaking. My lease was due to expire at the end of May. I had told the landlady that I wanted out. I had gotten tired of having to share everything with so many people. Tongai and I had agreed on looking for a two bedroom apartment to rent.

I spotted one place on the internet, going for R 4600 in Kenilworth. We could share the rent with Tongai. I arranged to view the apartment. It came furnished with a washing machine and a dryer. I was sold. I wanted in. The agent said someone had already taken the lease. But I would have the first preference should the person pull out.

The agent called in a couple of days saying the apartment was now available. Tongai deposited money for the rent into my account. I managed to squeeze some money for the deposit from my mother. Nhlakanipho helped us with moving into the place. I left some of my clothing in Nhlakanipho's flat.

*

We sat in the lounge with Tongai having packed our bags into our respective rooms. I had brought my TV along from Observatory. We placed it on a stand in the lounge.

'You know this is a window into a new life...' Tongai said.

We agreed not to smoke in our new apartment. The one thing we had in common with Tongai was that we were both passionate about literature.

'We should pin up posters of writers,' Tongai suggested.

He said of the time he stayed with the music bunch: Kgotso and company, that those guys had posters of jazz legends in their rooms.

'And they were disciplined...they practised everyday without fail,' Tongai added.

*

We established a routine with Tongai: contributing towards groceries each month, taking turns to cook supper and to wash the dishes. We used the train to travel to work. Tongai always had a book to read in the train. I tried keeping up with Tongai, going through some of his novels which he had filled the book shelf with.

*

At about two in the morning we were coming out of the Cubana in Newlands on a Friday night: Tongai, Nhlakanipho and I. We had been drinking hard since the afternoon. Tongai and I were too tired to walk back to Kenilworth. We decided to crash in Nhlakanipho's place as it was closer. On our way out of Cubana we got ourselves some borewors rolls. We walked while eating and passing a cigarette around.

'What's going on?' Nhlakanipho queried as there was yellow tape around Mfundo's flat in the ground floor. A number of the tenants in Nhlakanipho's building were huddled in the parking lot. Mpumelelo had Nthabiseng in his right arm next to a car. He told us that Mfundo had just been taken by the police. Mfundo had stabbed his girlfriend seven times. There were stretches of blood in the flat, even pieces of bone, Mpumelelo said. 'Someone from upstairs called the police when they heard the screaming,' Mpumelelo informed us.

I could not take off the image of blood and the pieces of bone from my mind. Of all the things Mfundo could get arrested for, this I had not imagined. It was not clear to me what exactly Mfundo did for a living. We all went upstairs to Nhlakanipho's apartment.

'Hayi guys...that was savage,' Nthabiseng said seated in the lounge.

Nthabiseng had thick lips and a weave tied pony tail style. Nhlakanipho had told me of the fights between Mpumelelo and Nthabiseng. Mpumelelo often beat Nthabiseng. But this was too much.

'What exactly does Mfundo do?' I asked.

'What if it's something like human trafficking,' Nhlakanipho playfully said, finishing with an intrigued look.

*

In two weeks Mfundo was released from Pollsmoor. He spent his first night out with Mpumelelo. Together they knocked down a bottle of Jack Daniels and snorted cocaine.

Mfundo believed it was a blessing from the ancestors that he butchered his girlfriend. In that weekend that Mfundo was arrested, two of his friends were shot and killed. This was the aftermath of the war Mfundo had previously mentioned.

I called Nhlakanipho on a Saturday afternoon. He said they were at Springboks at Newlands. There, they were with Mfundo. He was drizzling in Levis jeans and an expensive looking jersey. Mfundo was scratching the surface with criminal tales.

*

As we were walking in Boundary road after finishing our drinks at Springboks, one man offered to sell us tickets for the rugby at a reduced price. The Stormers were playing at the Newlands stadium, just around the corner. Mfundo took up the man's offer and bought all of us tickets. He took the placard the man was carrying, written: 'EK is n' Stormer.'

Nhlakanipho went in first at the gate. Mfundo had decided that Nhlakanipho would be the one to test whether the tickets were legit. When Nhlakanipho was allowed in, we followed in. The stadium was a roaring ocean of blue and white jerseys: whole families in their supporter's uniform. We walked up and all sat in one aisle. The players seemed smaller down in the field. The game was not as intimidating as it is on TV.

Mfundo was laughing on the phone throughout the game. Nhlakanipho gave Mfundo a hug after the game, thanking him for buying us tickets. He later confessed to me that he wanted to cry as no one had ever done such a thing for him.

*

In this time my life at the office was dead. There was nothing for me to do. I had grown tired of asking my manager for work to do. I had applied for more jobs than I could recall. And no one was coming back to me. I still kept a notepad and wrote the occasional poem. I was writing just for myself. I hated my drinking habits. On Fridays I could not help it but to drown myself in alcohol. I now had a beer belly. I spent my weekends drinking with Tongai and Nhlakanipho. Tongai had become a confidante. He had a polite air, often held his hands together when addressing people.

*

In one particular Friday, I got out of work and went straight to a bar in town. I downed beers until my nerves settled. I was sitting on my own. I was good by myself.

As it became dark, at about seven, I was thinking about catching a taxi home. Then I received a call from a number I could not recognise. I was startled that it was Nthabiseng. We had never exchanged numbers before. Nthabiseng wanted to see me. She gave me directions to her place. I hesitantly got on a taxi to Newlands.

There was a cold wind ruffling the trees as I was climbing up Newlands to Nthabiseng's place. I found Nthabiseng wearing pyjamas and a gown, her face was red, she had a bump on her upper lip.

'I don't know why I'm telling you this,' Nthabiseng said, looking down, her right leg was shaking above her left one.

'Mpumelelo attacked me last night. He beats me a lot...'

I looked at Nthabiseng. Strands of her hair covered her face.

'He beats me all the time,' she said and started sobbing. 'I was pregnant with his child last year. I just couldn't go through with it. I aborted the child in Joburg. I just couldn't have a child with Mpumelelo,' Nthabiseng rubbed her eyes after saying this.

She went to the kitchen and came back with a bottle of wine. She poured for both of us. The wine was half way down. She had been drinking before I came.

I spent the night in Nthabiseng's bed. She cried as we made love, and I tasted her tears. I hurried out the apartment in the morning, looking for any hint of Mpumelelo.

We did not use a condom with Nthabiseng. For the next weeks I counted the days, worried about her falling pregnant. Despite everything she continued her relationship with Mpumelelo. I realised that she needed him to stand. She was not able to do it alone. Before meeting Mpumelelo she did not have any friends. She wandered on her own around Cape Town.

*

Something else was happening with Nhlakanipho. I was increasingly becoming resentful of Nhlakanipho. It was in the unflattering remarks he made about other people when they were

not around. He did not spare anyone, even Mpumelelo, his own brother. Nhlakanipho once told me that he would not like Mpumelelo were he not family. I was certain that Nhlakanipho also gossiped about me.

Mpumelelo was speculating that Mfundo was running out of money. I could not argue with him as he had spent more time with Mfundo. Mfundo came out openly one Sunday in his flat, saying that they were in a dry season.

Nhlakanipho bought the cocaine and champagne that time. Mfundo was with a tired looking young prostitute. Nthabiseng was also around with Mpumelelo. I had not seen nor spoken to Nthabiseng since we slept together. She was extra friendly with Mfundo, tapping on his shoulder when laughing. When Nthabiseng went to the bathroom, Mfundo beckoned to Mpumelelo, 'Tell your bitch to get off my dick,' he said in Mpumelelo's ear.

Mfundo was losing his ability to speak English. He often got stuck in sentences and would throw in a Xhosa word. When with us, Mfundo wanted to converse in English. Nhlakanipho could only afford cheaper champagne than what Mfundo usually bought. With only two grams of cocaine available, Mfundo sparingly scooped for us.

'I did it all to correct Mpumi's slip up of failing grade eleven,' Nhlakanipho said remembering his feat of coming in the top ten in matric.

Mpumelelo did not seem to like this recollection. Nhlakanipho did not notice it, and instead sunk deeper in his skin.

'I'm only twenty four years old,' Nhlakanipho said. 'Mandela was also twenty four when he said he was going to be the future president of the ANC.'

Nhlakanipho filled his glass with vigour. Whenever we drank he wanted to consume the most alcohol. He usually looked for the biggest glass, and would then end the night being a nuisance on us by passing out.

'Just because you bought the drinks... you don't have to drink with greed,' Mpumelelo chastised Nhlakanipho.

Mpumelelo was sizzling with bitterness that evening. He kept on saying that me and Nhlakanipho were just laaities.

'I think it was God that brought Mfundo to us,' Nhlakanipho continued in his majestic tirade.

This pleased Mfundo. Mfundo dropped the smile once I looked at him.

‘I don’t know how else to explain his coming into our lives.’

It was surprising seeing Nthabiseng snort cocaine. She bent her head and sniffed up like an expert. Nthabiseng was wearing a denim skirt. Her legs were crossed as she sat on Mfundo’s leather couch.

‘These are my friends... guys like Manga,’ Nhlakanipho said.

‘These are the people who know me. They know my strengths and my weaknesses. If we were to be enemies, we would be ruthless e-ne-mies.’

‘But Manga, you would never be enemies with Nhlakanipho,’ Mfundo said.

‘You never know, you can never fully know what lies in a man’s heart,’ I said.

This was followed by silence.

I was seeing a megalomaniac in Nhlakanipho. His view of the world revolved around his ego. When his ego was bruised, he gossiped about people. My and Tongai’s ambitions of being writers, Nhlakanipho undermined, saw them as a means of giving up, in that we had lost all hope of attaining real success.

I refilled my glass with champagne. I smoked non-stop when drinking. It was not even for the pleasure anymore, but rather just to feel a cigarette in my mouth.

‘How long are you gonna work at a call center?’ Mfundo lashed out at Mpumelelo.

Mpumelelo and Mfundo had a brutal way of dealing with each other. Sometimes I could not tell whether they were joking or being for real.

‘Those are jobs for whores,’ Mfundo said and answered an imaginary phone.

‘I want to go into movies,’ Mpumelelo said after some thought.

Mfundo broke into a scornful laugh. I felt pity for Mpumelelo.

‘You gonna finish the calendar now now. Clock thirty one years,’ Mfundo said. ‘You must contact that father of yours in Joburg, ask him for something,’ he advised.

Mpumelelo's father was a wealthy businessman. He had been empowered by BEE. For some years he came out in the black book of South Africa's most influential people. Mpumelelo had a fall out with his father when he was still in varsity, staying at his father's place. Mpumelelo hated his father's love for young women. 'He sleeps with women yours and Nhlakanipho's ages,' Mpumelelo would tell us.

'I don't need him,' Mpumelelo said. 'I just need my brother, Nhlakanipho, and my mother. In fact, I'm even closer to you, than my father,' Mpumelelo said pointing at Mfundo.

'You cannot rely on me. I'm a hustler, a roller, I need money. You are a liability to me. I'm spending money when I'm with you,' Mfundo shouted.

'I'm a liability to you?' Mpumelelo said sounding surprised.

There was slight remorse in Mfundo's face.

'My father is the richest man in Langa. Everyone knows him,' Mfundo said.

'He has never given me anything. He only took notice when people started speaking about me struggling. In that period, I only had two pairs of trousers. He called me again when they heard that I'm part of a syndicate.'

Mfundo pushed the volume up and danced. He started the night he stabbed his girlfriend like this, jollyng. Mfundo then drank from the bottle draining off the remaining champagne, standing next to a white cupboard in the kitchen.

'I'm rich maan... Mpumelelo,' Mfundo said.

We were all gathered in the kitchen except for the ladies who were chatting in the lounge.

'So what, what do you want me to do?' Mpumelelo said.

'I'm rich, maan.' Mfundo sang a song about buying the block of flats.

*

The young prostitute's nose was red. They had been up all night with Mfundo. The prostitute passed out in the couch.

'Hey, hey, hey!' Mfundo shouted, dragging the young prostitute by the arm. He took her to his bedroom.

