

Pitched

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by

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Abstract

Pitched is a novella made up of short stories. It is about breaking in, breaking down and breaking out of the advertising industry. My protagonist loves and hates this confusing world she lives in. She is tough but also emotional and anxious, often trapped between her strong desires and her strong morality. She finds herself both attracted to and repulsed by the people who inhabit this world - sexy wolf-like men, and prickly female execs alike. I have been inspired by the work of Lidia Yuknavitch, Kate Zambreno, Michelle Tea and Chris Kraus to create a universal woman I can identify with.

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Interns

A lineup. Four females; two males. Their graduate caps on their heads. Black gowns on their shoulders.

“Do you want to go first?” Creative Director asks. He gets up from his chair. The metal legs scrape the linoleum floor. Leaving a mark.

Wolf Man sits back. He lights a cigar. He narrows his eyes, smoke filling the room. “In a moment.”

Creative Director shifts on his feet. He is impatient. He is important. He has many things to do. He moves to the double-sided glass, the lineup of graduates beyond. He taps on the glass with two knuckles.

“They can’t hear you, you know,” Wolf Man says. He puffs on the cigar. Blows a perfect circle in the direction of Creative Director.

“Obviously,” Creative Director responds. He sits down again. Taps his sneakered feet on the floor. “So, you’re sure these graduates are the cream of the crop?”

Wolf Man narrows his eyes. Bares his teeth. He shoves a folder on the table across to Creative Director. “Cream of The Graduate Class.”

Creative Director licks his lips. “Sweet.”

He opens the folder. Extracts six pieces of paper. Photographs of the graduates attached to the top of each paper. He looks up at each graduate beyond the glass as he places the papers side by side.

Wolf Man kills his cigar on the table with a hiss. He swivels in his chair to face the graduates, his legs on either side of the chair’s back. He observes each of them, trailing over the women’s bodies, hidden under their gowns and graduation dresses. His eyes drill through the material to their flesh. So clean. So fresh. He can almost taste them on the tip of his tongue. He sizes up the boys. Frail egos. He can almost smell the fear of their insecurity through the glass. It pleases him.

He nods at Creative Director. Pushes a button, which activates the intercom in the investigation room.

“Greetings, creatives,” he says.

They stiffen. Straighten their shoulders. Glance at one another.

“Thank you for coming here today,” Wolf Man continues. “If you can all just look in the direction of the red wall.”

The graduates stare. Frowns between their eyebrows.

“This is how this session is going to run: we are going to ask you to step forward one by one, and to tell us why we should take you on as an intern at the Agency.”

The graduates shuffle uncomfortably. One girl touches her hair underneath her cap. Another folds her hands into each other. One boy clenches his hands into fists. Wolf Man releases the intercom button. Sits back. He lifts one eyebrow at Creative Director. “They’re all yours.”

Wolf Man gets up and moves to a small steel table in the corner. A bottle of whiskey and two tumblers arranged on it. He pours three-finger whiskey in both glasses. Hands one to Creative Director.

They clink their glasses, the future in their eyes. Newborn creatives for the taking.

Creative Director swallows the golden liquid. He tastes the newness of his Agency’s future. The possibilities. The clients he can pitch for. The awards he can win. The money he can lose himself in.

He smiles to himself. His muscles relax. Today he will leave with two new interns in his pocket.

As the first graduate steps forward, she flashes an innocent smile, and removes her cap.

*

We nod as one after his interview. Cute and clever. We’ll take him, the latest pixel pusher.

We arrange the desks to make sure he sits close to us, to learn. To keep an eye on his messaging habits.

We teach him:

how to resize

the real purpose of smoke breaks

the power of ignoring snotty emails from client service

the ranks

what to say when a deadline won’t be met

how we take our coffee.

We force tequila down his throat every Friday night. We laugh when he gets drunk and takes off his shirt in the bar. We appreciate his early-twenties flat stomach. We message each other the next morning, sharing pictures of his nipples. When Monday comes, we work like we drink.

He works late and we applaud him. We accept emails at 10pm and reply immediately. We don't feel guilty when he shows up with red eyes. We nod silently when he tells us he broke up with his girlfriend. We take him out for a boozy lunch and expect high res images in our inboxes the next morning.

We take him to a client presentation. Just once. We introduce him as The Intern. We push him to the back of the room. We present an entire campaign and never look at him. We high five each other when we leave the room; we don't look back to see if he follows.

We get out of hand one night. We go to a club after we've depleted the office bar. We dance close to him. We make an intern sandwich and laugh our asses off. We go our separate ways at three in the morning.

We snigger and coo when we discover that one of the client service girls took him home that night. We find delight in the size of his penis, and the way he stumbled over her designer table and hurt his little toe when he entered her flat. We affirm it a great one-night stand, never to be repeated.

We shake our heads when he tells us he's leaving. We think the same, though: he hasn't even been an intern for six months. We planned on promoting him. Some day.

We hear months later that he was gay, and had left our agency because he felt like he had no real friends. We purse our lips, grab a pile of CV's and start the search for our new pixel pusher.

*

She hops in on her first day, hair straight, neck tall, eyes round.

"I can't wait to write awesome copy."

I can't wait to get out of this shithole.

"I feel like I have so much to give with my writing."

I feel like all I can give right now is a fuck.

"You've been a writer for, how many years?"

I hate counting. “Ten.”

“This campaign is SO exciting. Aren’t you amped to start brainstorming on it?”

I’m amped to go home and brainstorm ways to make a living without selling my soul. “Sure.”

“See you tomorrow, for another rad day!”

She hops out of the office, hair kinked, neck slightly bent, eyes square.

She is an hour late for work on her one-year anniversary. There’s an email in her inbox waiting to congratulate her.

“Do you want to get a coffee?” I ask when she gets in.

“I’m hungover as hell.”

I’m hungover on this job.

“Yes for coffee. Did you get the copy I sent last night for client X? I emailed it just before I went out.”

Yes, and I wish I hadn’t, because your copy is average, and my copy is average, and this job is average. And I hate it and I don’t know why I bother. “I did, thanks. And it looks good. Exactly what client asked for.”

Watered down words that talk about how brand X will turn you into a big ass success.

“Let’s do that coffee then. I need it n-o-w. Last night was (sniff) too sick.”

Beautiful puffy lines of snow white devil’s dandruff. I know. I’ve been there. Party-party-rock-candy-booze-and-cigarettes and the fluffy clouds of awesome that give you a kick in the head, an ego the size of your creative director’s car and strings-of-words-that-never-end.

The day she resigns she is wearing a dark dress, hair tied back, neck crooked, eyes smoky.

“This is not what I want to do with my life.”

It’s not what anyone wants, but hey, here we are. “I understand. You’ve got to do what makes you happy.”

“I’m going travelling for a year. I want to see the world.”

I want to see anything, anything beyond these four walls of endless grinding, talking, cheating, smoking, writing. “Good for you.” And I mean it.

“I might even find a job in another country. Work in a bar, you know?”

Yes. Now get out. “Awesome. I’ll write you a great reference letter.”

“Will you? Thanks so much. You really are the greatest writer I know.”

And I want to steal your passport, take your dad’s salary, live on an island, drink cocktails for breakfast, surf for lunch, run naked on deserted beaches and learn a language that no one has ever heard of.

“You’ll be great. We’re gonna miss you, but I wish you only well.”

“That means so much to me.”

I cry into my laptop as another young writer decides to live.

*

OFFER LETTER:

Dear Intern,

We are pleased to confirm our offer to you to join the Agency (the ‘Employer’) as design intern slash office bitch slash slave. You will be reporting to the following dickheads: creative director, Man 1, and senior designer, Man 2.

The primary objective of the role is to make coffee, run errands, lose your mind and your current friends, and learn how to design meaningless advertising material for people who are insecure, just like you.

Your role and responsibilities are detailed below. Your duties will include, but will not be limited to the following:

- Design input on all campaigns, keeping in mind that your input probably won’t be considered
- Lying to clients and/or client service and/or Man 1 and Man 2 about missed deadlines, alcohol consumption and internal sexual relations in order to protect any of the involved parties
- Putting your passions aside to serve the greater good of the Agency
- Organising meetings, brainstorming, social events and presentations, and reorganising the aforementioned when no one shows up
- Finding ways to make yourself invisible at the above gatherings
- Making Man 1 and Man 2 look good above all else

- Building relationships that will make you believe you are part of a bigger family, although any or all of these members could turn on you in the event of pressure, fire or lost clients

You will carry out your duties at the offices of the Employer at Hell's Circle, c/o Deception & Madness, Cape Town, South Africa. The Employer retains the right, upon written notice to you, to change, tweak, distort or destroy your contract at any point, without explanation.

Commencement

On successful completion of the Employer's recruitment process, your employment will commence on 1 November 2015. The recruitment process includes interviews with several dickheads; providing proof of ID, criminal records and blood samples; as well as providing the Employer with contactable references. Your contract will terminate and self-destruct one year after the commencement date, on 31 October 2016. You understand that once you've signed on the dotted line, we own your soul, and that there will be no expectation of a renewal or continuance of the contract of employment.

By accepting this offer of employment you confirm, and the Employer relies on your confirmation, that you are not breaching any legal obligation owed by you to a third party. In other words, you're not fucking us over by joining the Agency while still freelancing for another company and/or client.

Probation

The initial 3 months after you commence employment will be a probationary period. During this time you have to prove that you're worthy of this contract and a deserving minion to Man 1 and Man 2. The purpose of the probationary period is to allow us to decide if you're really worth our time and energy, and to assess if your soul is fickle enough to make a success of your role as set out above.

During your probationary period, either party may terminate the employment by giving to the other party one-week's notice in writing. We say this, but what we really mean is, we reserve the right to give you notice anywhere from one hour to one week.

Working Time and Hours

Your normal working hours are 40 hours a week, which must be worked in accordance with the needs of the business. Most of our employees push up to 80 hours a week, and less than this will be frowned upon. Stipulated working hours are from 08:30 to 17:30 every normal working day, with one hour allowed for lunch. Again, most of our employees don't wear watches and work until the job is done, anytime from 20:00 to midnight. Or longer, depending if we're pitching.

The Agency agrees to feed you with junk food after hours, pump you with alcohol when the going gets tough, and sometimes surprise you with a line of cocaine or two. It has to be noted that this isn't guaranteed and rests solely upon the discretion of your line managers, Man 1 and Man 2.

Remuneration and Benefits

Your commencing Total Cost To Company will be ZAR5,000 per month, including all benefits, which will be deducted from your monthly salary. The leftover amount (after cigarettes, alcohol, coffee and petrol) of approximately R200 will be payable monthly on or before the 25th day of each month.

Remuneration levels are reviewed annually, and any adjustments and/or changes are at the absolute discretion of the Employer. Please note that all information regarding remuneration is confidential and should not be discussed with other Agency employees, your mom and dad, your pets and/or your girlfriend and boyfriend. Trust us, we will know. And send the Wolf Man to pounce on you.

Documentation

We have forwarded your Employment Agreement along with this letter, where we have outlined in more detail how we will dissect, eat and feast on your soul. We ask that you return the completed documentation prior to your commencement date to enable us to laugh at you before you join the team.

Acknowledgement, Declaration and Acceptance

Please sign below, the Wolf Man is watching.

I understand and hereby acknowledge and accept the terms and conditions of employment as set out in this letter and the fuck-off long and confusing Employment

Agreement as emailed to me by the Agency. I declare that I have read and understood all policy documentation provided to me. I enclose all signed documents as well as a vial of my blood to this acceptance letter.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Like, Unlike, Block, Delete

The photograph is of her kissing a man that's not me. Not really a man. A boy, he is. A man-boy. One of her students.

My mouth tastes of last night's evils. Dagga. Beer. Photographs. Lots of young people. Students. Young boys. Delicious boys.

I light a stale cigarette, crinkled from sleeping in my jeans' pocket. I click to the next photograph. Not her. Students sucking each other's faces. Pouty mouths. Beer hands. I click again. Her face. Surrounded by three boys, like the petals of a flower.

I look around my flat. Do I have any leftover spliff?

I click on her profile. When last did she say something? Ah, there. This morning at 1:23 she posted one last photo. I think I left just before midnight. She stayed behind. She wasn't that drunk. I was drunk and high, and she said she was fine.

So. Fine.

I had to be taken home by someone else. I don't deal well with crowds. All her students are too beautiful. Perfect. I am short, my body not trim. I drank tequila, one, two, three, and that was me. The green stuff did not help; my toilet bowl embraced me when I got home. Thank God for Miss M who held me after I had puked. I can't embarrass my girlfriend in front of her students.

Girlfriend?

There are photos of us from before. She crawled under my arm, we smiled, it snapped, we posted it immediately and got like, like, like within minutes. *Look at them, they are in love, how sweet, love is great. At last these fuckers found each other.* I love her, I don't love breasts, I'm lying to myself.

I unlike two of our photos from the early days. One where she is smiling too widely. One where I am smiling too widely.

I check my phone. No messages. It's 11:23. She's probably sleeping. The phone rings before I can toss it. It's her. I click on the "x" to close Facebook before I answer. I don't say a word.

"Hi, love, how-are-you? What-happened-last-night? You-left-so-early?" Guilty. Every word from her lips drips with guilt.

"I left with Miss M, remember? I told you I was leaving, maybe you were too excited to hear me over the music, or somethin'." Or somethin'.

“Oh, thank-goodness. I was worried. So glad you got home safe. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to meet Miss M. There were just too many people. Cray-zeeeee.”

She is rambling. She is trying to explain herself. I imagine the size of her eyes as her words trip over each other.

I stall.

She is not stupid. “Are you cool? Are we good? You sound a little weird.”

“Ya, I’m good. Are you good?” Easier to return questions.

“Fine-fine-fine. Just a little tired, but I had so much fun last night. So. Much. I haven’t been on Facebook, but I think a lot of people took photos.”

Change the subject. Compliments work. “I’m sure your students loved having a party with their lecturer.”

“Yeah, it was fun... I feel like I didn’t see you at all last night. You looked very pissed when you left.”

I toy with my lighter. “I was fine. I’m fine... It’s fine.”

She wants to come over and bring me a coke. I say no, I have some admin to do. I switch off my phone.

I bite into my thumb. ‘Unlike’ is not enough. Delete, delete, delete. I’m about to reopen Facebook –

“What’s the matter?”

Shit. I jump, whip my head in the direction of the bedroom. He is up.

“Go back to bed.”

I don’t want him around when I have business to take care of. He of the student body. Her student. The one who left early too. The one I call Miss M. The one I met at a student exhibition where she works.

[I was browsing alone while she was talking to some parents.

He was touching his own work, photography of naked models. All males.