After some murmurings outside the flat, Nthabiseng left Mpumelelo and went home. Mpumelelo came back to us from upstairs. Mpumelelo was now kak drunk. He wanted to take a plate from Mfundo's kitchen to his flat.

'Leave that plate,' Mfundo warned.

'I'm taking it,' Mpumelelo argued.

'What's wrong with you? You are not like this when your chick isn't around.' Mfundo said.

Mpumelelo walked from the kitchen with the plate. In the flash of a light Mfundo took out his gun and pointed it at Mpumelelo. 'You are not gonna come here and fucking disrespect me,' Mfundo said with his eyes wild. Nhlakanipho came in between them, pleaded with Mfundo to put down the gun. Mpumelelo looked at Mfundo with careless eyes. Seeing Mfundo's dangerous look, I pushed Mpumelelo out the flat.

*

'I was only scaring him. I was not gonna do anything,' Mfundo said, when the three of us were seated.

'He's frustrated by this bitch of his. That's why he's acting up. She was all over me. I know bitches like that. Those are the sort of bitches we just fuck and slap, tell them to fuck off. Mangaliso probably has also fucked her. That's why Mpumi keeps saying Mangaliso is just a laaitie,' Mfundo reasoned.

I looked the other way when Mfundo mentioned my indiscretion.

'Mpumelelo has a jealous heart. He does not like seeing my riches. He does not realise, I worked hard to have all these things at such a young age,' Mfundo said.

I did not see a difference between Mpumelelo and Nhlakanipho. They were both possessed by envy, were quick to shoot down people who were doing well.

'Mpumelelo is one of those that used western medicines at initiation school. I know these things. I am a sangoma. There have been more times than I can count where I have dreamt of something and it happened in the exact way I dreamt of it,' Mfundo said.

Though Mpumelelo had a degree in psychology, Mfundo was more perceptive.

Mfundo asked us to leave into the night. 'You boys must go home now. Don't compare yourselves to me. I don't have to wake up and report to a job,' he said.

He walked us out his flat. 'You, Manga, you must stop fucking other niggers' women,' Mfundo said, leaning against the front door. We all laughed at this.

*

I don't know what it was that was drawing me to Mfundo's lifestyle. I was blindly gravitating towards his way of living. When I got paid next, I found myself in the PicknPay bottle store in Newlands shopping for champagne. Mfundo had accused me of running away from brothers when I had money. Mfundo's champagne was way out of my reach. I settled for a bottle of Jack Daniels and some cheaper champagne and drew eight hundred Rands from my account for cocaine. All this dented my bank balance.

I was in a carefree mood walking to Mfundo's place pleased by the irony of a brother like me carrying all this expensive alcohol. I had never been one for prestigious drinks. When others were drinking Amstel, I'd have a Black Label quart because that sort of shit did not matter to me.

Mfundo was with Mpumelelo in his flat. They both cracked up when they saw what I had in the plastic bag. Mfundo had a white apron around his waist. He took the champagne to the deep freezer. He crackled steaming pots on the stove. Mfundo did things fast: he spoke fast, he walked fast.

'There should always be something green in a meal,' Mfundo said chopping green pepper in the kitchen.

He must have stabbed his girlfriend with a knife like the one he's using. I imagined him chasing her around the flat.

Mfundo served us a fine meal of spicy pork sausages and mashed potatoes. Nhlakanipho and Zola, an accomplice of Mfundo's, had arrived on time for the food. Zola looked the part of a gangster, wearing a black leather jacket and he drove a BMW Z4.

'Cocaine kills my appetite. It's better I eat first,' Mfundo said.

Nhlakanipho finished first and went for a second filling, emptying the pots. I gave Mfundo money to buy us cocaine. He called the dealer. Mfundo often said that he bought from his own supply. I had never gotten coke on my own before. I didn't even have the numbers of any dealers. On times when Nhlakanipho and I wanted some cocaine on our own, Mfundo refused to give us the dealer's numbers. Mfundo often warned us about getting hooked on the drug.

Cocaine has never been sweeter than the stuff we had that night. My lips became rubbery. I spoke without any inhibitions even beating on the carpet at times. I was running into a field of freedom, my lungs heaving in the open space. I saw everyone as a shadow bearing no threat.

Zola had messages to relay to Mfundo. They laughed about worrisome matters, some involving murder. Piecing this talk together I was certain that it was about the war Mfundo had previously told us of. From Zola it emerged that Mfundo was a wanted man. Zola joked that Mfundo should change the number plates on his car and that when they go to Langa he should wear a balaclava.

'They'll never have me,' Mfundo asserted. 'Since they missed me in Khayelitsha, they can forget on ever getting me.'

'Hayi suka, people say you were so scared your gun was not even cocked,' Zola teased.

'That was a blessing. I could have had four or five down and ended up with those long cases that drag for three years.'

Zola did not take cocaine. He was far more menacing than Mfundo. He barely said anything to us.

'This thing can be resolved in one weekend...' Mfundo said.

'These laaities don't realise that there are big dogs that can just say, "Se gat," and end this whole thing,' Mfundo threw his right hand in the air after saying this. 'I don't want to lie, I am in hiding here. I have a lot more to lose than these laaities. How can I run around shooting it out with people who don't even lead the same lifestyle, they are not even on the same level mentally. I tell you what, those kids are going to end up killing each other,' Mfundo said.

Mfundo and Zola reminisced about their string of affairs with women. On some occasions they had all slept with the same woman. According to Mfundo his girlfriend still visited him. But her family did not want her to go to him, so she only came during day time. She had not fully recovered from the stabbing and had chest complications. Mfundo took out a bottle of Verve champagne from the kitchen cupboard. It seemed his money problems were over. I found it remarkable that he was able to maintain a steady flow of income, be able to pay his rent through illegal activities.

‘That’s them,’ Zola said after answering his phone.

Mfundo pulled out his gun from beneath the sofa cushions.

‘Let me put something on,’ said Mfundo. He went to his bedroom, came back carrying a red panama, and then they walked out the flat. They drove off in Zola’s car.

I passed out on the sofa for perhaps an hour or so. I looked up. Mfundo was pointing his gun at me. Nhlakanipho was still out on the sofa next to me, Zola was standing beside Mfundo.

‘Don’t scare us Mfundo,’ I said, even though I was not frightened.

‘No, no, no, there are no bullets,’ Mfundo said cocking the gun twice to show that there was indeed no ammunition in the firearm. He took out the magazine and waved it in my face. Mfundo then threw the gun at me. I caught it out of instinct.

‘Put it under the sofa,’ Mfundo commanded me.

‘You must know where it stays. Maybe someday you’ll have to use it.’

I did as Mfundo had said.

‘Where were you guys?’ I asked, still dazed with sleep.

‘Don’t you know I’m also an assassin,’ Mfundo said smiling. ‘But eish I missed. I have to get another supply of bullets.’

*

Drunkness makes me horny. I checked out a few of the spots in Claremont on my own. I preferred easier girls who just grind on you. I did not stand a chance of getting something from those clean girls. Some of the prostitutes in Kenilworth were attractive. I passed a

younger one with full thighs on my way to my apartment. I thought of trying something with her but decided against it. At the rate that I was aroused I'd have to wank before going to bed. Sitting in the pavement in front of our block of flats was a lady wearing a bandana and a pink jacket.

'Don't you wanna come inside with me?' I asked her.

She looked up, 'You gonna have to pay,' she said in a coloured accent.

'How much?'

'One hundred and fifty.'

'For the whole night?'

'I can stay for the whole night. But can you buy me KFC in the morning?'

'Ok, I'll get you KFC.'

I went to the Caltex garage to draw the money and also to get some condoms. She started undressing when we entered my bedroom. To get the first round out of the way I tried fucking her between the breasts. It was awkward, my knees on her rotund belly, trying to get between her breasts.

'You know what, just fuck me,' she said, getting tired of the breast job.

'But the first round is short,' I said.

'It doesn't matter.'

She swallowed me in between her thighs. Strangely, she was wet. She lay back as I fucked her. She was big. My waist was moving but I couldn't feel anything. She was also too quiet for my liking.

'Come on act like you enjoying,' I urged her.

She moaned softly and mechanically and stopped when I ejaculated.

'Yoo, I'm so tired,' she said going to my wardrobe.

I only had one pillow. She took a jacket of mine from the wardrobe, laid it on the bed. That was enterprising of her. She lay with her bandana on the jacket.

*

I still wanted to squeeze off some semen in the morning.

'You gonna have to make it fast,' the lady said.

I had never had a blow job before. I sent my erect penis to her mouth.

'No, no, put on a condom,' she said.

I rolled down a condom. Tongai walked in the room with her sucking me on the condom. I felt Tongai's eyes from behind.

'Oh sorry, I didn't know you had company,' Tongai said.

There's no way Tongai would not have known that I was with someone. Surely he would have heard our voices. It was a terrible blow job. I didn't feel anything. I had to masturbate for satisfaction. I gave the lady the money. It was my first time paying for sex.

'Don't you wanna get KFC?' I asked.

'No, I must go now.'

*

We felt like the Obz vibe on Saturday evening. I boarded a taxi to lower main Observatory with Nhlakanipho and Tongai. We bought three quarts at Café Ganesh, took them upstairs to the balcony. We liked sitting there as there often were people smoking weed who'd share with us. Tongai did not smoke spliff as it messed with his mind. Our lives had been about discontent. Holding cigarettes with our brownish yellow fingers we bemoaned our condition. Tongai was most vocal about our looming failure. He had pessimistic humour, made fun of the men in their middle ages who frequented Ganesh, they had nothing and we were in danger of ending up like them, Tongai thought. Tongai washed off our dreams of being writers.

'It's like Coetzee says: many will be called, though few will be chosen. For every successful poet, there are millions of failed poets,' Tongai said.

'I think what we fail to realise is that it is impossible to make a living as a poet. We need to get over these dreams of being celebrated. This is a working man's world. People progress at work, get promotions,' Tongai went on.

Nhlakanipho broke into a wholesome laugh, 'I agree,' he said.

'I think we'll never know unless we try. Being a writer, you don't need to carry it on your neck, letting it determine you socially,' I said.

I spotted a lady I knew downstairs. She often sang and played guitar at open mic nights around Observatory.

'Do you know where we can get coke?' I asked her.

Her eyes vibrated with excitement.

'I can ask someone,' she said.

She called a dealer. The cocaine went at a cheaper price of three hundred Rands compared to what we were used to with Mfundo. I whispered to Nhlakanipho and we went out to withdraw cash. I closed my eyes and took out the money. Nhlakanipho hadn't been paid as yet. I also took the dealer's numbers from my guitar playing friend. She came upstairs where we were sitting and gave me the cocaine through a handshake. I felt a round piece of paper in the palm of my hand. Nhlakanipho ran the cocaine through a note like Mfundo did in the toilets at Ganesh. He tested and tasted some of the white powder in his mouth. It was neither as much nor as hard hitting as Mfundo's cocaine. We kept on going to the privy without Tongai knowing. As the night grew old we hit some of the clubs in Observatory. These were dingy spots owned by Nigerians. The ladies here were more forthcoming. The time I stayed at Obz I had once taken a lady from one of these spots to my place. Even here there was standard: buying the ladies drinks followed by raunchy dancing. The music thumped with girls dancing with their reflection in the mirror. We walked to the Observatory station early in the morning when the clubs had closed. At this hour there were no security guards in the station. We could board a train without a ticket. The cold sat on the skin. We tried shaking off the cold by smoking.

*

I woke up sweaty the next day, my chest and back wet. The sun outside the window was sad. I had violated my spirit. It was in tatters. This is not how I wanted to grow old. In an ocean of black shells my feet were septic, becoming volcanic. This is not how I wanted to grow old. The prostitute, she had bent me inside out. This is not me. This black wind haunted me.

‘I cannot go on like this,’ I said to Tongai. ‘I spent just about all my salary on drugs and alcohol.’

‘The sad thing is that these things will stop even being funny and just become sad,’ Tongai said. ‘I think it’s a lack of self esteem. We are scared of being with decent people. Even these places we drink in, there aren’t any progressive people.’

I listened to Tongai. Perhaps it was time to open to his reasoning.