I left early that night too, not touching her or kissing her goodbye.

I had his student-designed business card in my pocket.]

“Are you okay?” He moves closer, his hands are small.

“Fine, I’m fine... It’s all fine. Go back to bed. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes, okay?” I move my hand over his torso. Warm torso.

He yawns. “Were you talking to someone on the phone just now?”

Excuse at the ready. “No, my phone is off.” I pick it up, fan it in front of his face. “Talking to myself... You know.”

He buys it. Shrugs. “Don’t take too long to come back to bed. This body is cold without you.”

I watch his narrow waist as he walks away. Beautiful boy.

I turn back to my Mac. I watch over my shoulder to make sure. I hear Miss M getting into bed. It’s a creaky bed.

[The first time we met for coffee, it ended in my bed.

He was eager.

He believed my stories: friend of the lecturers at his university; always been into men; not a gay-virgin at almost 30.]

I search for the photo of my girlfriend kissing her student. I request to have it deleted by the person who posted it. I wait for a response. I light another cigarette. I go to my ‘Block List’ to see if my beautiful boy is still there. Yes, yes, he is.

[He thinks I hate Facebook and don’t have a profile.

He of the young mind and naïve penis.

He is obsessed with himself.

He doesn’t see.

He loves working with male models.

He thinks I’m wise.

I don’t argue with him.]

After 11 minutes I get a notification – photo has been deleted. Good. I don’t want her feeling guilty for kissing a boy.

She invites a man

It was past morning coffee time when she made her way up the stairs. Her skirt was short, she knew where he sat.

What excuse could she use today? Whatwhatwhat. Think quick. Quick think. Something about seeing him drive behind her that morning. If only there hadn't been cars between them. Him behind her. Stop.

She spotted long-blonde-hair-earthy-look Jess at his desk. She smacked her off the desk, but remembered she was married to a woman. Bless 'em lesbians. She slinked back to her desk, her skirt still short.

By lunchtime she was tap, tap, tapping away. She watched from her perch as various men walked past, looking busy, looking cute. Lanky James was lanky. Long y. But his ass. It hugged the Levi jeans and gave it purpose. Charles was rough and broody, carrying dark clouds on his shoulders. She saw him pinning his fiancé to the wall when he got home after work. Lucky bitch. Dirk of the German accent was all voice and cool clothes. He had hard fingers and a wedding ring. She dived way past, but that didn't stop her from imagining his wife dancing to those fingers.

Then there was him. Him with the aloofness and reddish hair and bloody bulky stupid arms. He was most unlikely, that's why she fixated so.

She ordered a salad from the canteen and typed email upon email of to-do, must-have-done, have-done, should-be-done-soon, and done-done.

When sundowner time came, she thought she had a plan. She would ask him about yesterday's surf (or was it the day before?). The public holidays were confusing (fuck-knows when was Sunday, Saturday, Monday), but he was sure to have surfed at some point. Yes, that would always be a safe question.

He sat on the outside couch looking smug, and she moved closer with her skirt short and her ass tight from stress. All the tension from the day had settled there, where she hoped his eyes might trail.

She smoked in the corner with her friends, feeling safe. Her ass turned to him. The girls yacked about work and deadlines and the various weddings they had attended over the holidays.

When she turned to him, he didn't register. He got up and walked away without seeing just how tight her ass was. Damnit.

On her way home she remembered to stop. The grocery list wasn't getting shorter, unlike her skirt. Ha-ha. What skirt? The silly one that hadn't got her anywhere that day. She pulled out the list: same, same, same and same. An old fool ogled her, and she stepped aside. No use wearing stupid skirts when old fogies were the only ones noticing it. She made her way to the fruit isle. Naked berries everywhere. Very naked. She reached out and grabbed two-for-one. She turned and saw –

Him. He was in the fruit isle too, reaching for a peach. She imagined her breast replacing that peach. She envied the peach as his hand closed over it. Soft.

“Hey... It's not peach season,” she said.

He looked up. Smiled a little. Confused, maybe a little.

“Hi... there, you.”

“You live in the area?” she asked.

He nodded. The peach moved with his hand. Nodding too. Softness.

“Ya... I live just up the road.” She pointed in the general direction of the mountain.

He picked another peach. Squeeze.

“So, what's with this peach season story? It's always any fruit season at Woolies.”

How about breast season? Is it always breast season too?

She shrugged. “Getting wine.”

She moved off, her ass tight, her short skirt still shortness. He must follow with his eyes, please. And then with the rest of him. Come on.

She grabbed a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, throttling it. He didn't follow. Oh well, fuckhim. Hashtag fuckhim, actually.

The plastic bag ate into her hand as she struggled to open her boot. She heard the berries squeal inside.

“You need a hand, lady?” He was behind her.

Only if it's *your* hand. On *me*. You know. That.

“Thanksomuch. Always handbag, bag, groceries, shit.” Breathlessness.

“No problem.” He smacked the boot closed.

“You on your way home?” That just came out of her mouth.

He nodded peaches.

“Would you like to come round for a glass of wine. We’re practically neighbours, right?”

He nodded more peaches.

“Rad,” she pointed at the exit. “Follow me home?”

“Cool, cool.” He looked unsure of her, but certain of the way.

She drove slow. She wanted to extend the feeling, the foreplay, the anticipation of it all. He was behind her, on his way to her, his car’s front sniffing her rear.

She opened the apartment while he carried her groceries. She relieved him of the hungry plastic bag, poured wine with her back to him. He was bigger in her apartment than in the office. She turned, offered him a glass. She noticed a yellow fleck in one eye. Gosh, she could die.

Wine, slow. She tried, she really did. But it flowed too easily down to the pit of her stomach. She offered him berries in a white bowl.

“That’s a weird-looking berry. Is it even berries?” He angled his head to get a closer look.

“It’s the kind I like... Prefer. You know.”

He looked at her, his face a challenge. “What happened to eating strawberries for dessert?”

She carried the bowl outside, to the balcony of stars and mountain.

She swallowed a ‘ha’. “We’re not eating dessert. I don’t even cook. So this is it.”

What kind of cliché did he take her for? It made her sick.

She turned to the darkness beyond the balcony. He did too.

“Nice view.”

“Yeah, I love it here.” She sat down, he next to her. The wine was trite.

They sat in silence. Now what? She sipped.

“You’re a little...,” he hesitated, but not long, “...strange.”

She looked at him, the moon was just rising, his face unsure.

“Aren’t we all? I mean, all of us in the ad game?”

He traced her face with his eyes. She wished she was standing. Her ass was better than her face. She bit into a berry. Purple juice tangy. Yum. And sour.

He lifted his glass of wine, she watched the veins on his arms tangle and twist. How she wished to lick those veins until they throbbed.

“Are you single?” That just came out of her mouth.

If a smile could be skew, he made it. A small one, with a sarcastic huh-huh as backdrop.

“I thought I should ask. You never know with ad men.” Ad men. Mad Men. They all played the game. And dreamt of screwing like Don Draper.

“Well... Yes, I’m not seeing anyone.”

Silence.

“Would it make a difference if I wasn’t single?”

Fuckyes. What kind of ho did he take me for? “Yes.” Firm. “I don’t do involved men.”

He put his glass down. It rattled.

“So, are you planning on doing me then?”

When? The question made her want to undo it all. Do it. Do him. Undo herself. Do it over. Don’t do it. What is this ‘do’ anyway? Get out. Kick him out. Undo him. Puke.

“Haven’t made up my mind.” She said between a swallow of wine.

He watched her mouth. She hated it when they did that. It made her feel forced to lick her lips. Which made her feel like a cardboard Barbie, or slutty, or minxy. And she felt nothing like that. At all.

“Well then, will you let me know when you’ve made up your mind?”

Men, they were easy. All of them. Fucking predictable bastards.

The moon was climbing. She liked how it touched the mountain, just a little. Not for long, but just to let it know it was there. A tickle, but more like a breath of a tickle.

“Can I top up your wine, lady?” He was up. He was hovering over her. She liked it, but she didn’t.

She handed over her glass. He went inside, she talked to the stars.

I shouldn’t have invited him, what was I thinking?! Stupid. Shitless. WTF? Now that he’s here I don’t know what to do with him. I want him to lick me, but I want him to come somewhere else. I want to come, but I want to do it alone. I want him with me, but I want him to go away. I want a warm body in my bed that’s not just my own, but I want my space for myself. He cannot see me naked, but I want him all over me. I want to know him, but I don’t want him here.

Do you get it?

“You like ice with your wine?” He was back.

“No... thanks. No ice for me.”

They clinked glasses. She needed the wine. They drank more silence. She lit a cigarette.

“Can I have one?”

She shook one out for him. She held the lighter, their hands touched. His was promisingly hard. She hated the word ‘hard’.

After this glass I am going to kiss him. I am going to finish it, move closer and pull in to him. Or I am going to walk back into my apartment – he will follow – and I will lead him into my bedroom.

No.

I will lead him into the lounge and kiss him on the couch. But what if he is standing and I am sitting? Weird. Should I pull him down with me?

No.

I will lead him into the kitchen, pretend to look for something to eat, and kiss him while we’re both standing.

Yes.

“I love smoking.” She really did. Maybe too much. She didn’t pretend.

He sat back, blew smoke through his big mouth. “I want to quit this shit.”

“I did. For three months. Then I started again. This year. Kak. It’s hard. I don’t hate myself. Now I know I can quit again. Three months isn’t nothing. Nothing at all. It’s a long time in my eyes.”

“So, why did you start again?”

She blew in the other direction. “Rough year.”

He nodded at the moon. The stars were hidden behind the clouds now. No wishes on their first night, then. Good.

She swallowed the last sip. Two down, none to go.

Now or never. Wish me luck. Fuckit. For what it’s worth. And all that high five bullshit.

She got up, his glass was still half full.

“More wine?” She pointed at his glass.

“I’ll get it.”

She moved both her hands in a come-closer gesture. “Why don’t we both get it?”

He looked confused, maybe. But he followed.

In the kitchen, by the sink, she turned. Her back was safe, her chest was open. She took his glass from his hand.

“And now?”

She rested her ass on the counter for balance. He was a strong man. He moved closer.

He kissed unsure at first. He parted his lips. She gave him tongue first. He followed. She tasted sea salt and teenager angst and man. It was exciting.

I want all of him, but nothing. I want him to touch me, but I want to kick him in the groin. I want him to go away, but stay. I want him to take his penis elsewhere, but climb into the shower with me. Oh shit, what have I done?

“Something wrong?” His mouth was by her ear.

She shook her head, bit his neck. Maybe too hard, but he didn't flinch.

“You. Should. Go.”

“What?”

She took his tongue again. She pressed her body against his. He was hard. Too close. Get closer. Get off. Getoff, getoff, getoff.

“Please go.”

She pushed him slightly. He stepped back.

“You confuse me.” He might have scratched his head, she wasn't sure.

“Thanks for coming round for...” she walked to the front door, “wine and stuff. I'll buzz the gate.”

He shook his head. “Is that it? This...?”

She nodded. She begged.

Please understand. Don't judge. Don't hate. Don't tell. Don't talk to me. Kiss me. Go away. Love me. Just leave me alone.

Pitched

He asked her to spend the night. She brought him tea in bed the next morning.

He grabbed her arm as she placed the mug next to him.

“Come here.” His voice muffled in the white duvet. His legs straddling a pillow. Their love nest. Bad idea. What had she done?

“We’re gonna be late for work.” She pulled away. Only slightly.

“Who the hell cares?” He tugged at her underwear. She was wearing the white camisole from yesterday’s office outfit and the turquoise panties she had grabbed from her closet, never imagining where they would lead her 12 hours later. But it wasn’t the panties’ fault. It was all hers. Or his, actually. Yes, yes, it was all him.

“You care,” she reminded him. “It’s Wednesday AKA pitch day, remember?”

He fingered the lace at the bottom of her panties. “Let’s do something this weekend. Go away somewhere. Like Franschoek or Greyton. Let’s just get out of town for a bit.” His eyes were round. Puppy-dog round.

“How about we just get pitch day over first, and then chat?”

His hand moved to her bum. “I don’t care about pitches right now. I care about what’s in front of me. I want to take you somewhere this weekend. What do you say?”

She grabbed his hand and pushed him back. She looked him in the eye.

“Really?”

He nodded. “Now are you coming back to bed, or do I have to beg?”

She opened the duvet like a present. “Fine. Five minutes.”

In the boardroom everyone looked dark. Dressed in black to represent the client logo. She was allowed in the meeting only because she was a mid-weight copywriter now. It was her first pitch. She wasn’t allowed to speak, though.

Stand in the corner and look pretty, the MD had said.

She watched him, her bad boy, as he presented. His arms moved up and down, showing his passion for the concept. The same arms that had wrapped around her the night before. Or in the early hours of the morning. The arms that had tempted her day-in and day-out. Why was last night different from any other night? They always worked together late into the night. He was her mentor. He had asked her for drinks once; she had said a very firm no.

And then: He asked her to work from home with him; he was hungry and had food at home. She was so exhausted from the stress of the pitch, she agreed without

overthinking it. She didn't feel like eating tuna from a can yet again anyway. He made pasta while she went over the presentation with him, fine-tuning the details. He poured wine. She shook her head. He placed a glass next to her anyway. She sipped when he turned back to his pasta pot. It tasted amazing. When he served the food, she was on her second glass of wine.

Back in the boardroom everyone was looking up at him. He laughed when the brand manager asked a cocky question. She laughed back. The brand manager looked like a model. She made notes as he spoke and brushed her hand through her perfect hair when he looked at her. She was a tough nut to crack, he had said many times, but right now it looked like he was cracking her.

When the words on her laptop started to blur, she got up and stretched.

"I think this presentation is as good as it's going to get. And I'm beat."

He didn't move. "And?"

"And I have to sleep." She looked at her iPhone. "It's nearly two o'clock and I don't even know who I am anymore."

"You've done a great job, Junior." He smiled. He knew she hated it when he called her that. She had been promoted from junior to middleweight copywriter three months ago, but he still called her Junior when they were alone.

"Thanks, Boss." She cocked her head. She knew he hated it when she called him that. She had her own bullets to protect herself. "You're gonna kill it tomorrow, no doubt."

"We. We are gonna kill it."

"I'm just there to look pretty, remember?" She closed her laptop, reached for her handbag.

"Hey." He was suddenly next to her. Close. Too close. "You're much more than that, okay?"

She shrugged it off. Whatever.

"Look at me."

She knew she shouldn't, but she did. His eyes were too blue for their own good. His body was strong from all the surfing on weekends. She saw glimpses of his tanned and hard muscles every day at work. She always looked away too late. She hated how he made her feel. But she loved it. And she was tired. Tired of fighting it. Tired of working 16-hour days. Just damn tired.

He kissed her.

She stepped back before she could melt. “This is a bad idea.”

“Come on, Junior. You know you want me too. Just spend the night with me already, okay?”

“What about work? We’ve had this conversation. Seriously, though. You’re my manager, and I just can’t.”

“No one will know, okay. I won’t say anything. Will you?”

Wait. What? That wasn’t the point. But her legs were shaky, her body was responding, her mind was taking off and galloping into the sunset.

He kissed her again. It felt like Christmas and first kisses and chocolate melting on her tongue and hot sand between her toes and oh-so-good.

She was in his bed, and she saw a flash of turquoise. She stopped him again.

“Just wait.”

“What? What now?”

“We have to be at work in less than six hours.”

“And your point?”

“I don’t have any fresh clothes here.”

“Let’s deal with that tomorrow, okay?”

“But it’s pitch day... We have to be fresh.”

“Just shut up and come here.”

In the boardroom the pitch was over. There was a lot of hand-shaking, back-slapping, and cheek-kissing. He escorted the client team to the door. The model-bitch-brand-manager gave him another cheek-kiss before they left.

She kept her distance the rest of the day. He was distracted. She knew him well enough to know it was about the pitch. He prided himself on winning all his pitches. He was just that kind of creative director. He loved the hunt, the kill, the success. She didn’t want to be the first to break the silence and ask about ‘them’. If there even was a ‘them’. She sent a formal “Well done on the great pitch today” email before she left the office.

Thursday morning she remembered that he was out of office for two days on a TV shoot. She was relieved, but disappointed. Why did she even care? She had a job to do – a job she loved at an agency she loved even more.

On Thursday evening he sent her a message: *Are you packed for the weekend?* ;) Her heart clenched and unclenched with excitement. She squealed a little before she replied: *Are we still on for that, for real?* He replied: *Absolutely. Pack that turquoise*

number of yours. She smiled to her little toe and selected her sexiest nighties. She wanted to phone her best friend and tell her all about it, but her best friend was also her work neighbour – account manager in client service. And she had promised not to tell. She wasn't telling. She was dying to tell, but she wouldn't. It was their secret and it was real and it was hot and it was sexy.

At 12pm on Friday the agency was called into the boardroom.

“Well done, team. We won the pitch,” the MD said as champagne bottles were popped.

Her creative director appeared out of nowhere to make a toast. She tried to make eye contact with him, but he avoided her gaze. She wanted to send him a signal. A sexy signal to tell him that she was excited, ready and waiting. Her little bag was in the boot of her car and her mind was racing.

He disappeared after 30 minutes to go back to his TV shoot, and she dragged herself to her desk. She didn't feel like drinking champagne and getting drunk while he wasn't there.

“Hey, babe.” Her friend was by her desk. Eyes slightly glazed. Champagne glass filled to the brim. “Whatcha doin'?”

“I'm not in the mood for drinking. I'd rather get my work done and get out of here early.” And wait for him. Him. The man who made her heart do funny jumps. Who made her palms sweaty when he wasn't even touching her. The man who could take off her turquoise panties in under one second. Him. Yes, him.

“But you played such a big part in winning this damn client. Why aren't you keen to celebrate?”

She looked away from her friend's inquiring eyes. “Just over it. I think I need sleep more than champagne. But you go have fun.”

“You know what will be even more fun?”

“What?”

“Client is throwing a massive dinner party for the senior staff tonight, did you know? They're all going on a sunset cruise or some shit.”

She shook her head. Senior staff. MD, AD, FD and CD, most probably. Her CD. She hid her smile. He was giving up a client dinner on a yacht to spend a weekend with *her*?! That must mean something.

By 11pm that evening, she switched off her phone and cried herself to sleep. Somehow her account manager friend had managed to make it onto the yacht, and had

sent her photos from the party. Her and the MD, looking rather comfortable. The FD and a big-chested blonde pouting into the camera. The AD and a bunch of young guys without shirts throwing alcohol into his open mouth. And a photo of her creative director with the model-bitch-brand-manager sitting curled up on his lap.

Narcy & Lucy

Lucy looks up, smelling new meat. She elbows Narcy.

“He looks fresh,” says Lucy, licking her lips.

“Fresh off the boat,” Narcy agrees. She nods her head, taking in the new guy. She likes what she sees.

He is skinny. Heroin chic, she would say. His face is arranged around his designer beard. His glasses are the perfect shape of hip. Not round, slightly pointy. It makes his face look serious, but laid-back. His outfit was meticulously picked, maybe with the help of a girlfriend. Narcy checks his ring finger. Clear. Yes, girlfriend. She looks in his eyes. A girlfriend, definitely.

She turns back to the clothes. The newbie wears a checked shirt that cinches in around his narrow waist. His denim looks old, but is new. His shoes are a new brand of sneaker off the Internet, without a doubt. No average store shopping for this guy.

Narcy watches him cross the reception area of the agency. He extends his hand to the receptionist as he requests the name of Narcy’s favourite human, the creative director.

“Today is my first day,” he says as a way of explaining his presence.

“Have a seat,” says the receptionist, looking tired. She indicates the couch.

Narcy winks at Lucy. Lucy smirks back. Lucy had her way with the receptionist on Friday night through a bottle of vodka. The receptionist hooked up with one of the IT guys and spent the rest of the weekend hating herself. Lucy giggles when she remembers them having sex on the exact couch the newbie is about to sit on. How she hovered over the receptionist, whispering into her ear. Telling her to unzip the IT guy’s trousers. To forget her fiancé at home. To let herself be seduced by the cuteness of the young guy who had fingers like a pianist, but touched like a real man.

Lucy wipes her mouth to remove the spit that had formed in the corners of her mouth. She moves her attention back to the newbie. “Should we move in?” she asks Narcy.

Narcy sits back, lights a cigarette. “A few more minutes. I love observing them before it all starts.”

“I’m bored,” says Lucy. She rubs her hands together until she feels the heat forming.

“Wait.” Narcy exhales a cloud of smoke.

She narrows her eyes, looking for insecurities in the newbie. It takes a few moments to spot it, but then the clouds of her cigarette part. She sees the newbie’s thoughts. His brain is busy. Yes, yes. It’s all there. She takes it all in. This is his first job. He graduated six months ago and started feeling like a failure when he couldn’t nail a job like his friends. His father’s voice haunts him. The voice that had told him numerous times that he should have studied something more worthwhile. Narcy loves that. So much to work with here, she nods slowly.

The newbie moved in with his girlfriend a few months ago. A very pretty illustrator who works from home. He worked as a barman in a tiny club on Bree Street and barely had money for groceries. His dad cut him off financially. He felt like a loser when he couldn’t buy his girlfriend the ring she wanted for her birthday.

Narcy closes her eyes. She goes deeper.

The newbie is insecure about his relationship with his girlfriend. She comes from a rich family. He hates it when other men look at her, which happens often. She is too perfect for him. Those words eat at him when he tries to fall asleep at night, spooning her. Her face is strong, her mouth delicate. He is obsessed with kissing that mouth, but worried that his kisses aren’t enough. Her hair is long and shines in the sunlight when she goes for a run. He wishes he was stronger and had more muscle to hold her. He worries that his penis is too small. He tries to overcompensate with oral sex, but she never comes when he goes down on her. He looks up ‘how to please a woman’ online when he’s alone at home. He tries his new tricks when she returns, but she doesn’t respond the way he wishes her to. She never goes down on him, but he doesn’t mind. She’s too beautiful to ask for a blow job. Her mouth too precious.

Narcy opens her eyes. “We’ll work on that, young one,” she says to herself.

“Can we go already?” Lucy huffs. “I’m starving, Narce.”

Narcy kills her cigarette and stretches. “Let’s do it.”

Lucy is first to reach him. She circles him slowly, sniffing his neck.

“Now aren’t you something delicious to look at,” she says.

He is sitting with a strained smile, waiting to be collected from reception.

Lucy smells his sweat and squeals with delight. “He is off-the-hook scared!”

Narcy keeps her distance while Lucy does her usual routine of sniffing, hovering, investigating and sizing up until she settles somewhere comfortable.

“You’re gonna win awards within six months of joining this place,” Lucy whispers into his ear. “And get an increase,” she purrs. She circles him one last time and finds a pocket close to his heart. “Money will make this job all worthwhile, little darling,” she breathes.

His mouth twitches, his eyes wide.

Narcy sees her creative director approaching from the inside of the office and decides to make her move on the newbie.

“Do you see this man approaching?” She leans in close to him. “You’re hotter than him. You see his frown lines? Yes, he is at least 15 years older than you. You are young and energetic and don’t need anyone. You are hot. Hot, hot, hot. And new and fresh. Now get the fuck up.”

The newbie swallows. He looks in the reflection of the office doors as he gets up to extend his hand to the creative director.

“You are fucking fantastic, actually. Now go and show this damn fool what a hot new thing you are.” Narcy pushes him lightly in the small of his back as he steps forward. He grabs the hand of the creative director. She sees a flicker of surprise in the creative director’s eyes.

She pokes Lucy from her position in his pocket. “Did you see that?”

“I sure did,” Lucy responds and bites lightly into the newbie’s skin. “So yummy.” She smiles, satisfied.

Narcy follows them. She runs her hand over the creative director’s crotch. She knows that he knows that she’s there. She’s always there. She groomed him herself. From a young creative to an award-winning creative director, she held his hand when he walked up the stage. She hugged him when he lost yet another girlfriend because ‘he is married to his job.’ She confirmed the size of his penis the best in Cape Town. And did he know what to do with it, ladies, yes, he did. He worked a room just as well as he worked a woman in bed. He knew how to hold them to make them feel special, what to say to get them to drop their panties. When he woke in the mornings, it was Narcy who was there to tell him to let the girl out. She talked him through his depression, told him how good he was by himself. Stronger, smarter, harder. It’s what women wanted. She dressed him to be named one of the hottest bachelor’s in Cape Town. She cradled his head in her lap when he came down from a cocaine binger.

Narcy sighs with pleasure. He is her pride and joy.

But he is getting older. His frown lines deeper. His ideas slower. His body not as trim as it used to be.

And Lucy loves to remind him of this, again and again. “Thirty-six with the liver of a fifty-year old,” Lucy had said to him on his 36th birthday and every day since.

“You will have to retire soon,” Narcy had said while massaging his shoulders, “and make way for the new guns. But you’re still the greatest man alive. Who cares if you’re still single and alone? Just look at the house you live in!”

“I’m keen for fresh meat,” Lucy had concluded, running her forked tongue over her red lips.

That was a month ago. And today they got their wish.

Narcy focuses her attention on the newbie and watches as he is introduced to a sexy client service girl.

“She’s something, isn’t she?” Narcy whispers. “You can have her, you know. You can have anyone. After a few drinks, they’re all easy.”

The newbie touches the back of his neck where a tattoo of his girlfriend’s design is half-hidden under his shirt. He blushes when the sexy client service girl laughs at his silly joke about being new.

“Nah,” Narcy says, “you’ll be forgetting about your own girl soon, your Sea Point Princess. She’s too high maintenance for you. You’ll be sleeping your way up the ranks and having the time of your life.”

“Hear, hear!” Lucy shouts and cradles his soul with her arms and legs. “He is weak this one. I’m so excited.” She pokes his soft spots with her tongue. Soft goo seeps from his soul. She licks at it. “Tasty.”

The newbie settles at his new desk, a brand new Mac in front of him. He switches it on.

Narcy observes herself in the computer screen. She pouts. “Yip, you’re hot.”

The newbie checks his beard before the computer lights up.

Narcy rounds him one last time before she finds a fragile spot in his ear. She curls up there, ready to groom her new talent.

Brainstormed

The boardroom table hums with expectation. Four chairs ready. Snacks in the centre. Cold beer in the bar fridge in the corner.

Four people enter: Executive Creative Director (male), Creative Director (male), Copywriter (female), Art Director (female). ECD retrieves four beers from the fridge.

The foursome takes position around the table. Females one side, males the other.

Art Director looks at her watch before clicking her pen. Six pm. Copywriter sends a text to her boyfriend: *Working late again. Will probably not be home for dinner. See you later xx*

CD sits back in his chair. Stretches his arms above his head. He yawns. Art Director looks at his neck. Notices the muscles twitch. She looks away. She's been single for two years. She loves a beautiful neck. She wants to lick it. She wants to trace her pen over it. Tattoo her name on it.

"Have you guys worked on any ideas for this brief yet?" CD asks.

Copywriter nods. "A few. But we don't think we're there yet."

ECD takes a sip of beer, wipes his mouth. Copywriter looks at his mouth. So different from her boyfriend's. She imagines the ECD's wife kissing that mouth. Every morning, every night. She imagines him using that mouth to please his wife. To kiss his baby. To nibble at his wife's body. Copywriter looks away. She's tired. Tired of working late every night. Tired of missing out on life.

"Let's hear it then," ECD says.

Art Director pages through her notepad. "This energy drink doesn't offer much more than any other energy drink on the market."

Copywriter nods. CD looks at his iPhone. ECD looks hard.

Art Director clears her throat. "Anyway, the only thing that makes it original is that it contains cocaine."

Silver Swan sticks her head out from between Art Director's cleavage. She looks left and right.

"So what?" CD asks. "What's cocaine got to do with it?"

Cockroach jumps from his shoulder. Flat, dark, fast. He scurries to the girls' side of the table. Sees the swan and hisses.

“Well, we think cocaine is a unique ingredient. We did some research on it and it really does something to the brain,” Copywriter says.

Butterfly escapes from the sleeve of her top. Circles the table above the snacks. She moves to ECD and flaps her wings above his head.

“But the brief already states that,” ECD says. “More or less. What else can you tell me about cocaine that I don’t know?”

Scorpion with a purple tail pokes his head through the top of the ECD’s trousers. Jumps from his waist to the table. He sees the cockroach and lifts his tail. Armed.

“For one, it keeps you awake for 48 hours,” Art Director says. “We thought we could shoot a TV ad for 48 hours straight and then cut it into a 60 second commercial.” Swan slides down her shirt, keeping one eye on the hissing cockroach. She hooks her feet around a button of the shirt and stays there, hovering.

“That’s not a concept. It’s too gimmicky,” CD says. “Is that all you came up with since this morning?” Cockroach jumps on his hind legs and spits in the direction of Swan. He laughs before turning and running to a dark corner of the table.

“We only got the brief this morning, though. We’re both still finishing up on the fast food brand campaign. Give us a break, okay?” Copywriter says. Her face turns red. She downs the last of her beer. Gets up for four more. Hands it around the table. She sits. Sighs. Runs her hand over her eyes. Butterfly lands on the ECD’s shoulder and sniffs his shirt. She tentatively sticks out her tongue and licks at his sweat.