‘This is not how I wanted to grow old. You know when I started these things, smoking and drinking, I didn’t think I’d take them to my old age.’

Tongai said he had been in consultation with a psychologist in his third year at varsity. The psychologist said Tongai was not one to drink in moderation. I also had not been able to limit my drinking. We made a pact to stop drinking and smoking that afternoon.

‘You know the happiest time for me was when I was doing form five in the old country,’ Tongai said. ‘I played first team rugby, was a prefect. I did not drink for those eight months.’

Tongai had been binge drinking since he was fourteen years old. His mother drank and often brought men into their house.

‘The lady, where did you meet her?’ Tongai asked.

‘I met her in Claremont... asked her to come to my place.’

‘You mean you just met a lady and asked her to come home with you?’ Tongai said disdainfully.

‘She’s actually a prostitute...I paid to sleep with her.’

‘I thought as much. I took a good look at her.’

To survive until the next pay day we each contributed a thousand Rands for groceries. I bought a monthly train ticket for transportation.

*

My life is a railway line my days drag along, and I have become the rusty stones on the side of the rail. I am tied to my job. The other workers know that there is not much for me to do. While they are busy the whole day I listen to music. I have heard them mock my being a graduate. I carry yesterday's supper to work. I do not have money to buy myself lunch.

It is proving not to be difficult to stop smoking. I was already only smoking after work. I have never liked people to see me smoking. Even at university I had my cigarettes in isolation. Tongai predicted that we could be better minded without money. 'It does not cost much to have coffee in a cafe, you know, do the things that normal people do,' Tongai said.

*

I heard Tongai's voice chanting in my sleep: 'You will not go anywhere.' I tried opening the door in my room but could not move it. I staggered like a drunken man. I pushed on the window. The glass shattered. The pointed remnant of the window pricking me on my mouth roused me. I had just broken the window. I almost fell off. I was left with a cut beneath my left arm.

'What's going on here?' I heard a lady say.

It was the early morning. The lady was standing below my window. Outside the darkness was giving way to the first minutes of light. A gentle chill was blowing

'I had a bad dream,' I said.

'No one does that from a bad dream. Those windows are shatter proof. They are not supposed to break,' the lady with dyed black hair said. She was a member of the body corporate in our block of flats.

'You gonna have to clean it up,' she said.

I hurried to Tongai's room. I switched on the lights. Tongai was lying in bed on his back. I could tell that he was pretending to be asleep. There was fear in the way Tongai was breathing. I told him that I had just broken the window.

'You suffer from night terrors,' Tongai diagnosed me. 'You can go on the internet and research on night terrors. One girl I stayed with also had them,' Tongai said.

I took out a black refuse bag from a cupboard in the kitchen. I went around the parking lot picking up pieces of glass. I cleared the ones that I could see. But with glass you are never certain you have cleaned everything.

'It is remarkable that you would fight like that,' Tongai said as we were getting ready to go to the train station. 'I have never imagined you as the violent type.'

*

From then onwards I did not any touch alcohol and ceased to smoke. I survived that trying month. Tongai only lasted a couple of weeks sober. He came in home drunk, one Saturday morning. They continued drinking every weekend with Nhlakanipho.

My head was becoming clearer now that I was sober. I began writing these small recollections. Taking a scrap of my world, I was wondering what success really was. My world was humming a tune of what success was, saying: 'Get a good paying job.' The writing became the only thing that made sense to me. It gave me great satisfaction.

*

So this is what Mfundo has been involved in. I ran into an open letter by a resident of Gugulethu on the internet, decrying gang activities in the township.

Concerned community member of Gugulethu

I write this article with a broken heart, because of gangsters here in Gugulethu and Langa. In our community there are two groups that are fighting called Mashimane and Abafana be card (Fraud) ne ntash (cocaine) and Langa boys.

The sad part in this war they involved innocent people because, if they see you greeting or talking to one of the other group they suspect that you are supplying ngemali or guns the other side.

These guys are old enough to know what is right or wrong, driving nice and flashy cars, and some of them have kids of their own and familys and living nice life.

From what I heard this fight started in Langa e hlathini (bush) here a teacher in the initiation school (ikhankatha) was shot and killed by crossfire between Zondi from Abafana be card and Langa boys (Zondi start shot). The following week on Tuesday again Zondi start shoting at Ntsimbi's tarven (Tigers) and same week on Thursday they shot at Moeshesh (Langa boys revenge) where they shot at 5 people and 2 died Masakhane and Zondi. After a week Lucky of NY 1 Gugulethu was assassinated on the robots near Shoprite in Lansdowne road going to

Khayelitsha. While we are still shock, Abafana be card go NY 50 Gugulethu and they shot at 2 people who were sitting in a car, Paprika and Dika of crossroads but they survived. While we were still shock assassinator Mamte from Langa in NY 21 by people who were wearing balaclavas, but these people are known.

These guys some of them do not stay here in Gugulethu, and they rent flats in places like Goodwood, Thornton, Parow, Bellville, Athlone, Ryland's, Montana and Paarl. They just come to Gugulethu to shoot and kill people driving hired cars and other people's cars not their cars. They are known by people, not that people don't know them it just people are scared and don't know what to do when they see them because some of them are cops friend and they use cops to this fight in a wrong way.

Tongai came to my room in the early morning. He showed me a message from Nhlakanipho. They were looking for a place to sleep as Mfundo was threatening to kill them. I told Tongai it was fine for them to come over.

We waited in the lounge. Tongai went downstairs to open for Nhlakanipho and Mpumelelo. Mfundo's girlfriend was also with them. Mpumelelo was wearing his grey coat. They filled the couches in the lounge... *I did not know Mfundo's girlfriend, Nokuzola, was this beautiful.* She was also classy, spoke well, and told us what had happened. Mfundo had taken everyone out to Cubana. The guys went to the toilet to snort cocaine. Mpumelelo, worried that Nokuzola was on her own, left the guys and returned to the table. When Mfundo came out, he found Nokuzola and Mpumelelo laughing.

'No one laughs with my girlfriend,' Mfundo said.

They thought he was playing.

Mfundo's face hardened, he grabbed a glass from the table and smashed Mpumelelo behind the head.

'Why did you do that?' Mpumelelo cried out.

'It's not the first time you are disrespecting me,' Mfundo said.

Nokuzola ran out with Nhlakanipho and Mpumelelo. Mpumelelo was given three stitches at hospital.

Since then Mfundo has been threatening over the phone to take them out. I wondered to myself why Mpumelelo did not ask Nthabiseng for a place to sleep.

I got weed from my room. Mpumelelo looked relieved when I gave him the grass. He rolled with telephone book paper as I did not have any rizzla.

Nokuzola shook her head when I offered to pass her the joint.

‘So Mfundo was in the wrong, but we have to be the ones that run because he is a gangster,’ I made sense of things.

‘I don’t know where you guys get this idea that Mfundo is a hardcore gangster. Mfundo is not a gangster. If he was a real gangster why is he running from the boys from Gugulethu?’

Nokuzola said.

Strangely, I did not see any evidence of a scar on Mpumelelo’s head. I stole glances of Mpumelelo. His eyes were red.

‘Mfundo and his friends slept with those boys’ girlfriends. That’s how this whole thing started,’ Nokuzola informed us. ‘Those boys are seventeen and eighteen years old. They do not wear fancy pointed shoes like Mfundo. They wear Chuck Taylors and shoot like idiots. Mfundo was almost killed in Khayelitsha, a bullet grazed his chest,’ she said.

Nokuzola’s lower lip was longer than her upper lip. She was wearing a black beanie. There was something alluring about her. I wished I could hold her.

‘I find myself asking whatever happened to normal things,’ Tongai burst out.

‘Whatever happened to going to movies? What sort of life are we leading, where we have to be running from the likes of Mfundo? Why are we even associating with such people?’

We laughed at Tongai. He got like that sometimes, bringing out things his grandmother told him.

‘Mfundo only got himself a gun, now that this thing started. The other one, Zola, he does not even carry a knife. He’s a tender’s boy. In East London, Zola does not want to be seen with Mfundo, he does not want his business partners seeing him with people who are into credit card scams. It’s that cocaine that makes Mfundo act like some fierce criminal. When he’s had that thing, he starts with all this nonsense of being a gangster. Mfundo is actually sweet, but he wants people to think he’s some hairy monster,’ Nokuzola said.

Nokuzola’s right palm was on her forehead. Her fingers were trembling.

'He's hurting the people that care for him. And doing nothing to those kids that want to kill him,' Nokuzola reflected.

There was trouble in Mfundo's home. Mfundo's father beat up the mother and Mfundo wanted vengeance on his father. Nokuzola had to mediate. She did not know why she came back to Mfundo after the stabbing. Mfundo had a pending case for attempted murder. There was nothing that Nokuzola could do to have the charges dropped; the case was in the state's hands.

We did not sleep that night. We stayed up, chatting. When morning came: Nhlakanipho, Mpumelelo and Nokuzola left the house.

*

I woke up to a myriad of 'please call me's,' from Tongai one Saturday morning. *He must be distress.* I quickly called Tongai. He said he was locked in at Tagorez in Observatory. He had passed out in the toilets. I put on my jacket and went to catch a taxi in the main road. I got off in front of the PicknPay in Observatory. I had to phone the owner of Tagorez. I asked the manager at Revolution Records for the owner of Tagorez's numbers. By the time I got to Tagorez I had already called the owner.

'The owner is on his way,' I said to Tongai, as I stood outside the front door.

A steel burglar door and a big padlock guarded Tagorez. It took no more than fifteen minutes for the owner to arrive. We had woken him from his sleep and he had not combed his hair. He seemed hung-over.

I broke into laughter when I saw Tongai sitting inside. He had a beer in his hand and was going through some records in the rack. Tongai had helped himself to the alcohol at the bar.

Tongai walked out with the beer. I feared the owner would scold him. But he did not say anything.

'Oh, this is your friend... the one who was locked in Tagorez,' the manager from Revolution Records said as we were passing the store.

Tongai was keen on breakfast so we went in at Ponchos and ordered bacon and eggs. Observatory was quiet. From the opposite side there were a few people trickling in at the

second hand book store. Tongai made fun of his incident at Tagorez saying he was about to compose a jazz number before we walked in.

'Let's go to Banana Jam... Just for one drink,' Tongai suggested.

We had cleaned the plates and were sitting at the table relaxing. For a while we had been arguing about the merits of writing in one's indigenous tongue. Tongai said everything depended on money and that there had never been a Xhosa classic before. I said art comes from a different paradigm and that it becomes the property of a community irrespective of commerce.

Tongai surprisingly had a lot of money to spend. Within a short space of time at Banana Jam he had knocked down three draughts. He told me that he was a disappointment to his grandmother. He said he did not speak to his grandmother, when she calls them he refuses to talk to her. The grandmother had warned Tongai not to be anything like his father. Tongai said his father was a terrible man.

'But you are not violent, you are calm aside from the fact that you drink a lot and violate yourself,' I said.

'My father was also like that. He had a calm side but was also very violent... I was sitting at my mom's flat with my feet on the table trying to write in my notebook and mom said: "You are sitting judging the world...just like your father". And since then I haven't been able to write,' Tongai said.

Tongai's father also had magical abilities. While his mother had a restraining order against him, he would show up in the elevator when there was no one around and say: 'Did you think you could escape from me?'

I told Tongai of my relationship with my father, and that the last time I was with him he wanted us to go for a paternity test. I had never told any of my friends about this. The last person I spoke to about my father was some guy I met at a bar. He just came in and sat next to me. This guy told me that he had reformed from crime and was now trying to make things right with his daughter.

'I think each person has their journey and that's it...' I said. 'It becomes yours and no one else's. This world has this way of measuring people...but time also lapses and there's nothing

you can do about it...I think the biggest lesson to be learnt is that of being a person...And that exists outside all these schools,'

Kgotso and Michelle walked in at Banana Jam holding hands. Kgotso was wearing a Kangol cap. He looked like a Sophiatown jazz cat. Kgotso suggested we join them on their table. Michelle used to go out with Tongai before moving on to Kgotso. Tongai never did consummate their relationship. In one weekend Tongai spent with Michelle, he was not able to get it up. Kgotso was a burgeoning jazz musician. We witnessed him scoop an award at a Standard Bank youth music festival for a trumpet solo. They had all been drinking together the previous night at Tagorez. Kgotso laughed heartily as Tongai told them that he spent the night at Tagorez.