“Fair enough,” ECD says. “Let’s move on.” He looks at CD. Scorpion moves sideways to Cockroach. His erect tail shaking.

“We also discussed the benefits of cocaine. Apparently it makes people’s eyes bigger. Since this is for a TV ad, we thought we could do a series of shots of people’s eyes. You know, like the intro to Orange is the New Black?” Copywriter says.

Butterfly folds her wings softly and places her head on the ECD, in the fragile space between his collarbones. Closes her eyes.

“Every fucking chick I know is obsessed with that damn show,” CD says. Cockroach eyes Butterfly and twitches. Bares his teeth.

“So? It’s great and everyone loves it,” Art Director says. Swan flaps her wings and dives for the table. Wipes her beak on the table. Left, right, left, right. She steps towards Cockroach.

“I’m not going to deny that,” ECD says. “Those scenes between the two hotties are pretty great.” Butterfly nudges her head closer to his skin. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s get back to the brief.”

“Cool.” Copywriter.

Butterfly slides down ECD’s throat and onto the boardroom table. She rests there.

“Cool.” Art Director.

Swan stalls.

“Cool.” CD.

Cockroach stops.

Scorpion circles the group, moving them closer together. He moves a few steps forward, until the creatures are facing each other, eye to eye. He takes position next to Cockroach.

“How about an energy drink that lets you do all the things you’ve ever wanted to do in 48 hours,” ECD says.

“Okay, okay. Like climb a mountain, bungee jump, get laid, win an award, sail a boat, and make shitloads of money, all in 48 hours,” CD says.

“Are you saying those are all the things men want to do?” Art Director asks. She focuses on the corner of the CD’s mouth. Delicious. She wants to suck it, and spit on it. She wishes to push her fingers into his mouth, forcing her fist into it. And then let him trace his tongue over her fingertips.

Swan opens her mouth and screams. Cockroach lifts himself on his hind legs and hisses back. They circle each other. Slowly at first. Then faster. Cockroach spits blobs of green goo into Swan’s eyes. She swings her neck left, and right. Drops to the ground.

“You clearly have no idea what men are about,” CD says.

“Well, enlighten me then.” Art Director lifts an eyebrow. A challenge. A question mark. An unanswered question. An invitation.

“Guys, can we get back to the target market, please? The brief says we have to focus on men and women, ages 18 to 35, LSM eight to ten,” Copywriter says. She feels sleepy. Her eyes are heavy. Too heavy for this day, this brief, this moment.

Butterfly tries to lift her head, but she falls back down again. Scorpion sees this and moves closer.

“Fuck the brief. Haven’t I taught you anything?” ECD asks, his eyes deep-set in his face. His frown dips from his forehead to his mouth, dragging it down.

Scorpion sees his gap and grabs Butterfly by the wings. He sinks his tail into the soft flesh of her abdomen. He rips the flesh, and two eggs roll onto the table.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be an asshole,” ECD says. “I’m just exhausted.” He gets up and takes another round of beers from the fridge.

Copywriter doesn’t move. She stares at the snacks. Stale pretzels.

Creative Director yawns. “This is useless.” He sucks on his beer. His eyes on Art Director. “Should we just drink?”

Art Director lifts her beer. “I’m keen, if you’re keen.” She tilts her beer towards Creative Director.

Swan blinks, the green goo making her go blind. She moves forward and trips. She gives up and folds her head under her left wing. She breathes deeply, feathers vibrating. Cockroach approaches and touches her with his two front legs. Swan lifts her head, eyes closed. She moans quietly before folding her head back again.

Copywriter looks at the time on her cell phone. “Well, if you guys don’t mind, I have to go.” She shifts in her seat, legs heavy. Her stomach cramps.

ECD nods. “Let’s meet again tomorrow. First thing in the morning. With fresh minds. Cool?” He gets up.

Scorpion extracts his tail from Butterfly and strokes her twice over her wings. Butterfly closes in on herself. Scorpion jumps back into ECD’s trousers.

Copywriter gets up. “Cool.” She grabs her handbag and heads for the door. “You coming?” To Art Director.

Art Director looks at CD, shakes her head.

Butterfly lays sprawled on the table, her two eggs too far to reach. She tries to move, but fails. Her body limp. Scorpion venom spreading slowly. She closes her eyes, wings tucked around her abdomen.

“Goodnight, then,” Copywriter says.

As ECD and Copywriter leave the boardroom, CD closes the door behind them.

The last thing Copywriter sees is Art Director pulling a feather from her mouth.

Nadja

She goes to “Voice Memos” on her iPhone and presses play on the “Make-up Focus Group” file.

She is filled with images of the women’s faces. Lauren with the perfect eyebrows and cherry red lips. Precious with the dark chocolate skin and zero blemishes. Janita with the three-coloured eye shadow and cat-like eyes. And Nadja. Nadja the natural. With mischief in her eyes and laugh lines around her lips.

>Play<

“Thanks for joining me today, ladies,” says her own voice. “As my email explained, we’re running a focus group for a US make-up brand that’s launching in South Africa-”

“Is it Missy?” Lauren interrupts.

“Ooooh, I would love to get my hands on Missy’s new rose eye shadow,” Janita continues.

She hears the annoyance in her own slight sigh. “Unfortunately I can’t disclose the brand. We’re here to chat about you. Each of you specifically and women in general. And of course, your views on make-up.”

A shuffle around the room. Clink of glass. Chair scraping.

“We’ll run through my questions for about 40 minutes and then have some tea.” Pause. “Good?”

A slight cough.

“I would like to know about your make-up routines... Would you like to go first, Janita?”

“I wouldn’t mind at all! What’s the first question?”

“Your make-up routine... Do you follow a specific routine every morning?”

“Every morning? I would rather say every few hours. Ha-ha-ha.” Her laugh is throaty.

No one else laughs.

“Can you tell me more about that?”

“Well, I do my make-up after my bath in the mornings. Then I reapply lipply and eyeliner at the office.” Pause. “Let me think... Then I reapply eyeliner again after

lunch as well as a coat of mascara. And after work, if I go out, I will take a shower and do my face again.”

“And before you go to bed, do you take it all off?”

“Yes, yes, obviously. Doesn’t every single women’s magazine tell you to do that?”

“Thanks, Janita, that’s really great.”

“What?”

“Your answers, thank you.”

“Okay, sure, no problem. Can I go for a cigarette while you talk to the others?”

“I would prefer if we all stayed in the room until we’re done. Thanks, Janita.”

Pause. “Fine.”

The click of buttons. Janita has turned to her cell phone.

|| Pause ||

She gets up.

She needs a cup of tea. Wine. Tea. Wine. Fuck. Fine.

She pours a glass from the half empty bottle at the bottom of her fridge.

Working again on a Friday night. Alone, and working again on a Friday night.

Her and four women.

She drinks from the glass and lets the wine do its magic.

But there’s no magic. Only deadlines. A Saturday morning deadline. Chasing it. Hating it. Resenting it. She has to transcribe the entire interview by the next morning, including insights and target market analysis.

Fuck her fucking team who all flew to Joburg on Thursday and left her to orchestrate the interviews in one day, while they were partying it up at some fucking award show. When they returned from their fuck show on Friday morning, no one came back to the office and she welcomed the four women into the boardroom by herself. She made them tea, she fed them cronuts (which no one ate, but Nadja), and she smiled although she wanted to scream. The make-up brand wasn’t even her fucking account. She was doing her so-called ‘team’ a favour.

Okay, breathe.

More wine. She gulps it down. It stings her stomach. She imagines the day's cronuts (three of them) lying scattered at the bottom of her stomach, wine raining down on it. The cronuts open their legs, their bodies, their arms to the wine and suck it in. The cronuts and wine become one and form a dancing pair of alcoholic dough. Dough that sloshes against the pink of her insides and turns it acid green.

And now she feels sick.

She breathes deeply and places the wine next to her iPhone.

>Play<

"Would you like to go next, Precious?"

"Sure," says Precious's voice. Smooth as her skin. "I wash, tone and moisturise my face every morning and evening. In the morning before I apply my make-up, and in the evening before bedtime. I also spritz my face with rose water throughout the day when it feels dry."

"Okay, great. And when you apply make-up, do you have a ritual you follow?"

Small pause. "What do you mean by ritual?"

"Well, some women apply base first, then eye make-up, then lipstick..."

"No, I don't wear any base. Only a little bit of blush, and always lip-gloss. And lipstick for night time."

"I see. And eye make-up?"

"Nope, none of that."

"Great, thanks, Precious."

"Can I be next?" Lauren pipes up. "I definitely follow a ritual."

"Okay, Lauren. Tell us about -"

"I take make-up very seriously. For me it's like a work of art. I take my time, at least 30 minutes every morning, to colour my face. Before I'm even fully awake, I have a shower and cleanse my face with very expensive products. Do you want the names of the products I use?"

"No, thanks, Lauren. Please continue."

"Okay, where was I? Oh, yes, after cleansing I pluck a few eyebrows if necessary. But I go for waxes every two weeks anyway. I then apply base, followed by face powder. I have a range of brushes for different parts of my face." Here Lauren

points at her forehead, then her cheeks, then her chin. “After the base has settled, I apply my eye make-up. Eyeliner, shadow, mascara... While I wait for the first coat of mascara to settle, I start on my lips. My lips are very important to me.”

“We can see that,” Janita interrupts and smiles what looks like a fake smile.

“Please continue, Lauren.”

A sniff from Lauren. “I first apply powder to my lips to seal the lipstick, you know? Then I apply lip liner and fill in the lines with lipstick. I finish it off with gloss and another dab of powder.”

“Wonderful, thanks, Lauren. Is that it?”

“No wait! I apply another coat of mascara before I leave the house.”

“And how do you eat breakfast with such a perfect mouth?” Nadja’s voice echoes through the boardroom.

Silence.

“Excuse me?” from Lauren.

“Do you eat breakfast at home or at the office?” Nadja.

A cough. A clink of glass.

“I don’t really eat breakfast. Maybe I’ll have a little snack mid-morning. But I reapply my lipstick at my desk after I’ve eaten. Doesn’t everyone do that?”

“Isn’t this conversation meant to be about make-up and not food?” Janita.

“Does anyone do Banting?” Precious.

Mayhem. Words fall over each other as the women compare notes on what they don’t eat. When not to eat. What never to eat. What no one is eating.

Except Nadja.

|| Pause ||

She looks at her white wine. Why do they call it white when it’s really light yellow? She sniffs it. She drinks from it. The pee of a thousand women who are too scared to eat. Who count kilojoules more than blessings. Who puke cronuts for fun and drink wine to forget.

She hates her job.

She navigates her iPhone to skip a few seconds of the recording. She releases the button and the women’s voices.

>Play<

“-That’s all I’m saying…” Lauren’s voice.

“Ladies, ladies, can we please get back to the question?”

“Yes, please. I have to leave soon, as I have an important meeting to get to.”

Precious.

“So, Nadja, we know your view on breakfast, but what about your view on a make-up routine. Do you have one?”

“Sorry to disappoint you. I don’t have one. But isn’t not having one, also one?”

She smiles to herself now as she did in the interview. Her first real smile of the day.

“I think it is. Why not? So, you don’t wear make-up then. May I ask why?”

“I do wear some make-up on special occasions such as weddings and maybe fancy dress parties, but otherwise… I don’t know. It just doesn’t appeal to me.”

A communal gasp from three women. Three women who can’t see. Don’t want to see. See only themselves through made up eyes.

Three blind mice.

“Then why are you here?” from Janita.

“I thought I could learn something today. My friend received the invite and asked me if I could come instead. She knew I would get a kick out of a make-up focus group.” Nadja laughs. A genuine laugh. From her stomach. Through her throat. And out of her natural mouth, surrounded with real-life lines.

Three blind mice look at each other and smirk.

She continues. “This actually leads me to my next question. Why do you wear make-up, ladies?”

“It makes me prettier! More confident! Happier!” Janita squeaks.

“It enhances my perfect features!” Precious chirps.

“I don’t go anywhere without my mask! It’s my war paint! Ra-ra-ra!” Lauren chants.

The three blind women-mice blur into one as they dance in a circle. Splashes of red! Splashes of coral, turquoise and magenta! This season’s colours! Mesh. They vomit rainbows. They point fingers at Nadja and roll their eyes. They grab each other

around the waist before they disappear in a cloud of pink smoke. Pink dust like eye shadow settles on Nadja.

And on her. She looks from her wine to Nadja.

Nadja shakes the pink dust from her hair. She bites into a cronut. “Should we get out of here?”

South African Women

Many South African women hate their jobs. Nashima has been working at the same company for 20 years and has nowhere to go with her HR diploma and manipulative manager. Sam's hard-core approach has earned her the reputation of 'Snow Queen' at the agency where she heads up the client service team. She turns a blind eye to unethical clients and laces her tongue with cocaine to cope. Kate is also a woman in a power position and earns double her husband's salary. She supports his sports addiction and her children's various hobbies, and buys herself expensive clothes every weekend to hide her low self-esteem. Marita is a full-time mother and feels guilty every morning when her neighbours rush off to work, while she stays in her pyjamas staring out the kitchen window. Many South African women live with guilt. Anna knows her nightly insults are bruising her husband's ego, but she doesn't know how to stop. She wants him to be stronger, and keeps pushing him as far as he lets her. Tanja hasn't had a good night's sleep since she lost her baby. She is convinced that the boozy holiday in Mozambique – while she was four weeks pregnant and didn't know it – killed her child. She is one of the numerous South African women who drink through pregnancy. Some say one drink a day is fine. Others just can't help themselves. Rethabile drinks cocktails with her friends to numb the pain of her husband's blows, praying he won't hit her stomach. Melissa loses herself at the office bar every Friday night, hoping to lose the baby inside her as well. She wishes she never slept with her creative director, and that his stony silence didn't cut so deep. Dalene grew up with a mother who poured a gin and tonic every day at 4pm. Dalene dilutes her wine with water and tells her husband the baby won't even know. Everyone told Sarina how lucky she was to carry so small. She hid her love for cocaine from her rich boyfriend who was only interested in cradling her stomach in front of friends. She named her daughter Skye when she was stillborn at six months, and packed her cocaine and designer clothes away when she moved back to her mother's home in the Natal Midlands. Some South African women live with their parents, and wish they didn't. Some don't have other options. Jenna is 19 and studying law at the University of Cape Town. She meets her friend Dee in her res room every day after class to swop notes and underwear. Jenna wears Dee's undies to bed every night, dreaming of a world where her parents would be okay with a gay daughter under their roof. Noku lives in a one-bedroom flat with four siblings and an

ageing mother, and flashes her legs to passing BMW's at night, wishing for a man to save her. Madelein lost her job as an intern designer at an agency in Jozi and moved back to her parent's house in Pretoria. She stalks the young black guy on Facebook who took her job, and obsesses over photos of him looking happy and drunk at office parties. Lots of South African women are Facebook stalkers. Laura blocks and unblocks her ex-boyfriend on a daily basis. Bianca scrolls through her news feed obsessively, comparing her body to her friends'. Sonia types the names of guys who broke her heart into the search field, hoping they've ended up fat and broke. Awande clicks on her boyfriend's profile first thing every morning to see if he's done anything without her the night before. Robyn clicks through the profiles of new colleagues, hating on the hot chicks and wishing the handsome, single men would notice her too. Countless South African women are single. Sophia gets plastered at the office bar on Fridays and takes home the newest intern. She wakes up on Saturdays with a massive hangover and asks the intern to stay the day. They never do. She hates herself more after every one-night stand and washes herself between her legs until she is raw. Nadja spends her nights in bed reading books, ignoring calls from her friends. When her uncle claimed her at the age of 13, she never let another man close to her. Deeshana goes to weddings alone and spends most of the evening avoiding family who ask the inevitable *Why are you still single?* She is tired of asking the question herself. That's why she threw away magazine clippings of wedding dresses she'd been collecting since she was 14. Many South African women are married. Some married their high school sweethearts, and others their parents' choice. And then there are those who married because it was time. Or love. Many South African women question love. Some fall into it, and others out of it. Juliet is in love with falling in love, with jobs, with men. She signed up to Tinder in search of The One, but got a string of one-night stands instead. A lot of South African women use dating sites in the hope of finding something they lack. Some project their insecurities onto men and expect too much, others are already married and looking for distraction. Many South African women have affairs. Gerda reads magazines in bed to try and avoid her husband's hard-on pressing against her back. She sends Sara text messages in the early hours of the morning from the guest bathroom her husband never uses. Anita met Andrew at a coffee shop she frequents after yoga. They ignored each other's wedding rings and kept their secret safe in the one-bedroom apartment Andrew rented when he was in Cape Town for business. Nadine always had a thing for men with

facial hair, and when a young man with dark stubble joined her company, she knew she was in trouble. At the end-of-year office party she let down her hair and before she knew it, her panties too. Zinhle is trying to put an end to the flirtations between her and her boss, but his threats of firing her keeps her stalling. She loves her husband and only flirted with her boss because he was rich and made her laugh. She cries on the shoulder of her best friend, Lerato, who does not judge. Lerato has three kids and shrugs her shoulders when yet another person tells her about her husband's indiscretions. Some South African women try their best. To be better mothers, employees, wives, daughters, friends and lovers. Maria lets her husband have his way with her even after hitting her in the face. Suzie gave up her second job to raise her sister's two kids, while her sister tries to find herself overseas. Yvette works more than 60 hours a week, reaching and exceeding her targets as an account manager at an agency. She doesn't quit, even after asking her boss for a raise. She got a new title instead. Numerous South African women cry. Behind closed doors, in bathrooms, alone in bed, in cars. Some want to throw back their heads and scream at the moon. Most scream into their pillows instead. Some hear police sirens at night and wonder if they're coming for them. Some wish they were coming for them.

With apologies to Nicholas Grider, whose Millions of Americans Are Strange provided the inspiration for this piece.

Wolf Man

He's sitting by the bar when I enter. His back to me. I know it's him the moment he turns his head sideways. He's wearing a snarl and a pair of Converse. And a beard. The things I like, that make my knees weak before I've even touched someone.

"Sorry I'm late," I say. The late wasn't planned. It just happened. I had time, and then not. I changed from boots to Converse moments before the date. Now I'm glad. Ecstatic, even. But trying to contain myself.

"No worries. That's usually my job," he says.

I stall.

His voice. It's not human. It's more man-before-human. Not man. Wolf. A voice that slices through a thousand women's panties. And his smile. All teeth. Canine.

I draw a deep breath. Calm.

I order a whiskey, on ice. I barely taste it.

"Should we get a bottle of wine?" he asks when my whiskey has melted along with my legs.

"Sure. You pick. I'm easy." I see the glint in his eye. Not a glint. The moon. A half-moon of badassery and mischief. "I'm easy with alcohol, I mean."

"You should be careful what you say," he bares his teeth.

I imagine those teeth sinking into my white skin. Making my nipples bleed. I shake my head, my hair falls over my shoulders.

We talk as the bottle of red sinks. It's easy. Too easy. He's familiar. A Cape Town man without too much Cape Town. A tongue speckled with sarcasm and wit. And teeth that drip dark red intellect. The type of intellect that makes me wet. I cross and uncross my legs.

"Should we get another glass... Or another bottle?" he asks as he pours the last of the first. "We should probably eat too."

I nod. Sure, yes. Eat, food, wine, eat you. I'm not drunk, but I am. On whatever this confusing situation is. A man I just met, with light eyes, a dark mouth, a heart laced with suspicion.

"Good idea. Let's eat."

Food will soak up the alcohol. Bring me back to my senses. Help me not go home with him. Be a good girl.

We share our food. Good food. Warm food. I'm happy. I'm easy.

When he gets up to go to the bathroom I catch my breath. Tall. He walks fast, with purpose. And stealth. I catch a glimpse of his ass. Shit-fuck. It's a good ass. I thank the gods of good asses.

I try to pace myself with the next bottle of wine. But it's not the wine that's making me feel strange. It's him. His eyes change colour from green to brown to grey. When he laughs there's a hint of yellow. His teeth are alive with his mind; questioning, inquisitive, sensitive, above average intelligent. Who is this person?

Before I can demand answers, he kisses me. All mouth and strong and tongue and teeth. No asking, just taking. I'm not even myself anymore. He tastes of rich tobacco, leather, and blood. Delicious.

The barman calls last rounds. We look around. We're the last people in the restaurant. We pay our bill. He does. I insist on splitting it, but he refuses. His man-wolf-like persistence is intriguing. Making me feel small in a princess way. Weak, wanting. To be devoured.

"Your place or mine?" he asks when we step outside.

It's raining. It's winter. My bed is cold. I'm wet. I'm not a princess. But a slut. And I'm okay with that.

"Mine," I reply in a voice I don't recognise.

We're inside my place. The moon is hidden behind the clouds, the rain has stopped. My heart is racing. I've been alone, single, no man for years. How do women do this again? Are they expected to be sultry seductresses? The first ones to make a move? To strip naked with a dance and pirouette to bed? I didn't even shave my bikini area. Didn't pick my underwear with the foresight of a man stripping it off me in a few hours. I feel like a schoolgirl trapped in a corner by a wolf.

He is panting, ready.

I'm shaking.

His teeth are bared, beautiful.

I don't move.

He circles my legs. Puts his nose between my legs.

I look up. Outside. The moon is skimming the corners of the clouds. Winking at me.

He licks the side of my face.

I whimper. I don't want him to stop.

He moves his tongue to my neck. Finds the softest spot there. He sinks his teeth into me.

I howl at the pleasure of my pain.

Stained

She feels a twinge in her womb as her feet hit the tar in Johannesburg.

Did she pack tampons?

No time to check her handbag; the taxi is ready to swallow her and deliver her to her first client meeting.

She swops her pink pumps for red platform heels. The taxi skips a stop street and honks at a BMW.

Did she pack painkillers?

She is spat out in front of a tall building. Her red travel bag and laptop bag (also red) after her.

She grabs her belongings and enters the building. Aircon greets her.

“Where is the bathroom?” she asks the receptionist with perfect make-up.

“Who are you here to see?” the receptionist responds without looking up from her computer.

“Client X... But can I pop into the loo quickly before I go in?” she pleads. You’re a woman, right. Surely you get it.

“They’re ready for you in the boardroom.” Receptionist with no heart points to a frosted glass door. Bodies beyond.

Fuck.

“Okay, thanks.”

Receptionist gets up from her big oak desk and saunters over to the frosty door. “Right this way.”

She panics. The twinge is now full-on cramps. It could be a pee. It could be a poo. It could be a period.

She touches her stomach briefly before entering the room, where five faces turn to her. All men.

She pulls herself towards herself, and smiles.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Apologies for the slight delay. My flight circled a few times before we could land, and I missed the first Gautrain.”

Blank eyes. Someone turns to his laptop; another is tapping away on his phone.

“Thanks for waiting. Are we all ready to start?”

Important Man gets up to shake her hand. “Welcome to Joburg. Let’s get this show on the road.”

She looks at the water bottles in the middle of the boardroom table while opening her laptop.

She clicks on her presentation and takes a deep breath.

Three hours later the men are still talking. Her eyes are bulging from the cramps, the pee, and the poo. She tries to smile. Channel her inner strength, which she seems to have left behind at the airport in Cape Town.

She looks towards the door. Surely someone needs a cigarette, a coffee, or a pee? The men yack about the next fiscal and targets and budgets and the weekend’s rugby scores.

She dreams of releasing a flood of blood and urine on the boardroom table. She fantasises about the 5 o’clock breakfast from this morning making its way through her body towards her exit, and being released.

The men look at her and wait.

“Excuse me?” she missed something. A question. A loo break. A brain cell. A tampon.

“Should we take five minutes and reconvene?” Important Man asks.

She nods and feels major relief. But anxiety. Five minutes? To pee, to smoke, to eat, to poo, to take painkillers, to tampon herself? Which one will win?

Her red platforms carry her to the ladies’ toilet. She checks the other cubicles. No one there.

She locks herself in a cubicle and opens her handbag. Shitfuck. No tampons.

She pulls up her skirt (tight and red) and struggles out of her G-string, wet from sweat. She sits and forces herself to relax. All three want to come out at the same time. The pee wins. Followed by the blood. She looks into the bowl and sees a drop mix with the water. It turns light pink. Her poo has disappeared. Too scared, too anxious, too shy. She checks her watch. Shit. One minute left. A wad of toilet paper will have to do. She folds the two-ply tight around her hand and lays it onto her G-string. Why did she wear a fucking G-string and not a full panty? Because, life. Too busy to think. To pack wise. To not bleed in meetings.

When she emerges the men are all waiting in the boardroom. Can she sneak a painkiller while one of them presents his FY2015?

She crosses her legs at the table and feels the toilet paper shifting. Her womb contracts as if to taunt her.

It's going to be a long afternoon.

By the time she gets to her accommodation for the evening, she is as high as a kite. On Myprodol and caffeine.

At the guesthouse she is greeted by a well-groomed woman, tall and skinny. Mrs Tall takes her through to her room, adjacent to their family home. A manor house with wooden floors and happy family photos in the hallways.

When they turn a corner, a shadow moves towards them. She stalls, but Mrs Tall laughs.

"That's our dog, Jason. He doesn't really like people, but he's harmless."

The shadow moves faster until she can make out a Husky with soft eyes and softer fur.

"Wow, he's beautiful." Or is she tripping?

"Yes, yes. We love him. But he loves only my husband."

"Oh?"

Mrs Tall stops and opens a door. "Here you are."

The room is magnificent. Large and wooden and airy and white, all at the same time.

"This is lovely, thank you." She steps inside.

"You're welcome. Make yourself at home, and let me know if you need anything."

She turns back to Mrs Tall. "Thank you."

"Will you be taking dinner in your room or in the dining room?"

She doesn't care. As long as she can put her face in food and then find something to put up her vagina and then put her head on the soft, white pillow.

"We don't have any other guests tonight, so you're welcome to dine in your room. Unless you're expecting company? In which case I will inform the cook."

She shakes her head. "Just me. In my room is great, thanks."

Mrs Tall nods. "Well, goodnight, then."

She wonders if she can ask Mrs Tall for a tampon. But she doesn't. Mrs Tall probably doesn't bleed. Or sweat. Or forget to pack tampons on business trips.

"Night," she says to the door as it closes softly behind her.

A bath. A warm bath is what she needs.

She removes the rolled-up toilet paper stained with her blood from her G-string and flushes it down the toilet. It's all so white. The bath, the basin, the tiles. The warm water soothes her. Swirls into her brain and touches her between the legs. She washes herself and wraps herself in the white robe. And places a fresh wad of toilet paper between her legs.

A soft click by the door.

Then a knock.

She opens the door to a man. A man-man. With strong arms and see-through eyes. A tray with homey food on a plate, a glass of wine, and water.

She hears a small whine coming from between his legs. The Husky.

"Good evening. I'm Mr Tall... Dinner?" He lifts the tray slightly.

"Oh, great, thanks so much." She tightens her robe, frees him of the tray.

"This looks amazing."

"You're welcome. Enjoy the meal." He starts to turn away.

"Are you the cook?" She wants him to stay. Have the meal with her. Sit with her. Rub her feet. Lick her toes. Or something. Make her cramps go away for good.

He smiles. Jason's head appears behind his knee. "The cook and the architect."

"Wow. Your place is beautiful." Beautiful is not the word, but she has lost all her words in the day's meetings. No more words. Please.

Jason makes a move. He nudges his nose towards her crotch.

She steps back, tray still clutched in her hands.

"Calm down, Jason." He places his hand on the dog's rump.

Jason looks at him. Understands. Sits.

"He's an incredible dog." What else can she say?

She moves to close the door, but Jason moves faster. He jumps between her and the door and places himself firmly on the ground.

"Come, Jason." Mr Tall pulls at him. He doesn't move.

She laughs. Awkwardly.

"This is weird. He never takes to anyone."

It's the blood, Mr Tall. He smells me. He tastes me. He wants to sit with me and stare at me and sniff me.

"I don't mind." She places her tray on the small reading desk. "He can stay if he wants to."

Mr Tall looks at the dog. “Do you want to stay with this nice young woman, Jason?”

Jason doesn't move. Just stares. At her.

Does he see the toilet paper getting soaked again?

“I guess that's a yes, then.” Mr Tall looks from Jason to her, and back again. He shakes his head once. Very quickly. And moves away.

She waits until he's gone before she picks up the knife and fork.

“Do you want a bite, Jason? Or what's the story here?”

He just stares.

“Well, I don't give a shit what you want to do, but I'm starving and then I want to sleep, okay?”

Jason stretches his paws and lies down, eyes on her.

She eats. The food is good. Tasty and homey and filling. She finishes the plate and takes a sip of wine. Her stomach responds.

She gets up to look for another Myprodol.

Jason follows her.

She drinks the pill with the wine and sits.

Jason sits next to her.

She doesn't touch him.

He doesn't touch her.

She finishes the wine and flops onto the bed. A feather duvet wraps around her body.