'Tongai, once you start you cannot stop, hey,' Kgotso observed.

Since we came in at Banana Jam Tongai had been drinking without ceasing. I had had a cup of coffee.

'I heard Ntaba was in town,' Kgotso said.

Tongai nodded.

'How do you guys do it? Ntaba is a staunch supporter of Zanu PF. His father is even a minister in the government,' Kgotso asked.

Tongai put his hands together, smiled: 'We agreed to disagree. We don't talk about politics...serious,' Tongai said.

'That's very strange...That's like me chilling having drinks with a member of IFP,' I said surprised.

Kgotso laughed at my statement. Ntaba had spent a week in our flat during the soccer world cup. He had come down to Cape Town from Johannesburg for one of the semi-final games. Tongai revered Ntaba. He went out of his way to make Ntaba comfortable.

I didn't know that Ntaba's father was a minister in Mugabe's government. Nhlakanipho had once asked Tongai whether Ntaba really believed that the Zimbabwean elections were not rigged. Ntaba had been arguing that all was well with democracy in Zimbabwe.

Michelle had a book of poetry on the table. I picked up the copy.

'It's written by some writer who committed suicide,' she said.

I flipped the pages, scheming through the titles.

'I once heard that the worst way of dying is drowning...because you go through all the emotions thinking you are going to make it only to die,' Tongai said.

Michelle and Kgotso were living together at Observatory. They invited us to their place for Kgotso's birthday party, in a couple of weeks' time.

*

I had served my last month at the office. I decided to resign when my manager moved me from my section without consulting with me. The frustration of not having any work to do had climbed up my ears. And I was drowning. My contract was also due to expire at end of the year in any event.

I would wake up and write each morning as Tongai left for work. I came alive the more I wrote. I found beauty in my writing. It seemed to be coming from another place, I did not know existed.

Tongai asked me to vacate the flat for one evening as he had a meeting with a life coach. I felt water rising up the walls of the flat. A part of me suspected that Tongai was going to invite a faith healer. I decided to go for a jog on the time that Tongai wanted me out the apartment. On my way out, I saw a teary eyed dreadlocked woman walking barefoot in the corridor. I knew that she was Tongai's visitor. She seemed lost. I pointed her to our apartment.

Tongai was still with the woman on my return from my jog. They were both barefoot sitting in the table in the lounge. I walked up to the woman and shook her hand. Never had I been that afraid from just looking at a woman. 'Thank you for being such a good sport,' Tongai said to me after the woman had left.

*

One morning I saw a vision of a witch doctor walking around a plain. She was in tears. She seemed to be crying for children. It all flooded on me. I realised that humanity is cursed. The world was surrounded by death. I cried as I thought of all these things. Out of nowhere God became the only permanent thing in life. Everything else was passing.

I started believing in God that day. I spent the day overwhelmed by his enormity. It all seemed to be idolatry: the magazines, newspapers and internet blogs. Even the admiration of authors was a form of idolatry.

*

Since meeting Moses at the open mic in Observatory I had visited him in his shack in Gugulethu. Moses complained about the upcoming soccer world cup saying it would only benefit FIFA. Moses called me inviting me to a hip hop gig in Khayelitsha. I saw this as an opportunity to feel Khayelitsha as I wanted to write about the anti-eviction campaigns that took place in the township. Kwanele had taken part in the protests. What had happened was that people who could not pay rent were being evicted from their homes in Mandela Park and moved to dog kennels in Site C. Huge chunks of land in Mandela Park are still owned by the World Bank. This was part of the package that came with the negotiations with the apartheid government. Kwanele, alongside fellow protesters, set light to government cars. The papers reported that this was thuggery posing as revolution.

I do not seem to find Moses's shack. Moses says over the phone I took the wrong taxi and that I should catch *iphela* to the Heideveld station. The sun is standing atop Gugulethu. I am getting lost between the winding roads. A girl of about ten years old counts coins and gives me my change in a shelter where she sells airtime. Gugulethu is overwhelming me today. Sure I have seen her stretch marks and wobbly thighs. I have even held her hand in public. I often thought she danced too much when she ought to be mourning. Who knows? Maybe Gugulethu needs to dance. And when the time is right, God will shut the music.

The young girl's name is Sanele. It means we are enough. Gugulethu will have to choose her messengers, not me. I cannot write for her. I know too little about her.

Moses stands in front of the Heideveld station smoking a cigarette. He wears a friendly smile and beckons to me on my way out of *iphela*. I shake my head when Moses tries to pass me the cigarette.

Inside the station we run to an early evening train full of people. There are no seats available so we stand in the midst of the many people in the carriage. A preacher works up a sweat in the face of the train masses. I laugh at him and also listen keenly. This too is a message. At some point I used to be impatient with preachers in trains. They have seen their truth.

The gig is in Litha Park. Moses leads the way as we walk on the tarred road. The streets are brightly lit.

'You have been quiet, for a long time,' Moses says.

'I needed to wash myself aclean,' I reply.

'Oh, you are a writer...that's what you are...a writer,' Moses says.

The event is held in a sports ground with a pavilion. It is a free show. As we enter, some of the organisers ask for our details for future gigs and also hand us a newsletter. There are faces I'm familiar with in the stands. The spirit of the occasion is self-determination. Speakers call for hip hop to set its own agenda outside of corporations. Some of them speak in American accents.

One emcee takes me with him as he raps. He speaks in his own language. He says his father used to come from work and go straight to the sheebien. He says he also could have been a gangster and blamed everything on poverty. May God bless this phenomenal artist, open doors for him. The world needs such honesty.

It ends in violence. We hear reports of fighting outside the venue. Drunkards hijack the microphone, the host protests.

*

From the first clatter of dishes in the morning I was up writing. My story was taking a surprising turn I did not even see coming. Having written five chapters it was high time I shared it with someone.

'Come let me show you some of my work...I have been keeping it to myself for too long,' I said to Tongai in his room.

'Aw, the poetry of Mangaliso Zolo,' Tongai scorned me.

Tongai then quickly wore an apologetic mask.

I started regretting the gesture. I went to the kitchen, left Tongai reading at my computer.

'Blaka blaka...Manga,' I heard Tongai yell from my bedroom.

'I like the voice,' Tongai said.

'On that same token, can you lend me ten rands...I want to catch a taxi to mom's place,' Tongai said when I had returned to the room.

I was a little put off though I still pulled out a ten rand note from my wallet.

'And can you borrow me a bag?' Tongai asked.

I gave him a bag of mine.

'No, this one is too small,' he said.

I pulled down a bigger bag from the top of my wardrobe.

'Is this one fine?' I asked.

Tongai nodded.

'What are you going to do with the bag?' I asked.

'Mom's,' is all Tongai said.

It was the Saturday of Kgotso's birthday. Tongai came back from his mother's place later in the afternoon. He came in through the door carrying a blue plastic bag.

'I bought some chicken,' Tongai said.

'No, thanks I'm fine,'

I had just eaten an avocado. *Creativity is about life, the body has to be vital. The good ones create children. While the corrupted ones use sex for perversion. That's what the world does: pervert the good things of God. The oil from the chicken will suffocate the life in me.*

'Why don't you want my chicken?' Tongai asked looking worried.

It is also essential I humble myself to God. The chicken is also from God. I cannot deny myself the good things of God.

'No, it's fine,' I said.

I got a knife and cut two pieces for myself.

'Are you not gonna eat?' I asked when I was done with the food.

'No, no...I'm fine...I'm not hungry,' Tongai said.

I wrote two chapters at supersonic speed. My head became a field with grassy ideas. There was something into everything. Even the security measures in crime scenes served as a marketing ploy.

*

'You know I'm starting to agree with you about living in the now,' Tongai said. 'This thing of planning ahead...we might as well go to Kgotso's party carrying a coffin.'

I laughed heartily at what Tongai had to say. We were walking at the Pick n Pay in Claremont getting some snacks.

I saw some guys I used to stay with at res as we were walking in Observatory on our way to the party. I was saddened seeing my old friends. They were so far from me. Life had moved us apart. One guy had even grown a beer belly. I chatted with them in Sesotho.

'Hey... you also know language,' Tongai sighed as we were walking to Kgotso's place.

Observatory is about images. My head was becoming light at the many appearances. The sky danced. The clouds were narrow. Me...I was water. I could not be contained. On a silent bend, I sat on my own.

'Are you fine...Manga?' Kgotso asked.

'Sometimes I disappear into my head,' I said.

'Sometimes it can be one voice,' Tongai said, peeking from the braai stand.

Tongai was shaking against the door. He had told everyone that he was not going to drink. I could tell that he was craving a drink.

'I'm celebrating...Caroline has agreed to go on a date with me,' Tongai said later, taking gulps from a quart of beer.

Caroline was also Canadian, she was studying at UCT. I knew Tongai had a thing for white women. Of all the white girls he had approached, only Michelle had ever gone out with him. A famous guitarist was billed to perform at Tagorez. From Kgotso's place Tagorez was just around the corner. We left the party as people were starting to trickle off to Tagorez. Tongai

was elusive at Tagorez. He left and did not say where he was going. I sat on my own. One gentleman dressed all in black walked in. I recognised him; I had seen him playing in town before. He wore many earrings, some even in his nose. His ears were pointed up like an Elf, and his mouth was red from what looked like lipstick. *That's the thing with the arts, it becomes Satan's field.*

The star of the night played his guitar with lust. He shimmered in a white blazer. His vision shaking, he looked otherworldly. I left the place with my throat drying. I stopped a cab in lower main Observatory. The cab driver was straight with calmness, his back pushing against the seat.

'Do you go to church?' I asked while we were driving.

The cab driver nodded. 'I play guitar in our worship team,' he said.

'I've just come from a show...some guy was playing guitar, that's such a lustful instrument,' I said.

The cab driver had a sleeveless jersey on. He was at ease. I just somehow knew that he went to church. He was not even fussy about how much I should pay him. He was fine with the amount I suggested.

'So where do you go to church?' I asked.

'The Bible Tabernacle,' he said.

'Man...I also want to go to church...I want to believe in God...I just need that gift of faith. How do I get to your church?'

'At the Mowbray taxi rank there are buses written: The Bible Tabernacle. If you get there at seven in the morning, you can catch one of them.'

'I hope to see you tomorrow. I believe God has a message for you,' the cab driver said before dropping me off.

*

The formal clothes I had avoided since I stopped working, I put back on in the morning. I walked out our block of flats carrying my bible. It was an uncertain morning, from the taxi, the streets were tiring. At the Mowbray taxi rank I looked out for the buses the cab driver had

mentioned. At eight I had not seen any of them. In front of the ticket boxes in the taxi rank two witches were cursing. I asked them about these buses.

‘Never...here, there are no buses,’ one of them screeched.

The cab driver’s name was Paul. Perhaps the message was in the bible. I could not find the book of Paul in my bible. *It could be that I bought a faulty bible.* One brother who walked passed me was also carrying a bible. I trotted up to him.

‘Do you know where I can find the book of Paul?’

‘There is no book of Paul, Paul only wrote letters.’

‘Where do you go to church?’

‘My church... it’s in Parow,’

‘Do you mind if I come with you?’

‘No problem.’

His name was Elio. He was from Mozambique. Before converting to Christianity he had been a Muslim for ten years. He also had had a spell with drugs and alcohol.

‘Oh, you can also sing,’ Elio said as we were waiting for the train at the Mowbray station, I had been humming. ‘Our pastor teaches people the piano.’