She hears Jason breathing, but she can't see him. She knows he's next to the bed.

She feels her womb pushing out the wall of blood. A clot fighting to escape from her body.

Jason's breath is on her hand.

“Should I take him outside?” The voice of Mr Tall at the door.

She pushes herself up on her elbows. Her robe is slightly open. The white, white robe.

“I think it's best...”

A faint whistle and the click of the door.

Silence. Sadness.

She sinks into the feathery pillow. Soft, deep.

A sound by the door. Of scurrying. Or clicking nails.

The shadows tell her it's Jason's nails. Trying to get in, scratch into her skin, sink into her womb. Like a wolf.

She slides out of the robe and sits cross-legged on the white, white bed. She removes the now-red toilet paper from between her legs and aims toward the bin. Bull's eye.

She opens her legs.

The smell of iron, mixed with dog, and man.

Jason howls beyond the door.

Red has always been her favourite colour.

Lego Man

Meeting 1:

They meet on the stained stairs of the building where they both live. They've seen each other around: getting into cars, coming back from places, walking the corridors with friends and/or lovers. But they've never spoken.

“Oh, hello,” he says.

“Hi there,” she says.

They both stop. They pass each other on their different routes. She on her way to find her cat. He on his way to his front door.

“I've never asked you this before, but what do you do?” she asks. Unsure but curious.

“I work in advertising. I'm a copywriter.”

She clocks his outfit: creative, careless, sexy. “Oh, I'm a copywriter too.”

“Cool. Where?”

They share the names of their agencies. They compare notes on deadlines, stress levels, creative directors and egos. They laugh into each other's faces. She likes what she hears. His voice is strong, a voice that can pin you down, keep you very still, make you want to do bad girl things.

“Okay, well, I've got to go,” he says suddenly.

She stalls. “Okay... Bye then?”

But he has already turned away. A piece of Lego falls from his bag. A red brick.

She pockets it as he walks away.

Meeting 2:

She finds him on Facebook and sends him a friend request. He accepts within minutes. They start chatting via Facebook Messenger. About work, life, relationships, salaries, opportunities. She is excited, but tries not to make a big deal of it. She looks through his profile and likes what she sees. Creative, sexy, interesting. With a passion for action figures. She wants to know more, but holds back. She sees a young woman in his not-too-distant-past.

All the good ones are taken, she sighs.

They chat like this for weeks. She hopes to see him on the stairs, but he never seems to be there. She wonders if he wonders about her. She climbs the stairs a little slower every day, hoping he will catch up with her.

Online, they chat about writing and she makes a comment about women and vampires.

“You know, we should have a bottle of wine at one of our places one day after work.”

She rereads this, her heart rate accelerating with every read.

“Yes, that would be awesome. Anytime, just say when.” Too keen? She doesn’t care. She wants to talk to him in person, hear his voice close to her, see if his eyes really are more brown than green.

“How about tonight?”

She is giddy with joy.

“Tonight it is. See you after work.”

She glides up the stairs when she returns from work. Two bottles of wine in her grocery bag. Red for him. White for her. She even bought snacks from Woolies. Expensive ones.

He knocks on her door as the clock nears 18:00.

“Hi, welcome,” she says, opening the door wide.

“Hello.” He is smiling, a sweet smile. He walks to her typewriter. “This is cool.”

“Thanks, I love it too. I gave away my TV and replaced it with this.” She is rambling, or is she?

He walks from room to room, comparing her flat with his.

“My bedroom is in your kitchen,” he says and opens his arms in the middle of the floor. “It feels so weird.”

“Wine?” She points to the bottles, two glasses waiting. “The opener is in there.” She points to the cupboard under the sink, where he’s standing.

He takes the opener and busies himself with the wine. She admires his arms. And hands. Strong, but not too rough. Toned, but not perfect.

They move to the balcony. The sun is just setting. The wine is the perfect temperature. Their cigarettes are lighted. To her it tastes like heaven. She watches his mouth as he talks, animated.

The night glides from minutes, to hours. They have too much to say for one night. They pour more wine, until there is none left.

They talk about relationships. His which ended a few months ago, hers a twisted road of broken men. They talk about work. His in an agency that underpays him, hers in an agency that underpays her even more. They talk about family. His close by and entwined in his life, hers far away which breaks her heart.

They drink her whiskey, half a bottle of some cheap brand. They get a taxi to take them to town for a bunny chow and cigarettes.

He is the first to notice the time. "It's two, I should go. I'm so drunk."

"Me too," she slurs. She wants him to stay. She wants him to talk some more, to laugh with her, to do life with her.

He gets up. She follows him out the door, halfway to his place.

"Goodnight," they say. He hugs her. Twice.

When she returns to her house, she folds herself into her couch. Was she imagining the connection, the electricity, the force? What was that? Alcohol fuelling her need for a man? Meeting one stranger who seems to know her a lifetime, and she builds dreams and future meetings like a chick in a film?

She unfolds herself and falls onto her back.

She feels something painful dig into her ass. She slips her hand under her and extracts the offender. A Lego man with black eyes. She places the man next to the red brick on her bedside table. She closes herself into her bed.

Meeting 3:

She throws an Easter egg through his window when he isn't home. The Easter egg houses a piece of Lego. She hopes it is a Lego girl.

They message each other via Facebook Messenger. And yes, it is a Lego girl. She asks to see it. He comes over, carrying the Lego girl in the palm of his hand. Like a dead baby bird.

"Thanks for the Easter egg. Look at the girl. She has blonde hair, like yours."

She smiles at this, invites him for wine.

They open a bottle, they smile, they talk.

She ticks imaginary boxes in her head:

✓ Afrikaans

- ✓ Creative
- ✓ Loves his family
- ✓ Sexy
- ✓ A Christian
- ✓ Clever
- ✓ Educated
- ✓ Down-to-earth
- ✓ Hot, hot, hot
- ✓ Funny

She ignores the boxes she doesn't like.

They have so much to say that the hours in the night seem to be cheating them.

They feel spontaneous and decide to drive up Signal Hill.

He listens to Sia in the car. She loves Sia. She feels like ripping off her clothes, running naked through the streets and ending up in an Olympic-sized swimming pool with him. She runs around his car in her underwear instead.

He laughs and increases the volume.

"I like you," she says. Punch-drunk.

"I like you, too," he says to the steering wheel, navigating through the dark roads to their mutual building. "But I'm not over..."

"I know, I know. Don't worry about it. I know you've only recently broken up with someone. And I'm not a rebound."

"I know," he says.

They are home, both in front of her door.

"You can't come in. My cat is sleeping, and we'll wake her. We're loud and stupid." She wants him to come in. To stay. To be in her bed. To wrap his arms around her. To sing Sia in her ear and tell her she'll never be a rebound. She wants to extend her heart, to make him whole.

They turn away from her door. Both. They stop in front of his door. He lets her in. She goes in. She is in his bedroom.

"What am I doing here?" She throws her hands in the air, but wants to throw him on the bed instead.

"I don't know."

She goes to the bathroom. Back to his room. He goes to the bathroom. She gets in his bed. Her head is spinning. She wishes she was sober. She wants to remember everything. His mouth, his body, his soul.

He is in his room. He gets into bed beside her. She turns around. She is not 16. She is a woman who wants, loves, cares, gives, wants to be loved.

She kisses him first. He responds as she had hoped. Deliciously. Passionately. Is he thinking of her, or of her? She can't say, but she doesn't care. She will deal with the after-feelings the next day.

She kisses him again and again. His skin is soft and beautiful. His tongue just the right amount of delicate and firm.

She is weak. She wants him. She doesn't want to want him. An unavailable man. She wants to go home to her cat, where the word 'rebound' doesn't exist.

They fall asleep like a couple in love, but they are not.

She wakes early in the morning, not wanting to move. Not wanting to disturb him. Not wanting to break the spell.

He stirs.

"I'm going home, so you can get another hour of quality sleep."

He doesn't resist or ask her to stay.

He walks her to the door and hugs her once.

When she gets home she places the girl Lego next to the boy Lego, the red brick between them.

Meeting 4:

They don't meet again for weeks. She questions herself, her life, her stupid tick lists, her vulnerable heart. She goes about her work, tries to erase him from her brain. But she can't.

She orders a Lego house online. It arrives within a day. She sees this as a sign. She places the girl Lego and boy Lego next to the box. She doesn't build the house. She doesn't know how. She keeps the one red brick as a token of their union. A little dog in the garden, a red mouse in their yard, a red chicken on their roof. Perhaps.

She makes a new tick list in her head:

- ✓ Complex, but awesome
- ✓ Broken heart, but can be fixed

- ✓ Caring, but not knowing how to show it
- ✓ Loving, but not towards her, just yet

She sends him an image of herself in her underwear. No, just her G-string, no bra. She half-covers her breasts with her arms. As long as he sees her as a sexual object, she'll be safe. She wants to try keep things light. Because he needs light. He needs easy-going, not complicated and demanding.

She misses him when she doesn't hear from him. She counts the months and hopes they go fast. How long does it take a man to get over a broken heart? She has heard stories of people – even engaged people – who meet Their One unexpectedly and fall in love, make a life, live it together. Surely their connection wasn't for nothing? Their story interesting enough to endure whatever fucked-up-ness was waiting in their futures?

She eyes the Lego box and decides to build it for him. Alone. She can do it. She sits on the floor, her cat close by, building the house, brick by brick. She doesn't sleep for 24 hours. She sweats and she doesn't eat. She channels all her love, her longing, her energy, and her lust into the house.

She starts with the foundation. Yellow for the first layer. She then gives the house green doors, a blue roof, purple grass, red windows. Sweat from her forehead drips on the roof, but she doesn't care. She wipes it away with a tissue and adds another layer of orange bricks. To secure the house, to make it the ideal dream home. She gives it two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, an open-plan lounge and a garage with space for two cars. Her fingers ache, but she continues, pressing block upon block until it is perfect.

After her house is built, she moves the girl and boy Lego inside. The one last red brick she places on the grass, as a post box. He will love that, she thinks, like he loves her typewriter.

“Can I come by?” she messages him. “Are you home?”

“Now?” he returns.

“Yes.”

“Sure.”

She carries her handiwork to his door, careful not to trip, fall.

He opens the door, a wine glass in hand. “I'm not alone.”

“Oh!” She steps back. Peeps inside, past his head. Three women are inside, looking at her.

She looks from one to the next. She frowns. She sees green eyes, blue eyes, brown eyes. Brunette, blonde, brunette. Green, orange and yellow outfits. Their mouths are upturned, in a sneer.

It's Them. All of Them. The three women who have broken and damaged his heart over the years. Her, Her and Her. Separate, but one. They have knowing eyes, straight hair, big mouths, ample breasts. They move to him, encircling him from behind. An arm around his middle, a mouth in his neck, a shadow on his back.

Your Spanish Fling

You sign up to Tinder, because you're trying to get over someone else. Even though you despise meeting people online. You swipe mostly left, not knowing how the app works yet, and have very few matches. You've heard the Tinder rumours, so you update your bio with a disclaimer: "I'm not a one-night stand or rebound [you're thinking of someone else]. But if you're looking for an awesome human in your life who laughs like a hyena, doesn't give a shit what people think of her, and is ready to love with all her heart, then cool 😊"

You go to bed, not feeling up to the cute small talk required.

You wake the next day, alone in your bed. You switch on your cell phone.

You have five new matches. You check the IM and read through the messages:

How r u? Wt u doin 2day?

Delete.

Hi sexy.

Delete.

You have a beautiful smile, wanna meet?

Delete.

Hey, lady.

Delete.

You have a very interesting profile.

Don't delete. Investigate new match. Smiling man, dark beard, glasses, friendly eyes, open face. Likes cycling, dresses well, is Spanish.

You're interested.

You reply. *Thank you, so do you.*

You talk on Tinder for hours. He makes you laugh; he works in digital advertising too. You run out of battery and decide to delete Tinder, 24 hours after signing up. It's distracting you from writing. You give the Spanish your cell phone number before deactivating your account. You continue to chat via WhatsApp for more hours. He asks you on a date, and you say no, not yet. Another 24 hours later and you say yes.

You pick your outfit carefully. You wear the one item of clothing from Spain that friends bought for you on a recent trip, a pair of flower printed stockings, with

mid-heel boots, a tight-fitting lacey skirt, a flowing black top, which shows just the right amount of cleavage, a red jacket, your favourite bird necklace and a leopard-print scarf. You feel faint the day leading up to the date, telling yourself to calm down. You smoke too many cigarettes and worry about coughing wine over him. He tells you he is working late, so you have another hour of angst. You finish your hair and make-up and pour a glass of wine. Just one, to calm the nerves. You smoke another few cigarettes. The wine tastes like toothpaste. You tell a friend you're going on a Tinder date, just in case. You give her the time and location of meeting the Spanish. The hour is up and you call a taxi.

You arrive at the hotel and he is waiting in the reception area. He wears his smile as perfectly as his white Spanish outfit. He takes you in his arms and hugs you as if you've always known each other.

"I feel like I already know you," you say.

"But you do," he says and mirrors your smile.

When you enter the hotel he guides you with his hand on the small of your back. You're glad you're wearing matching underwear, but you're trying not to think about that. You're a good girl and good girls don't sleep with Spanish on the first date. Or any other men.

You sit on the terrace overlooking the immaculate hotel gardens. There are art pieces in the garden. That's why you picked the place, knowing that the Spanish is new to Cape Town and also loves art. The stars are aligned above your heads. There are heaters nearby, it's going into autumn, but you're flushed from head to toe. You remove your jacket and scarf.

You order a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and it tastes like poetry. You feel like a cliché but you don't care. He listens attentively and touches your leg every now and again.

"I can listen to you all night," he says. He looks straight into your eyes and you're convinced he's not lying.

"Bless the Spanish," you say and laugh.

"What does that mean?" he asks. His face honest, true, so Spanish.

"Just... Thank you."

You smile into each other's faces and the world looks more beautiful than any other night of your life.

You talk about your lives; yours in South Africa running parallel to his in Spain, until you intertwined on Tinder. You say “Salut” to Tinder and drink to the successful match. You finish the wine and smoke cigarettes in tandem. He gives you his full attention, never looking at anyone else, but focusing on your mouth as you talk. This makes you laugh and you laugh often. You feel light and fuzzy and not sure if this is real.

After a shared meal of finger snacks and an after-dinner cocktail, you notice that you’re the only table still occupied at the restaurant. You ask him if he wants to see the art in the garden. He says yes, of course.

You walk slowly on the winding trail through the installation pieces: a 3D chair, a women’s face, an object you can’t name. You follow the path to the swimming pool to show him a piece you saw on a previous night of a big whale. The whale is gone and there’s a patch of yellow grass where it used to be. He tests the pool water, you test the water, and you look at each other. The water is steamy.