The people who sell train tickets were not on duty so we could not buy tickets. Along the railway route we passed graveyards. I thought we were going to the land of the dead only for us to surface again and pass hills. Elio led the way out of the Parow train station. He spoke in Portuguese to some brothers who were also on their way to church. *We can never fully comprehend God. His wonders can transpire in a foreign language. He will keep his secrets in the many languages.*

Since I was a first time visitor I was asked to stand in the church. The pastor was dressed in white, and he played the piano. He had a deep voice. I feared him. He seemed to be close to God. When people are that close to God it becomes a calamity once they fall. The devil was also close to God. *There is something devilish about the pastor. But his goodness I see in that he has children.*

A young preacher got up on the podium. Like me, he seemed uncertain of himself. He preached about the story of Jonas. His message being that God's plan is always greater than ours. There was a translator standing next to him. 'You should stop listening to your own music and listen to the music of the creator,' he said.

I felt the sermon in my inner core. Elio called the pastor after the service. They spoke in Portuguese. The pastor smiled at me and asked me to accompany him to his office. I looked up the church to the windows at the top. This is the end. I won't be able to come out of here. The pastor sat on a chair in the office and asked me my name. He is going to read from the book of life. I stammered and told him my name.

I walked out the office breathing heavily. Elio was standing outside the door.

'What's wrong?' the pastor asked, coming out after me.

'Come on, go inside,' Elio said.

Now crying, I sat down again in the office.

'You know I fear you... You seem to be so close to God,' I said.

We kneeled down and prayed. I accepted Jesus Christ and his purpose.

'You are now part of the family, we can even speak to your family for you,' the pastor said.

I became nervous, remembering that Mfundo had said the same thing.

'You play the piano,' I said to the pastor, as Elio and I were walking out.

The pastor smiled standing in the church yard.

On our way to the station I sent Rasun a text message: 'God is great.' Rasun replied: 'Dunsky come back to me when you have found the secret number.' I deleted that message after reading it. We sunk in to the subway. One lady we passed had yellow eyes. I asked her if I could pray for her. In the shadow of the subway I placed my right hand on her shoulder.

'That's amazing,' Elio said after I had prayed for the lady.

My fingers were sweaty inside the train. Elio was sitting next to me. The train wired along the rail to the Mowbray station.

*

The television was testing me in the apartment. I fought back with the little knowledge I had of the word. I uttered verses back at the screen. Tongai was also sitting in the lounge. Water was my salvation. When troubled I went to the sink and would pour myself a glass of water. I begged Tongai that we should not watch the South African crime stories as it was a condemnation to the conscience. Tongai was keen on finishing the program. Then one man was said to have raped a four year old girl. He started to look like me.

All this condemnation is not right. I had also been condemning the world with my story. I got my flash disk from the top of my wardrobe where I hid the device.

'I'm deleting this story,' I said, having inserted my flash disk in the computer.

'I urge you to think about this,' Tongai cautioned.

'No, I have made up my mind,' I said and deleted the work I had written.

If I am going into darkness, all I want to take with me are the Ten Commandments. With Tongai we scrambled through the bible looking for the relevant scripture. The Ten Commandments are all about not killing. There are many ways to kill: gossip is a form of killing, so is stealing.

My head was splitting into ideas in bed. I saw a vision of myself running at primary school. My life had always been a fight between good and evil. I had the lights on though I was trying to sleep.

PART 3

BEFORE THE SUN RISES

Evil need not come from one place. It can be a concerted effort from the disciples of witchcraft. I could not find my one pair of shoes in my wardrobe. My mother cried out: 'It's Ma'Dlomo, she's taking the shoes to witchdoctors.' My grandmother confronted Ma'Dlomo about the shoes and Ma'Dlomo professed to not knowing anything.

We prayed in the lounge preparing for my journey. My grandmother read a verse from the bible.

'It is this verse that makes me find myself going around the house three times, praying,' grandmother said. My mother had asked my grandmother to give a word. We were all holding hands in a circle. As the bus was departing from King William's Town, my mother, grandmother and my aunt's daughter stood waving their hands. My grandmother looked mightily worried.

I sat on the window seat. I did not say anything to the person sitting next to me. I preferred not to eat solid food during long journeys, yogurt was enough for me. It was getting stuffy in the bus as we entered Cape Town through Bellville.

Outside Texies I wait for my luggage. The morning sun is sharp on my forehead. As soon as one of the couch staff comes out the bus, people huddle around the trailer. He holds up my green bag, I pace up to him, show him my sticker. I drag my bag towards the station. A street kid runs up to me. I shake my head, refusing his offer to carry my bag. I know their tricks all too well: they will say they're not going to charge you, only to coerce you to pay them once they have carried your luggage.

The taxi conductor points me to the back seat when I tell him I'm going to Kenilworth. My long bag is placed in the middle of the taxi. I hate sitting in the back seat. My knees are crammed, pressing against the seat in front of me. Driving through the Southern Suburbs, a few minutes past ten, the streets are languorous. I have returned to Cape Town to clear the flat. I also hope to get my deposit from the agent. I should not spend more than a couple of

weeks here. Tongai does not want to continue staying in the flat. I had suggested he take up the lease.

'I can't man...it becomes impersonal staying with a stranger,' Tongai said.

Getting my bag up the stairs is hard work. I pull it up with my right hand, the wheels screeching and jumping on the stairs. It is lazily quiet in the flat. Tongai is still at work. I place my bag in my room. I still have a newsletter on global economics on the dressing table; I got this from the guys that had organised the hip hop gig in Khayelitsha. I never got to reading it. I glance at the title: Global Economic Forum.

My cosmetics are in a plastic bag. I take my toothbrush and toothpaste out and walk to the bathroom. There are two tooth brushes inside the bathroom mirror. This is strange, I think for a moment, brushing my teeth.

Just to pass time, I decide to go to an internet cafe to check my mail. On Facebook I notice that Bridgette is online. 'What's up?' I write in her chat box.

Bridgette is a woman I had pursued. She had spent the night at my place with her friend, TK, before I fell sick. Nothing happened between us, Bridgette and TK slept in the couches in the lounge. In the following afternoon as we kept the ladies company while they waited for a taxi, I saw Nhlakanipho pass Bridgette his business card. I had had enough of Nhlakanipho: his gossiping and he had had an outburst on the night out with Bridgette and them saying Tongai and I were terrible writers. I asked Nhlakanipho to keep his distance from me, the next morning.

'Oh, you're back,' Bridgette replies.

'How did you know I was gone?'

'Tongai told us.'

This unsettles me. What exactly did Tongai tell them? And how did they contact each other? Bridgette was my pursuit.

*

Tongai comes home at his usual time in the early evening. He enters the flat sighing, saying he's tired. He kicks up his feet on the table and we watch TV. Tongai runs to the kitchen when a snake comes up on the screen.

'It's only on TV,' I say.

'Still, I can't stand to see a snake,' he says.

Tongai, wearing a shirt and a pair of jeans, prepares to cook. He takes out a pack of chicken breasts from the fridge. He defrosts these with hot water in the sink. Tongai trots out the apartment to answer a call from his mother. 'Moms,' I hear him say on his way out. He returns and continues cooking. Tongai is chopping two chicken breasts with a sharp knife on the kitchen table. 'So how's the book coming along?' he asks. He seems to have vinegar in his throat as he says this.

'It's fine,' I say reluctantly.

At home, I started on the book again. It was easy rewriting the chapters I had already done. I remembered most of the work that I had written. I am a careful writer. I go over my words numerous times. I only add new words after much consideration.

'Daniel was sleeping here while you were gone,' Tongai says.

Daniel is Tongai's cousin. He had had problems with accommodation before. He stayed with us for two weeks then. The guys he was free-riding off had asked him to move out. What irked me about Daniel was his attitude that people owed him something. He became an inconvenience to us. I would have to wait for Daniel after work outside the flat. But this did not seem to bother him; he would stroll up to me rocking sunglasses.

'Oh...I was wondering why there were two tooth brushes in the bathroom.'

'I hate this thing of his of calling in the dirt of midnight,' Tongai says.

Tongai comes up to me to show the message he received from Daniel. I do not look at the message.

'He's been sleeping here since Tuesday,' Tongai says on his way back to the kitchen. I spent two weeks at home, it is a Monday today.

Tongai pours out a packet of pasta into a pot of boiling water.

‘Bridgette and TK want to visit this weekend,’ Tongai says.

‘Oh, I chatted with Bridgette on Facebook. How’s she doing?’ I ask, testing Tongai.

‘I did not speak to her, I only spoke to TK,’ Tongai says.

I am tired from the long journey. I keep dozing off on the couch.

‘I had such a good weekend,’ he says. ‘You know I watched a very clever film...’

Tongai puts the pots on top of the side cupboard when the food is ready. We each dish for ourselves.

‘Should I say grace?’ I ask in the kitchen.

‘No, I’ll say it,’ Tongai says.

He finishes saying grace abruptly almost as if something is moving in his chest. Tongai’s standard of cooking has dropped since our first days of living together. His food just does not taste as good anymore.

*

In the morning on my way to the bathroom, Tongai asks: ‘Oh is the music too loud?’ He is ironing a pair of jeans in the lounge, wearing a shirt and boxers. The music from Tongai’s lap top speakers is not in any way loud. It could never be loud even if he wanted it to be.

‘No, it’s fine,’ I say.

I return to find Tongai holding a bible. He still only has a shirt and his boxers on. ‘You know the one thing I have realised is that there is nothing better than waking up and reading the bible,’ he says.

I look at Tongai, his eyes fall to the ground. Tongai dresses up and jets out the door to work. It is a yellow morning. The sun penetrates through the window in my room. When doing my bed, I drop all the linen to the ground and start with the heavier items. While reaching beneath my bed, my fingers come up with a pink bra. Bridgette’s name enters my head. I suspect Nhlakanipho slept with her in my bed. This turns my head upside down.

‘Joe, why is there a bra underneath my bed,’ I ask Tongai over the phone. ‘What were you guys doing while I was gone?’

'I don't know...serious,' Tongai says. 'Wait...it could have been Daniel,' he says after a while.

'So, he was sleeping in my bed?'

'Ja,' Tongai says.

'No, I don't like what you did,' I say, and drop the phone.

Daniel works at the Cell C outlet in Cavendish square. His phone goes straight to voice mail when I call. The one way for me to get the truth is to confront Daniel. So I exit the flat and walk to the mall. The employees at Cell C say they do not know where Daniel is. In a passage in the mall I see Daniel's tall frame. He is wearing the uniform black shirt and black trousers.

'Hey, Manga,' Daniel says smiling as I walk up to him. 'I heard what happened to you...some crazy stuff... But it happens.'

'Did you sleep with a girl in my bed?' I ask.

Daniel takes a while to reply: 'Ja,' he says and nods.

'Thanks,' I say and turn around.

'Hey, Manga wait,' Daniel calls out. 'You seem upset.'

'What you did is fucking disrespectful,' I say.

'No, no, I did not sleep with her. We just played around a bit. She was having her periods. Otherwise I would have slept with her.'

'That is still disrespectful,' I say.

*

If Daniel is covering for Tongai it would have to be a master plan. Since I'll be staying for only a couple of weeks there's no point in me fighting them. I give Tongai the benefit of the doubt. I put my duvet and all my linen in the washing machine. The bra I put in a plastic bag and drop it in Tongai's room. To ease my suspicion, I call Bridgette.

'Did you sleep at my place,' I ask.

'No,' Bridgette replies.

Bridgette is overly sensual over the phone. She says she is looking forward to seeing me on the weekend.

Bridgette calls me in the early evening. 'Saturday it is,' she says. I hear voices murmuring in the background. Her gesture turns me on.

'Ja,' I say.

Not long after I have dropped the phone, Tongai strides into the apartment. 'Sorry about this weekend,' he mutters. He is accompanied by Daniel and Nhlakanipho.

'We have brought this Mfana to apologise,' Tongai says, pointing at Daniel. Tongai makes his way to the kitchen. He pulls out a can of tuna from the cupboard.

'Like I said before...I'm sorry,' Daniel says.

'Apology accepted and acknowledged...' I say. 'Though I will never know for certain what you guys were doing here while I was gone.'

'Didn't you receive a phone call?' Tongai asks.

'What phone call?'

Nhlakanipho shakes his head in complete bewilderment at Tongai's foolishness.

'...I thought the agent might have called you,' Tongai quickly adds.

Tongai looks worried in the kitchen. 'Nhlakanipho brought some of the clothes you left at his place,' Tongai says. Nhlakanipho passes a blue plastic bag to me. My one t-shirt he was wearing the day Bridgette and TK visited is in the pile. He has a satisfied look on his face as I survey the clothes.

'So, how was home?' Nhlakanipho asks.

'It was great... it's always good to be with family.'

'Did you see any regulars?'

'No, no one you would know. You don't know my friends...down there,' I reply.

Nhlakanipho nods bitterly. 'So when are you leaving?' he asks.

'Sometime in the next two weeks.'

'When exactly?' Nhlakanipho asks.

'Don't worry about that,' I reply.

Tongai is out of sorts in the kitchen, he is panicking. He eats his sandwich standing up.

'So, when did you start sleeping here?' I ask Daniel.

'On Saturday,' Daniel says.

'No, no...' Tongai says, shaking his head.

'On Wednesday.'

'Oh...on Wednesday,' I reply.

I had been watching TV before the guys came in. I have my pyjama trousers on. It is clear to me that Tongai is lying. But I won't confront him.

'That's a hot chick,' Nhlakanipho says looking at the screen.

'Yes, yes,' Daniel says nodding.

This is about all I can take. I excuse myself and go to my bedroom. Nhlakanipho's high pitched chatter supersedes my prayer in my room. In time the flat quietens down. Tongai has gone to see the guys out, I assume. Sleep does not come to me. I return to watching TV. On Zone 14, Maradona's uncle offers to sew one lady's dress. 'You are a man of many talents uncle,' some girls make of the gesture. 'Her life will end in tears,' Maradona's uncle says, holding the dress. Prophecy comes in many ways. I was wondering why Nhlakanipho had a malicious look on his face when he gave me my clothes.

*

I set off at dawn to dump the clothes Nhlakanipho had given me, in the rubbish bin. I don't know what else these guys could have doctored. I also get rid of the cosmetics I had left in the flat while I was at home. Tongai did not sleep in his room last night. He must have slept in Nhlakanipho's place. Even his laptop which he usually keeps in the lounge is not on the table.

Later in the afternoon I read an email Tongai sent me: 'I realise I'm the one that should be apologising more than Daniel. I know this is not the first time I have betrayed your trust. I will be coming in late tonight as I'm working on my thesis.' Tongai attached a video of Alice Walker giving the Steve Biko memorial lecture at UCT to the email. He attended Alice Walker's talk with Michelle while I was at home. What's there to make of Tongai's gesture? He's only apologising now that I have discovered that he was lying. I cannot go on staying with him. He is a dangerously manipulative character.

So I call Tongai. 'I read your email,' I say. 'I'm not bitter at you, I don't hold any grudges. But you have betrayed my trust and I cannot go on staying with you.'

'Where am I going to stay, mfethu?' Tongai says, sounding sorry.

This shuts my stream of reasoning... *He is playing on my conscience.*

'No, I want you out. You can stay with your mother. I cannot trust you with the keys.'

'Okay,' Tongai says softly.

'I want the keys back.'

'I'll be at the African studies library after work.' Tongai says.

*

I haven't been to UCT since the time I left the institution. In the line waiting for the shuttle to upper campus, I spot a lady I once fancied. She gave me the run around for many years. She is dressed sportily wearing black tights; *she must be on her way to the gym.* 'Hey, Naledi,' I say tapping on her shoulder. She turns around and hugs me. Naledi does not seem to be in the mood for chatting, I pick this up from her dry facial expression. Her head is elsewhere.

*

'I'm here on campus,' I say to Tongai over the phone standing on the Jammie stairs.

'We have to meet after seven,' Tongai whispers. 'The library closes at seven.'

A statue of Cecil John Rhodes stands directly down from Jameson Hall. Someone once wrote some graffiti on the statue of the ancestor: 'Fuck you and your ideas of empire,' the graffiti read.

Tongai approaches from the direction of the main library. He has bulked up muscle. I had seen trays of mass builders in his wardrobe. Something tells me that he is a soldier. It's in the way he walks. The arty effort was never convincing.

'You can check them,' Tongai says taking out the keys from a brown envelope.

I take a good look at the keys.

'When can I get my stuff from the apartment?' he asks.

'You can come in on Saturday.'

When on Saturday?'

'Anytime.'

'Morning or evening?' Tongai hushes from his mouth.

I nod.

*

Naledi is walking on the main road in Rondebosch. I jog up to her. 'This is my exercise for the day,' I say. Naledi smiles as she looks back at me. I really forced things with her. There were times she would not even answer my calls. But I would still persist. Naledi is now doing her honours year. She has the neat beauty of a professional woman, with a thin mouth and a longish nose.

'I can't wait to get out of here,' she says. 'I'm so tired of this place...they want you to think in a certain way.'

'You seemed to be cracking it. You were part of all those societies: investment society, black management forum...' I remark.

At least Naledi is doing her honours in economics. It's a lot more interesting and meaningful than accounting. I wish I had majored in economics. Then I would have been doing something that engages my mind rather than just crunching numbers.

'Why the sudden discontent?' I ask.

'I'm just tired of this place. You know earlier on in the year, I could not even get out of bed. I was depressed. I had to see a psychiatrist. It's only now that I'm getting out of it, though I still have my days.'

'Maybe it's a late reaction to your father's passing,' I say.

'That's what everyone is saying. The psychiatrist also thinks so. But I don't think it has anything to do with my father's death... You how's the world of the working?' she asks.

'I resigned from my job. I don't even know what I'm gonna do next. I'm only here in Cape Town to sort things out with the flat.'

'What happened?'

'I guess, like you, I also got tired of working a dead end job. I needed to get out of there.'

'You are supposed to be showing progress now,' Naledi says.

'I want to give myself to God's seasons. Not measure myself according to the world: at a certain age I'm supposed to be working a certain job and driving a certain kind of car. I have suffered from depression for what feels like forever. I think now, I just want to do the things that I like.'

'So what's your plan?' Naledi asks.

'I want to write, that's what I like doing.'

'You want to write novels?'

'Poetry, short stories, whatever comes.'

'I could always tell that there was something not quite right with you. Even on the day of your graduation,' Naledi says.

'But I'm getting better now...I'm healing.'

'No, you still look tired.'

I shake Naledi's hand and leave her in front of her residence. A part of me wants to ask for her numbers, but I decide against it.

*

I think of Naledi while eating supper in the flat. Perhaps it's only now that I'm getting through to her. I had never imagined her as the type who would suffer from depression. She was always sassy and a fast mover, confident in her step.

At night I struggle to sleep. From twelve onwards, I cannot sleep a wink. I try reading, but I cannot concentrate. The lights in my room are on until the sun comes up.

*

The agent says I cannot get my deposit back as I'm required to give two months notice. The only hope I have of salvaging my money back is by getting another tenant. Tongai offers to put up an advert on Gumtree. In the advert Tongai says the apartment comes furnished with a television. The TV is mine, Tongai even helped me carry it when I was moving in from Observatory. He says he had forgotten that the TV belonged to me when I confront him.

Tongai contacts me after a couple of days saying he's found someone that's interested in the flat. I agree to meet with the prospective tenant. On the day of our meeting, an hour lapses past the time we had agreed on. *I'm starting to have my doubts about this arrangement.* The gentleman interested in the flat finally calls me: 'Zolo...I'm sorry I'm late...I'm now on my way to Kenilworth,' he says. His thorny tone of voice scares me. *He did not sound like this the first time I spoke to him. And why is he now referring to me by my surname? This could be a witchdoctor organised by Tongai's mother.*

'No, the place is no longer available,' I say.

'No, no, no...Zolo,' the guy cries out.

I drop the phone. I cannot trust Tongai with finding a tenant. This could give him leeway to bewitch me.

'Quit trying to find a tenant,' I text Tongai.

'Ok, the burden of finding a tenant then rests on you,' he responds.

'Don't worry, you'll get your deposit back,' I reply.

I'm even willing to pay Tongai from my own pocket just to get him off my back.

Later in the day Tongai sends me a message, 'the groceries...can I also get my half on Saturday,' the message reads.

He is starting to get on my nerves. 'You can take all the groceries,' I reply.

I would rather sever all relations with Tongai now; give him his belongings and the groceries.

'Can you come get your stuff tonight,' I say to Tongai over the phone.

'I can't...I'll be working at the library,' Tongai says.

'I'll pack them myself and take them to your mom's place.'

'No, no, no,' Tongai says.

I need Tongai's mother's numbers. Tongai's phone goes to voice mail when I call him.

Daniel should have Tongai's mom's numbers. In the afternoon breeze I hurry to Cavendish Square. They say they do not know where Daniel is at Cell C. On my way out from the mall, I see Daniel sitting on the benches outside. He nods and looks the other way when I ask him for his aunt's numbers. He passes me his cell phone displaying the numbers.

Tongai's mother does not pick up her phone. I leave her a message: 'This is Mangaliso, the guy that stayed with Tongai; I need to talk to you.'

I'm able to sleep from eight until midnight; then I wake up. I hear the sounds of movement coming from the flat. It sounds like Tongai's door is opening and closing. But I'm too afraid to have a look. My eyes strain; I toss and turn until it is morning.

*

There are white plastic gloves next to Tongai's South African ID. *What manner of being have I been staying with here?* Tongai is an agent for the Zimbabwean government. This explains his friendship with Ntaba. Tongai also once told me that he knows of people who are planted at UCT to monitor Zimbabwean students. These people can take up to three years doing the same course, Tongai said. Tongai has been killing people and now all the evidence is left with me. He does not really want to come get his things. The night I was admitted to Groote Schuur, Tongai stepped on my foot at the Caltex store and apologised. Nhlakanipho turned around and did the same as Tongai. 'I'm sorry,' Nhlakanipho said with his hands together. I screamed and started breathing heavily. When I mentioned this incident to the doctor, Nhlakanipho denied the event ever happened.

The outcome that I do not want is to start panicking. I step outside the apartment. The corridor is wet. Siviwe is holding a hose pipe in the parking lot, watering the flowers.

‘You see nothing came of the strikes,’ I say to Siviwe.

He nods thoughtfully. ‘But they could have stopped everything had they all joined the strike,’ Siviwe says. I leave him following a quick exchange of words.

Murder is the case here. I’m developing a sense that someone was killed. Maybe my grandmother was responsible for my grandfather’s passing. My grandmother’s last prayer at home was strange: her saying that she sometimes walks around the house three times. Those are things that witches do. The plastic gloves in Tongai’s room could have me implicated for the string of killings Tongai has committed. I have thrown clothes of mine in the rubbish bin. This could be seen as attempting to destroy evidence. I need a witness, someone to show the things in Tongai’s room. My head is becoming windy now. I descend down the stairs to the ground floor.

The lady from the body corporate is kneeling in her flat as I stand outside the burglar door. There’s something that looks like incense burning on top of a coffee table. She gets up abruptly on hearing my knocking.

‘There are some strange things in our flat. I’d like you to come up and see them,’ I say.

‘You are the one who was holding a bible and praying aloud... You upset a lot of the people downstairs,’ she says.

Who really are these people downstairs?

‘I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital that night.’

‘There’s no way am I going up there,’ the lady says and closes the door.

*

I’m alone in this. Tongai’s mother is also part of a body corporate in her block of flats. These buildings are controlled by witches. The last time I saw Tongai’s mother was at her place. Tongai just invited me to go with him to his mother’s flat one morning. Tongai’s mother was shaking while opening the door. At the time I thought the shakes were from her heavy drinking.

'I have cooked some food,' Tongai's mother said.

We dished up some pork and potatoes in the kitchen. I noticed that Tongai was not eating but gave no more thought to it as the food was so tasty. Tongai returned his plate to the pot as it was. Maybe Tongai had been trying to bewitch me with his cooking and when he failed, his mother decided to take matters in her own hands.

I'm afraid of taking my case to the police. From the look in my eyes they might think that I'm mentally unstable. I might even get locked up.