“How wild are you?” he asks.

After a bottle of wine? “Very,” you reply.

You remove your clothes, and stand in your underwear, freezing. He removes his clothes, and then everything. He runs to the pool and gets in. His ass is strong and muscly. His back is as smooth as a dolphin’s. You tiptoe over the grass to the pool in your underwear. You tell him to look away. You remove your underwear and take the few steps into the pool. The pool is lit from the bottom and you see the dark triangle of his pubic hair. You don’t know where to look. You’re a good girl, remember? You focus on the water’s surface, where small circles are forming around his body. You submerge your body into the lukewarm water and tentatively move around. He is behind you, encircling your body. Before you can feel his penis on your back, you swim away. You’re not ready for this.

“We’re going to get caught and thrown out of the hotel,” you say.

He laughs and splashes around.

You run for your clothing and wrap yourself in a soft towel, kept in a basket next to the pool for hotel guests. He is behind you again. You’re worried he’s going to push his luck. You’re not a one-night stand. You’re not, you’re not, you’re not.

He hands you your clothes. Then dresses himself. You shiver and he wraps a towel around your shoulders, then enfolds you in his arms.

“Can I kiss you?” he asks.

You answer by kissing him. He is soft, and hard, and man, and beard, and tongue, and delicious. You kiss like teenagers. You move to a bench and kiss some more.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says.

“Do you say that to all your dates?” you ask.

“What does that mean?”

“Do you take women from South Africa on dates and tell them they’re beautiful to get them into bed?”

He laughs. “Do you have problems expressing intimacy?”

Now you laugh. “No. Yes. Maybe. I’m South African and I guess I’m not used to such a passionate man.”

His reply is a deep kiss. You feel yourself melt against him.

“Can I take you home?” he asks. “In my car, I mean. I will give you a lift home,” he adds quickly when he sees the look in your eyes.

“Yes, thank you,” you say.

You walk arm-in-arm back to the hotel and through the restaurant, where a cleaner is vacuuming the carpet. She smiles and waves at you. You smile and wave back, thinking, “Yes, I am on a date with this delicious man. And yes, I just kissed him and want to kiss him again. All over.”

You remember the library lift and pull him towards it. “There’s a lift here with books cut into one of the walls, let me show you.”

“Why are you so amazing?” he answers.

You smile, smile, smile. The lift opens, you enter, it closes. He smiles, smiles, smiles. He pulls you close, pins you to the wall and kisses you. You feel your mind slip away. And imagine your stockings slipping slowly down your legs. But the lift ‘pings’ on the ground floor and you pop out.

You make it to his car without falling apart. You close your legs as you direct him to your house. He drives slowly, and decreases to 10 km/h as you get closer to your house.

“I don’t want to take you home. And I don’t want this date to end,” he says.

You laugh and put your hand on his leg. He takes your hand in his and kisses it, slowly licking your fingers.

“Focus on the road,” you mock-scold. But you’re putty.

He brings the car to a stop in front of your building. He pulls you from your seat onto his. The steering wheel is fighting with your midi-heel boots but you don't care. You kiss like you might never see him again. You feel yourself getting wet. You have to leave now, or it will be too late.

You come up for breath. "Goodbye, I have to go."

"You don't want me to come up?" His puppy dog eyes plead.

You shake your head. "My head is saying no, but my vagina is saying yes."

You move to the passenger door. "Yes, I just said vagina." You open the door, jump out. "Goodnight."

You place one boot in front of the other to make it to the front gate. You only turn back once as you unlock the gate. You wave and blow him a kiss. He waves and blows you a kiss back.

When you're inside your flat, you dare to breathe. You're walking on a cloud and loving it, but hating yourself for being a cliché. At least you didn't sleep with him, you think smugly. Good girl. You check your phone before getting into bed. He sends a pic of him alone in bed, smiling. He wants you beside him, he says, but he will wait.

You go through three days of working on a fluffy cloud. Your colleagues enjoy your extra laughs and sexy swing of your hips. He sends you constant messages of cuteness. He is thinking of you. He can't wait to see you again. He is so happy he met you. He wants to see you again, and again, and again. You try to hide your happiness, but you're just a girl wanting love.

You try to keep it casual in your head, "It's just a fling," you say to friends. But somewhere in the back of your mind is the idea of a match. A companion that lasts. That makes you laugh all of the time. That skinny dips with you one day, and holds back your hair the next when you're feeling sick. Who is just as likely to bring you a cup of tea in bed, as he is to order you a cocktail on date night.

Two days after your first date he asks you to keep the following night for him. He sends hourly reminders of the date, only so many hours to go... And then 24 hours, and then it's the next morning, and then it's that night.

You choose your underwear more carefully for the second date. Just in case. You shave your legs, de-hair your bikini area, and spray perfume in all the strategic places. You are so proud of yourself, because you haven't thought of the someone

else you're trying to get over, and you're putting yourself out there after being single for more than four years. You coax yourself to take it easy and play it cool. To be yourself and to just have fun.

You meet at a wine bar in town for pre-dinner drinks. When you see each other, you fall into each other's arms. He picks you up and keeps you there. You feel small and special in his embrace. He kisses you like you're his. You love it and don't care who sees you or not.

You sit on wooden benches outside the bar, your legs wedged between his. He asks you about your week and wants to know everything that's happened since you last saw each other. He nods and smiles and hangs on every word. You ask him in return to share about his life, and you nod and smile and love the sentences coming out of his mouth. He is smart, you think, and nothing is more sexy than a clever man.

"I have a proposal for you," he says.

"Yes?" you ask, sipping on a cocktail. You take a drag of your cigarette, look back in his honest eyes.

"Will you marry me?" he asks.

He laughs. You laugh.

"No, honestly. I have this great idea. My friend runs a Spanish magazine in Madrid and she wants me to write articles for her. I thought maybe we can do it together? You write in English, and I translate in Spanish? What do you think?"

You think it's the best idea since two-for-one cocktails. You would love to have your work translated into Spanish. To collaborate with this creative man and run around Cape Town writing articles about art, graffiti, cocktails, coffee, wine, life, everything!

"I think that's amazing!" you say.

"I think you are amazing!" he says and pulls you to him for another delicious kiss.

You hop from bar to restaurant to bar on this perfect night. You eat fresh Italian food at a true Italian restaurant. He switches to Italian when you enter the restaurant, and you nearly trip over yourself.

"You speak Italian too?" you ask.

"A little," he says.

He orders you the most beautiful food of your life. You eat like there's a party in your mouth, and kiss in between every bite.

“Your hair is an explosion of beauty,” he says.

You laugh. “Thank you for the compliment.” You feel free with this man. He is not like any other man you’ve ever met. He punctuates every sentence with a smile. He gives out compliments like sweets. He laughs at your silly jokes. And he tells you how much he loves your style, your hair, your voice, your mouth.

You feel your inhibitions starting to slip. You want to take him home, and make him yours. You want him in your bed, between your legs, smothered in your sheets.

You end the night at a busy bar close to your home. As you enter the bar, he stops to talk to a tall, blonde woman and a man. You are not introduced to them, and wait on the side. You order a round of whiskey and sit on the street. A man comes up to say hi to your Spanish and you want him to go away. The Spanish introduces you as his friend. You don’t take much notice of this, because as soon as the random man is gone, the Spanish encircles you with his legs.

“We should have breakfast together tomorrow morning, yes? So, should we go to your place with a bottle of wine now?”

You nod. You’re tired of being a good girl. You’re well over 30 and you’re fed up with being alone. Your bed is too empty and your body is wanting. Wanting to be touched, licked, explored, sucked.

You put on some music when you get home. You each have a glass of wine on the balcony overlooking the city lights. You smoke in silence and smile at each other.

“You are so lovely,” he says after every kiss. “Where have you been all my life?”

You make your way to the bedroom and he undresses you first. You allow him to admire you and position you on the bed.

“I want to kiss you from here,” he point to your head, “to here,” he points to your toes.

You smile an adult woman smile and allow him to do just that. When his mouth finds your clitoris you’re already soaking wet. You come twice before his penis is even exposed.

You’re shaking and riveted and feel like a flower opening in the sun. You feel him inside you and move to his beat. When it’s over, you fold into each other and then drift into a deep sleep.

You awake with him smiling, looking at your face. “You’re so beautiful,” he says. You feel more alive than you’ve ever felt with a man. You make love again, this time in the daylight, you straddling him, your breasts swinging from side to side.

Afterwards you snuggle, his body fitting perfectly behind yours.

“You’re so amazing,” he says into your hair. “Where have you been all my life? This is exactly what I was dreaming about.”

When you awake it’s almost lunch time, your stomach ready for food. Your body isn’t used to this activity. Your legs are jelly, your vagina in delicious pain.

“Can I have a shower?” he asks before getting out of bed. “And you make us coffee, yes?”

You smile dreamily and make the bed while you listen to the water running. You brew the coffee, singing a strange song in your head.

When he comes out of the shower, he looks different. He is fresh, a new man. He pours coffee and walks out to the balcony for a cigarette. He looks at his phone and squints in the early afternoon light.

“What are the rest of your weekend plans?” he asks, but the question seems fake.

“Writing.” You look out over the city, the mountain beyond. You’re a big girl, you’re not going to make a big deal. “The answer is always writing. And you?”

He looks at his phone, not at you. “Dinner with friends tonight. Then maybe skydiving tomorrow. If the weather is good,” he says to no one in particular.

You pull on your cigarette. So no messages wanting to see you tonight, then, right? But you don’t ask. Or question. Or project. You’re a big girl, you should know better.

“I’m going to have a quick shower,” you say. Wanting to add: should we then go for breakfast?

“I’m leaving now,” he says.

You blink. “Okay.”

When you open the front door, he turns to you for a hug. So no sidewalk kisses and passionate goodbyes, then?

He hugs you, but not tight.

“Thanks for everything,” you say, not knowing the protocol. You’ve never had a stranger in your bed.

He blows you a small kiss before walking away.

You lock yourself in and walk to your bedroom. Another Tinder cliché. You place your bird necklace around your neck, position yourself in front of your floor-length mirror. You press the bird into your heart. It breaks through your skin, blood dripping to your navel, where his tongue had just been. You press harder. The bird escapes through your heart to your back. You press and press.

Blindfolded

It started with a WhatsApp message. An unknown cell phone number had created a Group Chat. She recognised some of her friends' numbers in the group: her senior account manager, her creative director and her copywriter. She, the illustrator, of cute things, rainbows, ponies, vodka glasses and women's make-up products.

Hey guys, it said, clear your schedules for tonight. Don't tell anyone, and don't take anyone along. Meet in reception at 6pm.

Illustrator looked over at her copywriter, who was looking at her phone too.

"Smoke?" Copywriter asked.

She nodded. She didn't smoke, but she joined Copywriter in times like these. In times when they needed to gossip, make sense of a brief, or shoot the breeze without judgement from management.

"What the fuck is this about?" Copywriter said the moment they stepped out the door. She lit her cigarette while walking. She blew the smoke away from Illustrator.

"No clue. Do we have any idea who created the group?" Illustrator asked. She wrapped her arms around her furry jacket. The shit she did for her smoker friends.

"Who knows? It's a little bizarre, but hey. Maybe they're taking us for supper to thank us for winning the pitch last week?"

They looked at each other. And snorted. Copywriter choked on her cigarette smoke. Illustrator shook her head.

"Do you think there's a chance they might fire us?" Illustrator didn't want to think it, but she did. She had to.

Since joining the agency two years ago many newbies had entered the office, only to reverse out of it a few weeks later. When they lost a client, heads rolled. She kept hers low, deep into her laptop. She knew illustrators were aplenty in Cape Town. There was one around every street corner. Drinking coffee, wearing owl T-shirts. Ready to jump any creative director for the chance to get paid.

Illustrator herself barely avoided that trap. Only because her creative director was gay and preferred the lean bodies of intern boys. She held onto her job by working late into the night. Sending tweaked illustrations that were already signed off. Taking a course in photography to up-skill. To add another job to her already full portfolio.

“Possibly,” Copywriter replied, looking at the tall buildings around them. She often did this, Illustrator had noticed, when trying to find answers.

“Well, we’ll find out soon enough.” Illustrator looked at the clock tower across the road. “In about two hours.”

Copywriter sniffed. “It’s not like I had plans for tonight anyway.”

Illustrator knew. Neither did she. Work was her plan, her only plan.

*

Wolf Man watched them. He counted. All four of them were present. They stood around in reception looking confused. Weak. He loved it. He lifted his nose. They smelled of fear, anxiety, tiredness, wariness. He moved closer. Another human appeared from the darkening bowels of the office. He saw how the account manager’s eyes widened when she noticed the HR manager.

He licked his lips and tasted the salt of her sweat. Delicious.

The HR manager lined them up. Illustrator, then Copywriter, Account Manager, and lastly Creative Director. She blindfolded them one-by-one, then looked over at Wolf Man. She winked.

He circled them, taking his time, sniffing between their legs. He paused at the account manager. Licked her neck. Sublime. She didn’t move a muscle. He moved his tongue from her neck to her chest. He softly lifted her jersey with his tongue and plunged between her breasts. He inhaled deeply before extracting his mouth. Satisfied.

He slinked back to his corner and turned his back on them as they exited the office.

*

Copywriter tried to count the turns from her position in the back of the van, but she lost count after the third sharp turn. Her head was spinning. She assumed it was a van. She and her team had been escorted out of the office by the HR manager, straight into the underground parking garage. From there they were instructed to get into the back of some vehicle. And not to touch their blindfolds.

Copywriter held on to Illustrator’s leg.

“What the fuck?” Creative Director asked, again.

“Please stop saying that,” Account Manager piped up. Her voice sounded strange. Like it was coming from a dark tunnel.

“This isn’t necessarily bad, is it?” Illustrator said. But she didn’t sound convinced. “Maybe we’re getting a surprise present, or something...”

“You must know something, though, because you know everything,” Copywriter said. Indicating Creative Director.

“Who me? I don’t know a thing of what the fuck’s going on here. I was just minding my own business today. And no one told me why the fuck this was happening.”

Account Manager sighed. “This is ridiculous.”

Copywriter fished in her pocket until she closed her hand around her cigarettes and lighter. “I’m going to smoke.” She lit one. Exhaled. “Who wants one?”

“Me.”

“Yes, please.”

“Not me.”

“So, everyone, except our account manager?”

She lit the cigarettes one-by-one. Touched the leg of every team member before handing over the cigarette, making sure she connected with their hands. It took some concentration. It made her feel seasick.

They smoked in silence.