There is a friend of mine Tongai does not know, Nhlanhla. He is a Christian. We stayed together in the same residence in university. Nhlanhla was the first person to meet with my growing unbelief. I questioned him about scriptures and he was unable to give me answers. The night I was at Groote Schuur, Tongai took my cell phone. My cell phone could be bugged. So I call Nhlanhla from a public phone in Observatory. It's as if he was expecting my call, he quickly directs me to his place. Nhlanhla says he'll be waiting for me outside the house, when I tell him I cannot use my phone.

There are drops of a tired sunlight in Observatory, this Friday. I see faces I'm familiar with entering some of the pubs. I do not have the strength to greet them. The world is coming to an end. Two men are having simulated sex in a cafe I walk past. The hands of the world are beginning to strangle the earth. 'Greetings...shalom,' reads a message from my home church. *Shalom*, where does this word come from? This is freemasonry in operation. My mother could be involved with freemasons.

*

Nhlanhla is wearing a black hoodie standing in the street. He stays in a granny flat in his pastor's house. Nhlanhla has recently graduated as an engineer and is still looking for a job. He leads me to his granny flat.

'My man, I was recently admitted to a psychiatric hospital,' I explain. 'I only spent one night there and was miraculously discharged the following day. Before then, there's so much that had happened. I had even had a stint with drugs; I also resigned from my job. I did not want to blame anyone for my getting hospitalised. But going through some of the events: there was a strange lady that used to meet with my housemate in the flat. My housemate is Zimbabwean and yet he has a South African ID. I'm even scared of sleeping in that flat. I hear noises at

night. I don't know. Can I stay here, just until I go back home? If you think there's something wrong with me, you can take me to a psychiatric hospital.'

'I'll have to talk to my pastor,' Nhlanhla says.

Nhlanhla returns from having a word with his pastor.

'It's fine, we can go get your stuff,' he says.

This puts me at ease. We drive off in a monstrous vehicle to Kenilworth. No bullets could penetrate this car. This is all part of the plan. I had to be at Nhlanhla's place.

*

I show Nhlanhla Tongai's ID and the plastic gloves in the flat.

'Let's not jump to conclusions. Perhaps there's an explanation,' he cautions. Then, looking at Tongai's ID photo, he says: 'I know this guy.'

This means the world to me. Tongai is identifiable to another person.

I quickly pack everything into my bag, including my notebooks and diaries.

'This is strange, that he would make you read this,' Nhlanhla says pointing at the essay, *God's Lonely Man*. Tongai had suggested that I read the essay saying it was an important bit of literature.

*

I sleep on a mattress in Nhlanhla's floor. In the middle of the night I awake and call out to him. 'Sleep,' Nhlanhla says. For the first time in a long while, I'm able to sleep well.

*

A member of Nhlanhla's church had asked Nhlanhla to paint his ceiling. At eight on Saturday morning we are already in the flat in lower Kenilworth. As Nhlanhla scrubs the ceiling, I read my bible in the sitting room. The love of God brings tears to my eyes. What did I do to make God reach out? I do not have the answers. I was a sinful man leading a reckless life. It was mercy that saved me more than love.

Tongai is coming to get his stuff at ten from my apartment. My place is not far from here. When the time nears ten, I cross the railway line with Nhlanhla to my block of flats. We wait for Tongai inside the flat. An hour lapses with no hint of Tongai. 'On second thoughts, I'm coming at one,' a message from Tongai reads. This irritates me. I get the feeling that Tongai could be plotting with Nhlakanipho to drive me up the wall. We walk back to the flat we were painting.

Nhlanhla is calm as he continues painting the ceiling. 'It will take several layers,' Nhlanhla says, when I'm excited thinking that the job is complete. Nhlanhla studied engineering; he is gifted with his hands. He is a man of order and structure: a builder. We make our way back to my apartment at close to one o'clock. Again, we wait in vain for Tongai. We decide to leave when it is getting close to the time for Nhlanhla's lecture. Nhlanhla tutors at Damelin on Saturday afternoons. In an act of wonder, the lady from the body corporate agrees to keep the keys for Tongai.

Nhlanhla has to do this job for the children, I cannot hold him back. He has to usher the new generation to a better place. We are pressed for time in the taxi. The taxi driver could not be bothered by us being late. Something is happening: the streets are spinning; time is coming to an end. Nhlanhla gets off the taxi in Mowbray. He leaves me with the keys to his granny flat. My journey extends without him to Observatory. One child scratches his head wildly, standing in a yard in Nhlanhla's street. *There is a plague in operation.* I am pleased to have made it to Nhlanhla's house; I thought I would get lost.

I lie on the shadow of Nhlanhla's bed, restless, my chest heaving. Nhlanhla's pastor calls me outside. *They are building a new world here.* The pastor has just recently bought the house. I help carry some of the trees they are planting. This is one of the compounds that won't be harmed in the imminent destruction. But in this new world, it's still a black man that does the gardening. That's the part I haven't figured out.

Nhlanhla returns in the late afternoon. I am relieved to see Nhlanhla. His presence calms me. 'I still have that song you guys recorded,' Nhlanhla says, facing his computer.

'We were young...we did not know what we were doing,' I say. 'I no longer want anything to do with hip hop. It's too aggressive.'

Nhlanhla plays some of his Christian rap much to my consternation. It's not so much what they are saying but rather the spirit of the beat. Demons could dance to the drums.

‘Could you please play something else, good old singing,’ I ask.

Nhlanhla only lowers the volume of the music. There is one song that I like. It speaks of Paul being a persecutor of Christians. So Paul is also not blameless.

In the breath of evening Nhlanhla leaves for a dinner for couples organised by his pastor. In heaven lovers will enter in pairs.

I have found the real Paul in Nhlanhla’s pastor. He looks majestic. This is the Paul from the bible. ‘They just want to smell you,’ Paul says as two dogs come up to me in the main house. Usually I would have been scared of the dogs, but I’m in such an uncertain place that they do not bother me. This is all part of the plan: Paul is keeping animals for the new world.

‘Were you watching movies on Nhlanhla’s computer?’ Paul asks.

‘No,’ I reply, shaking my head.

Paul hands me a book to read from his book shelf. He is preparing a sermon for tomorrow. The world will be held and Paul will give a summary of life and lead us into the new time. I am drowsy reading the book in the lounge. But this is a test; I have to complete the book. The work is a manuscript...it is never in vain; even the works we do not finish are recorded.

‘Do you eat pork Mangaliso?’ Paul asks from the kitchen.

Jesus cast demons onto the swine. But the pigs are also God’s creation.

‘Yes,’ I reply.

Paul is my ultimate judge. He too is a writer. Once he has assessed me, he will decide whether I am fit to join the chamber of writers in this house. In these walls I will be preserved like a mummy. I am already dead.

We eat in the kitchen. Paul’s wife is also present. I do not have the appetite for the food. They are taking me back to the beginning of time with the ribs. Eve came out of Adam’s rib. I explain to Paul the events that happened before my breakdown and of the witch doctor that used to come to the apartment. I realise as I am talking that I have food in my mouth. I pause to chew properly. Paul and his wife look on intently. Paul’s wife has the face of an angel. She has heavenly blonde hair. I leave my plate half empty.

I continue reading in the lounge. I struggle to concentrate. My eyelids are battering, but I'm afraid to sleep. My heart pounds in the veins in my mouth.

*

As I'm about to fall asleep, Nhlanhla wakes me. I'm grateful he has saved me from dying. We have to finish painting the ceiling in Kenilworth. We drive to my old neighbourhood in a minibus. The night is whispering about the streets. I'm hearing voices in the back seat. They are confusing me. I follow behind Nhlanhla as he climbs up the stairs to the flat.

I sing as Nhlanhla layers the paint on the white ceiling. This is the only contribution I can make to ease the burden for Nhlanhla. In a better time people will give whatever gifts they have willingly. 'And so they grew in numbers,' echoes in my head. It is a verse from the Acts of the Apostles.

The bathroom is fuming with paint. Nhlanhla encourages me to rest in the lounge. I do not want to seem lazy. I'm still coming to terms with what another Paul's said to me saying that the curse of man is labour. I had just resigned from my job and was telling Paul that. 'Go take a break, you can come back,' Nhlanhla says. I step on the black refuse bags on my way out.

My mind is the enemy. I cannot rest. Not when there's so much wind in my chest and in my head. The bible is indicting me. I rise to my feet in such moments and look out the window. My ears are a chimney. I pray for calmness.

Nhlanhla and I have been called for a cause. It won't be easy. I run to Nhlanhla in the bathroom with scriptures. He reads them and encourages me to be calm.

In the night, Nhlanhla prepares a bed for me in the owner's room. I try forcing sleep, closing my eye lids as my heart jerks violently. *When the Son of man arrives, he will utilise even technology. Below the window in this room, a helicopter will wait to take us to heaven.*

*

Nhlanhla washes his hands in the basin in the morning. 'You kept me up, all night,' he says. I remembered running to Nhlanhla after I thought I had heard the trumpet's call. I was not able to sleep at all. It is done. Nhlanhla clears the newspapers and the refuse bags from the bathroom. I help him carry the washing machine back to the bathroom. We enter the bathroom with the door closed. I will not question this miracle.

'Now is the time to stop doubting and just believe,' I chant outside the bathroom.

I am using the skill of the mantra I learnt at the Hare Krishna temple. I never did understand the meanings of the mantra. 'That does not matter, the effect of the mantra is still achieved, even if you don't understand it,' an elder in the temple advised.

My heart is wheezing as we walk in the corridor. I see the old lady that was barking at Groote Schuur the night I was admitted walking in the direction of the train station. She is still wearing the blue hospital robes. I struggle up the hill to Nhlanhla's church in Mowbray. 'I am running out of breath,' I say to Nhlanhla. I hope to take a breather on a swing in the park.

'We are almost there,' he says.

This is the kingdom of heaven at stake. I force myself to continue.

*

The church looks different from the last time I attended. I don't know whether they have changed the venue. I pick up one lady's water bottle and drink from it as the congregation worships. The lady looks at me and smiles. *This is the kingdom of heaven: no one owns anything.* The water does not quench my thirst though. My throat has become acidic.

Paul gives his summary of life in the pulpit. I do not follow his words. I fidget in my seat. I feel we are entering heaven. But judgement still has to happen. Another preacher takes over after Paul. This will be an endless sermon. We will wait for Christ through preaching.

Perhaps heaven is like a game we used to play at crèche: we'd sit in a circle, the teacher would ask us to get up from our chairs, we'd have to run back to our seats and the teacher would have removed one chair, whoever was not able to find a seat would be out of the game.

Tea and cake is served after the service. Everyone in the church has name tags except for me and Nhlanhla. I feel like an outsider in this heaven. Speaking to the other church members gives me the chills. I try to make conversation but my skin becomes watery. And whomever I was talking to seems like a demonic creature.

'They're here,' I say to Paul at the back of the church, panicky.

Paul pauses: 'My wife is an occupational therapist,' he says. 'We have given your situation some thought. We don't think it's spiritual.'

'Are you on medical aid?' Paul asks.

I shake my head.

*

The lanes read: trauma and emergency. It is hot in the car as we drive to Groote Schuur. This time around I do not have any fight in me. I am like any other mental patient. I do as I am told. I give them my arm when they want to check my blood pressure. It is a tiringly painful Sunday. The doctor at hand is a dark skinned man. He pricks my finger for his tests. Nhlanhla leaves with Paul. They leave me in an empty room.

I find myself behind white bars. There is one security guard sitting behind a desk. He operates the gates to this section. There is lighting in this cold space. I sit on a plastic chair. Next to me are two ladies wearing blue hospital robes. We are all waiting for our turn to see the psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist is Indian. I sense that he's Muslim. His questions terrify me.

'May I pray?' I ask the psychiatrist.

'Sure, you can go ahead,' he says.

I cannot pray. I am facing the devil. And the worst part is that I cannot get out of here. I start pacing around the room.

'It looks like you are regressing,' the psychiatrist says. 'We have to take you back.'

They are taking me back to the living. A security guard walks me to a ward full of sick people. There are three nurses working here. They advise me to sleep in my allocated bed. I see a line of people walking up the corridor. This is judgement. The man next to me wakes up. The dead are rising. My presence is needed here to help the dead to rise.

One patient is carried out in a black bag. The confirmation of my death will be me seeing myself standing, wearing a black suit. That's when the matter will be resolved. I am starting to itch. I scratch my arms and my back. My whole body is itching. I stand on the floor. With my right hand I hold onto my head. The psychiatrist observes from a chair in the corner, writing in a folder.

Deep into the miserable night a lady nurse asks me to follow her. I shiver in the corridor, waiting. As I'm about to fall asleep on a chair, she wakes me. 'God will never shame us,' I say to her.

'Oh yes!' the nurse shouts.

*

I have been called here to save the lost. The patients in the ward are watching TV. 'Switch this thing off. You are destroying these children,' I say and switch the TV off.

'Hey, hold on,' a security guard says and switches the TV back on.

*

The nurses serve us breakfast in the morning. I say grace before eating. I sit on a chair facing the window. There's another patient to my left. We are both wearing blue robes. When the other patient is done eating, he licks his plate like a cat.

'He has a big appetite from TIK,' one of the nurses says. A nurse observes us as we take our medication. The other patient returns to his bed. He seems to be able to sleep. I can't.

I am freezing. The one blanket is not enough. I see lines of people entering the hospital while looking out the window opposite my bed. They are being called to judgement. The hospital is a safe place for me to be. There's a patient that's kept in solitary confinement. The security guards take him out. He runs and tries to dive through the window glass. He stands up, shaking his head.

The TV has been playing the same episode of *Generations*. It ends in the same sad laugh. In total there are three of us patients. The patient resembling a cat is sitting on the middle chair watching TV. Now is the time for every knee to bow. I kneel in front of him. 'Hey, hey, get up,' the security guard says, pulling me up.

*

Tongai predicted my ending: 'You will die a social death,' he announced one afternoon after work. I looked at Tongai; he put his hands together and looked the other way. I laughed quietly not knowing what to make of his statement. My books are all that connect me to the other world. They are safe with Nhlanhla. He can keep them and tell people who I was.

*

Ndlela's father is the only black man who has ever shown me love. He came to my award ceremony in high school. After I had come down from the stage, he shook my hand. Remembering this makes me cry. I sob in the bed.

'You have never been loved,' Nhlakanipho once said. Perhaps he was right. I have never understood love. And hence I did not know God. The ultimate love was being crucified for the sins of the world. Love is taking the blame when you are not even sure that you were at fault. These things make me cry.

I remember beautiful artists. They had a gift of seeing beyond conditions, and draw us to the blackness of uncertainty. That's what art should achieve: point out the other side. Art is not there to unearth any truths, but rather to show the multiplicity of the nature of things. Young emcees stood on stages and prophesied. Though only a few people listened to them.

It would seem we were in a season of mourning. Singers were crying on CD covers. The professional mourner is the artist. He cries for a living. He cries in order to live. They have sung many songs bemoaning the loss of our cattle. The cattle will come back in a different way. It will take a spiritual awakening.

*

The security guard who works at night has a hoarse voice and is light skinned. I suspect he smokes from the sound of his watery throat. My grandfather was also light skinned and a heavy smoker. I follow the security guard as he leads me to the shower. I pass him my robes over the top of the shower door. He waits for me outside. The water is lukewarm; I only have soap to wash with.

*

I cannot sleep at night. I am starting to feel claustrophobic. I want to get out of here.

'Please let me go...I want to be with my family and friends,' I cry out to the nurses.

'Go back to your bed and sleep,' the security guard advises.

I do as he tells me.

I do not know what the time is. Nor do I know the day of the week. All I know is that it is another morning. The madness is in the food. It is the food that keeps me in this place. I say grace before eating. I do not speak to the other patient. He looks like a cat with his slimy black hair. I swallow my pills with the aid of a glass of water. And return to lying in bed.

'Come Zolo,' one lady nurse calls me out from the blankets.

She decks dominoes on the table. The lady explains the rules of the game to me. Other nurses also play with us. In a strange string of good fortune I win all the games. 'You have won, Zolo,' the nurse keeps on announcing. Then one of the other nurses wins a game. 'He has won now,' the nurse says. 'Congratulations,' I say, and shake the victor's hand.

'He congratulated him,' one nurse cheers.

*

Kwanele told me that they evaluate you through such games. I return to brooding on my bed. I do not have the stomach to watch the TV. I am in a mental institution. Here they institutionalise one's mental condition. The world has been in the business of assigning names to things. Even AIDS is just a name. But, once you hear that diagnosis, it traps you.

*

I have been seeing the doctor walking around the passages. I have not spoken to him since being admitted. The doctor has a crooked walk; he is wearing a yellow shirt. 'Please follow me to my office,' he says, standing in front of me.

The office is nothing but a small room with a bed and two chairs.

'Religion means a lot to you,' he says, holding his folder.

'I'd rather not talk about issues of faith,' I say.

I believe the doctor is Muslim. And so I want to avoid conflict. He does not recognise Jesus as the Lord and saviour.

The doctor is asking me how I have kept alive since my resignation. He is questioning my very existence. My head is thin; I do not have the capacity to answer his questions. We are going around in circles.

‘What happened the last time you were admitted here?’ the doctor asks.

‘I woke up to find my mother praying at the bed side. She cut off my toenails and I was discharged.’

*

I scream at night: ‘Please let me go, I want to be with my family.’ I force myself to the nurses’ room. There are female patients in another room. They have long wild hair. The security guard comes after me, he asks me to return to my bed. I feel comfortable with him. This is my grandfather; he has come from the dead to protect me.

My grandfather was a man of music. He was a choir master. Music is the ultimate godly gift. It is a higher state of communication. My grandfather is calm and assured of his musical abilities. ‘Come wash, mfethu,’ my grandfather says.

‘All right father,’ I say and follow him to the showers.

I am uncertain with my feet on the tiles. Is this all a test? Will I even be able to come out of the shower? Luckily when I’m done washing, I call out and grandfather gives me new robes.

*

I have resorted to washing off the pain with song. I sing songs about love. These bring tears to my eyes. Song is the answer to my problems. I vibrate my vocal cords and sing for mankind: *Bawo Thixo somandla kuyintoni na...Emhlabeni sibuthwel ubunzima (God almighty what have we done? On earth we carry burdens)*. I pray for curses on children to be removed. All this makes my throat lumpy. I never stop shivering. The cold in here never ceases and they refuse to allow me to bask in the sun.

‘You have a visitor,’ says the security guard that works during the day.

My mother is wearing a sporty jacket in the reception area. She embraces me as if she can charge me with her heart. She looks barren and worried. ‘Have you spoken to Doctor Lagada? she asks.

‘Yes, I have, a few times.’

My mother’s banter keeps me going. She fills the cold void of silence. She is resilient. She hasn’t given up.

‘Don’t you want anything from town?’ she asks.

I didn’t celebrate my birthday this year. I didn’t even tell anyone that it was my birthday at the office. I need to learn to love myself first before I can love others.

‘I’d like some cake,’ I say.

My mother comes back in an hour carrying a square white box. I nibble on the cream from the cake sitting on the bed. For a while I bury myself in the delicacy. It leaves mounds of soil in my throat.

The hospital workers are on an endless move. They pass me, shuffling their shoes quickly. New people come in the evening.

*

Something strange happens at night. I look up to find a male nurse sitting at my feet. He has a bag slung over his shoulder like Mfundo. He gets up and walks away when he realises that I’m aware of his presence. His gait is exactly like Mfundo’s, but the only difference is that he appears to be coloured.

Under the glare of the light bulb I ponder this incident. I do not have the strength to question things extensively. I let it slide. They have taken the feline patient to Valkenberg. His mother came to give him more clothes. She was wearing a black veil that covered her head and neck.

They also want to take me to Valkenberg. ‘We received complaints about him last night, again,’ Dr Lagada says in his office.

My mother pleads with the doctor: ‘Could you please refer him to a hospital closer to home,’ she begs.

‘We will admit him as an involuntary patient,’ Dr Lagada affirms, when my mother refuses to sign the papers for my hospitalisation at Valkenberg.

‘Please Dr Lagada,’ my mother begs, sounding desperate.

If this is your will God, then let it be. I’m more worried about my mother, than me being institutionalised. I wonder how they will take me to Valkenberg. I’ll probably be transported in an ambulance guarded by security guards at the back. I’m familiar with Valkenberg from having visited Kwanele there a few times. I know you start off in a ward with new patients.

Once you improve you graduate to spaces that are less confined. They even allow you to take walks around the hospital when you are almost ready to be discharged. So this is what they did to Kwanele, they gave a name to his illness and trapped him in the name of that illness.

Dr Lagada calls me to his office in the afternoon. The nurse that looks like Mfundo and carries a bag is also in the room. 'So, how are you feeling now?' the doctor asks.

'I'm feeling better.'

'Were you able to sleep last night?'

'I rested,' I say after some thought. But I did not sleep a wink.

'You are looking a bit better, how's the anxiety?'

'It has ceased, Jesus healed me,' I say.

'How?' Mfundo's look-alike howls.

'He died for my sins on the cross,' I reply.

'How?' Mfundo's look-alike asks again.

This is all that I can take. I turn around and walk away.

'You see, he's passively aggressive,' the male nurse shouts as I walk out.

*

So this is how it comes to an end. My mother works around the clock calling people, asking for help. I become aware of lapses in time through my mother changing outfits. She hasn't stopped praying. We close our eyes and ask God for assistance in the reception area. I have made peace with my fate. I'm more worried about how the people at home will take my hospitalisation. It will certainly consternate my grandmother a great deal.

'Grootman, you must pray that you never suffer from mental illness,' I say to the security guard. 'They are taking me to Valkenberg.'

'From my whole time here, I haven't seen anything wrong with you,' the security guard says.

'They say I behave badly at night,' I say and start crying.

I take my tears to my bed. My time is dying as I sit on the white sheet. Security guards and nurses pass me. Dr Lagada looks distressed doing his rounds in the hospital. In the evening the nurses add new medication to my usual dosage. For the first time I'm able to sleep at night. I wake in the morning with my head clearer.

The ward manager questions me after breakfast. He has a white scar running down the right side of his face, as he stands next to my bed.

'I'm fine...just agitated, I want to be home with my friends and family,' I say.

He asks me roughly the same questions the psychiatrist who attended to me the night I was first admitted at Groote Schuur asked. He even uses the trick of asking, 'You are from East London right?'

'No, I'm from King William's town,' I reply.

The ward manager writes everything I say in his folder. He leaves after the brief interrogation. He gives me hope: something good can still happen.

In a matter of about thirty minutes we learn that the ward manager has approved my mother's request that I be moved to a hospital closer to home. I cannot contain my excitement as we wait for Dr Lagada's letter of referral. Dr Lagada gives my mother the letter to my freedom and wishes us luck. 'Thank you,' I say to the doctor. I say goodbye to the security guard as he opens the gate for my final departure.

Kwanele once told me that a man walks tall when coming out of a mental institution. It is a new day, on the streets they are stringing up newspaper billboards on lamp posts. 'I don't understand why doctor Lagada had to lie, saying he had received complaints about your behaviour last night,' mother says. 'The ward manager said that they did not receive any complaints about your behaviour last night.'

We wait for a taxi in a bus shelter. A cold wind is blowing. 'There was also a strange nurse...?' my mother says. 'That one who looked like a *moffie*, who was carrying a bag the whole time. Can you believe he said to me: "I know you. You came all the way from East London."'

*

Tongai did indeed take up my offer of taking all the groceries. He has cleaned out all the food from the cupboard and the fridge. All that remains of Tongai are four of his boxers hanging in

the shower. My mother advises that I do not sleep in my bedroom. 'I have also been sleeping in the lounge,' she says. 'There's a lot of shuffling that happens in this block of flats, especially when it hits midnight.'

*

In the late morning we leave the apartment keys with the lady from the body corporate for collection by the agent and catch a cab to the airport. The cab climbs slowly up Liesbeeck Parkway. We pass shanty towns on the sides of the N2.