“I feel nauseous,” Illustrator said.

“Me too,” Account Manager said.

“Who knows, maybe one day we’ll look back on this and laugh about it?” Copywriter said. “Or I’ll write a story about it. Who’s in?”

Before anyone could reply, the van came to a halt. And turned off. The back door opened.

“Let’s go,” HR manager’s voice.

They were herded from the van into the night. Up a flight of stairs. Doors opened. And closed. Down another flight of stairs. They stumbled and cursed.

“Almost there. Keep holding on to the person in front of you.” HR manager quipped.

Another door opened. “Here we are. You can remove your blindfolds now.”

The room was covered in splashes of colourful graffiti. In the centre was a large wooden table with lit candles. Four chairs placed on one side. On the other stood Executive Creative Director. Grinning. He held a goblet in his right hand, and lifted it to them.

“Welcome, my chosen few!” he exclaimed. “Have a seat.”

HR manager took her place next to him.

The team looked at one another.

“What the fuck-?” Creative Director started.

ECD waved his hand. “No questions. Sit first.” His voice stern. Authoritative. His boss voice was to be obeyed. They took their seats opposite him.

“You must be parched.” He looked at HR manager. She scooted to the back of the room, returned with a tray of four goblets. Placed it in front of them.

“What’s with all the drama?” Copywriter asked. She took a sip from the goblet.

ECD smiled. The candlelight danced from the edge of his teeth. “Well, well, well. We are gathered here today...”

Copywriter rolled her eyes at Illustrator.

“Hey! I saw that,” HR manager said. She lifted her eyes at Copywriter.

ECD ignored them. “You guys have shown your dedication and your passion with the incredible work you produced last week. So, we are gathered here today to present you with a proposal.”

The team became one. One face. One voice. One woman-man. They drank from their goblets, tasted the thick red wine. They relaxed an inch. They crossed their legs.

ECD saw this. He knew them so well. Each of them. All of them. The team he created, fostered, moulded according to his agenda.

“Without further ado, while you’re enjoying your goblets of joy, I have asked our lady over here,” he indicated HR manager, “to draw up a non-discloser which you shall sign tonight.”

“A non-discloser of what?” Creative Director asked.

HR manager busied herself in the corner. ECD smirked. “I knew you would ask that, and that is why I came prepared.”

He waited for HR manager to return to the table. She placed a document in front of each of the team members.

They paged through it. All of 10 pages of words that didn't make sense. They frowned. They glanced at one another. They moved uncomfortably in their chairs.

"This is just legal jargon," ECD said. "Let me highlight the most important parts." He took a copy of the document from HR manager.

"You have been chosen as part of the team to represent client X for the duration of 10 years."

He looked up. "That means you're basically the top advertising team in the country."

Back to the document.

During the 10 years of representing client X you will be solely dedicated to the work produced for client X, while agreeing to distance yourself from any and all other clients.

"Meaning you can create an incredible portfolio of consistently well-crafted work for this one client. Let me see... Point 10.5.1 is also a goody."

On signing this document, you also agree to dedicate the next 10 years of your life to the project. You agree to terminate any relationships with any parties that might jeopardise, ruin or threaten your dedication to the project during the agreed period.

"In other words, you're all sorted for the next 10 years. No worries about retrenchment or the like."

He threw his head back and drained his goblet. "You're all in, obviously. So, let's drink to that after you've all signed."

HR manager handed pens to the team.

Account Manager cleared her throat. "Can we ask questions?" her voice squeaked.

"What?" ECD held his goblet out to HR manager. She filled it until a few drops fled the rim. It dripped on the table. Splashed on the wall. Turned the graffiti from colourful to splotchy. "What could you possibly want to say, except to thank me?"

Account Manager looked down. She shifted in her seat. No one had noticed that she hadn't touched her goblet. "Well, the thing is."

They held their breaths.

“My boyfriend and I recently started to talk about having a baby. I’m not a spring chicken, after all.” She looked up, at the other women in the room. No one moved.

ECD shook his head. “I didn’t even know you had a boyfriend, and now you’re telling me you want to have a child with this man?” His voice cold. The paint on the walls started to crack.

Account Manager placed her hand over her stomach. “The thing is, actually... I’m already pregnant. And I was hoping to ask for some maternity leave later in the year.”

“That won’t be possible.” ECD brought his goblet to his mouth. He swallowed. Looked at the others. “We absolutely cannot accommodate weddings, honeymoons, holidays and/or mothers who have to ferry their kids around Cape Town at all hours. It says so in...” he picked up the document, “point 11.2.1. As well as your increase in weekly hours which won’t allow for out-of-office relationships.”

He moved from his position and circled the team behind their backs. He touched each of them on the shoulder as he passed. He lingered on Account Manager’s. Pushed his finger just slightly under her jersey. He moved away silently.

“Any questions?”

Meat Market

Saturday morning at a Cape Town market. Man 1 and Man 2 enter the premises, each carrying an empty shopping bag. Man 1 is wearing limited edition designer sneakers and a snarl on his face. Man 2 is wearing a scarf around his neck and hunger in his eyes.

The smell of raw meat and fresh blood enter their nostrils, luring them into the crowd, where men are pushing and shouting, trying to score the best deals of the day.

“Let’s focus on our action plan,” Man 1 says. He pulls a shopping list from his bag. “We need two new interns, one mid-weight copywriter art director team, and one creative director.”

Man 2 nods. “Cool.”

“Let’s start at the university and college stands,” Man 1 instructs.

The university and college stands host the mince of the industry: the graduates, the desperate, the virginal creatives.

Man 2 moves to the first table on their right. He pushes another man out of his way as he approaches a stand with a sign saying “Freshest Mince – today only!”

“What do you have on offer?” Man 2 asks the woman behind the stand.

“Only the best mince, of course,” she beams. She points to a metal container with pieces of pink meat inside. “These graduates all earned distinctions and were top of their class,” she continues.

Man 1 joins Man 2. They peak inside the container. Man 1 sniffs the insides.

“They’re very affordable, too,” the woman explains. “Going for only one thousand per month per intern.”

Man 1 and Man 2 exchange a look. “Did any of them win some student awards? I need two shit-hot interns,” Man 1 says.

The woman smiles ever so brightly. “Yes, two of them did.” She separates a batch of meat from the container into a smaller container. “Can I bag them for you?”

Man 2 nods.

Man 1 holds up a hand. “How about one thousand five hundred for both of them?”

The woman looks at the pink mince. She sees her hard work in their texture. They are worth more, but Man 1 and Man 2 are picky. She will have to let them go.

She looks up at Man 1. “Deal.” She seals the two interns into one packet, and hands it over to Man 2, who gives her the money.

Man 1 has already moved on.

Man 2 finds Man 1 at the “Other Agencies” stands, piled high with lamb and pork chops: the mid-weight creatives, the ones who might be looking around, in need of change, or a new ladder to climb.

Man 2 watches Man 1 sizing up the Other Agencies. His arms crossed over his chest, his eyes searching, criticising, judging. Man 2 joins Man 1 for a moment before stepping into the crowd. He moves from stand to stand, checking out the size of the chops, their colour and potential. He asks questions at some stands, hovers on the periphery of others. Once he is satisfied, he moves back to where Man 1 is still standing, arms crossed.

“So?” Man 1 asks.

Man 2 points at a stand with pork chops. Big, bloody and sure to be tasty. “They have a great copywriter and art director combo. But apparently the copywriter is married and pregnant. So, a no-go.”

Man 1 nods. “Next,” he says.

“The big stand with the red signs has good-sized chops, but only a hot copywriter,” Man 2 continues. “And their asking price is too high.”

Man 1 yawns. “Next?”

“I think our best option is the third.” Man 2 indicates a stand with braai packs. Two chops sealed under a tight piece of plastic. “Not as fresh, but still good. They’re well-oiled creatives, who can push out briefs without thinking. And they come at a good price since they’ve been on the shelf since early this morning.”

“Great. Let’s get them,” Man 1 says.

They move in and purchase the braai pack containing the copywriter art director combo.

“I need a drink before we make the most important purchase of the day,” Man 1 says.

Next they will infiltrate the recruiter stands, where the most succulent steaks are kept in pools of blood: the best creative directors in the country.

Man 1 and Man 2 push Man 0.25 and Man 0.5 from Other Agencies out of the way to get to the Craft Beer stand. They order two Woodstock Devil’s Ales.

They make themselves comfortable on two bales of hay. They stretch their legs and they drink.

Instagrammed

Walden

She is followed by a lens. It swivels as she walks to the ladies' toilet. The ladies vs. the lads. She smells the perfume of many women mixed with morning odours of toilet bowls and hungover leftovers. She wasn't planning on drinking the night before, it was a Thursday night, after all, but friends can be so persuasive.

The small cubicle closes in on her. She feels trapped. Even today's heels aren't doing the job it usually does. To perk up her butt and then her spirit. She dreams of wearing flats. Walking out the door. To something else. Anything else.

But she pulls herself towards herself. She has an important client meeting in 10 minutes, and client expects only the best. Perfect hair, lips coloured in, eyes shiny, words flowing and to-ge-ther.

She looks in the mirror, her green eyes bloodshot. The small veins crawling to her brain. Eye drops. A tiny green worm escapes from the corner of her eye and crawls to her hair. It rests there.

When our girl exits, the lens focuses on her face. Runs through the previous night's images. Picks a snap of her and her friends looking shiny, sparkly, crisp. Opens Instagram. Chooses filter. Walden. Posts. #besttimes #happiness #agencylife

Crema

An office conversation.

"How did you get home last night?"

"Don't even ask."

"Oh! Did you sleep over at His place?"

"Of course I didn't."

"Your eyes are lying."

"Then don't look. Did you finish the copy for that radio ad?"

"You're blushing. I didn't think you had it in you to blush. Do you like him that much?"

"He only makes my vagina blush, okay. How about that 30 second ad then?"

"I'm still crafting. Give me another 30 minutes and you'll have it."

"Have you picked the voice over yet?"

"How about that man with the movie trailer voice and long hair?"

“That could work. Should I email his agent so long?”

“Not yet, let me finish the script first.”

“Fine-fine-fine. How about a coffee before you get cracking on that script? I need one. Desperately.”

“Because your vag is still blushing?”

“Don’t start.”

“But you’re giving me nothing. I’m imagining you doing the walk of shame to work this morning. Or did you stop over at your house first? I know you keep fresh clothes in your car boot.”

“Damn. I hate it that you know me so well.”

“So? Tell me! Put me out of my misery.”

“Let’s just say I’m not drinking again. Ever.”

“Because alcohol makes you go home with bad boys?”

“He’s not a bad boy. He is... something else.”

“Shhhhh.”

“What?”

“He’s. Behind. You. Coming. From. The. Boardroom.”

The lens follows the two girls to the coffee shop. Hones in on their multi-coloured nails holding Flat Whites in recycled cups. Takes a picture. Chooses filter. Crema. Posts. #besties #singlegirls #capetown #coffeerun

Nashville

Our girl overheard this conversation that day. Or it might have been another day. Or a day in the future. She might have joined them for coffee. They might have stopped at her desk on their way out, asking if she wanted a coffee too. Her friends. Her agency family.

“It’s time for the big C,” the one might have said with a wink.

She might have followed them, a step behind, to the coffee shop on the corner. She might have listened to their conversation that continued from the office.

“I thought you went home after our Uber dropped me off?” she might have asked. Or semi-asked. She already knew the answer.

She felt sick. A deep sick that started in her abdomen and spread to her chest.

She had a crush on Him. She felt faint in His company. She remembered the first day she saw Him. She felt he deserved a capital “H” from that day, and so she used it. And then her friends. And then her friend who got to Him first.

The first day she saw Him she was nervous. About the interview, the newness of things. She walked into the agency with a degree behind her name (BA Creative Brand Communications, specialisation in Visual Communications: Art Direction) and three years of slogging at a small DTP company. This was the Big One. The agency she had dreamt about. Longed to be a part of. Followed on Facebook and Twitter. Fantasised about standing next to the team on the stages of award shows.

The first day she saw Him she was sweating. Pools of saltwater had formed under her armpits, under her breasts. She wiped her hand on the back of her skirt before she shook his hand. He didn’t notice the wipe as he was talking to someone else when they were introduced. He didn’t make eye contact. He made sideways contact. He ushered her into his office. He was big and busy and full of creative director sexiness. And sex. She imagined him in sexual positions. She felt soaking wet and scared.

The first day she saw Him he looked through her portfolio. Didn’t approve of the boring DTP work, but liked her end of year college work. He liked the realness, he said. When He touched her work through the plastic covers of her portfolio pages, she thought she would pass out. Her heart was blossoming out to him, his fingertips, his touch. She crossed and uncrossed her legs for ventilation. It didn’t work. She felt her underwear stick to her, sweaty and all over.

The first day she saw Him he offered her a job. On the spot. She thought she might explode all over his desk and crouch over him on his chair. She wanted to put her arms around his tanned neck and bite into it. Strong and sweat and man. She shook his hand again and forgot her portfolio on his desk. She had to chain-smoke three cigarettes after she left.

Our girl looks straight into the lens as it shoots her. Green eyes milky pink. A larvae nestled in her ear. Filter: Nashville. Posts. No hashtag for you tonight.

No Filter

The office is abuzz with money-talk-career-review-peer-review electricity.

Insecurity. Greed. Raises. Promotions. Possibilities. Some will break. Some will make. More money. Onto the next one. AE to AM to AD to BUD to Dicks-in-Glass-Offices.

Junior to mid-weight to senior to GH to CD to Dicks-in-Glass-Offices. Receptionist to Nothing. PA to executive PA, aka Boss's Bitch. All of the titles, swimming around the office. Hovering above heads. Heads that have cheated, climbed, rolled, opened, cracked, broken, inflated.

But let's go to our girl. She's sitting behind her laptop, junior art director over her head. Her review is soon, too soon, but not soon enough. She is pretending to check emails, but the words are contracting and expanding in front of her. She is trying to form better words in her brain. Why she deserves a higher salary. Why she can't possibly survive with a monthly income of R8,000 CTC, living in Cape Town. No, not living. What's living? Living is eating, sleeping, working, playing, funning, sleeping, working, loving, living. She's barely breathing. Her chest is tight with anxiety-insecurity-longing-hope-desire.

Because you see, our girl is a talented fine artist. What she sees in pictures she forces through her brain until it connects with her fingers. When she picks up a pencil, her fingers dance. They weave and tango and fly and tap dance. When she puts her pencil away and places her hand over her mouse, her spirit dies as the computer lights up. She distorts her tango into a client logo. She rapes her tap dance into a print ad with a stock photo image. She slices her dreams with every click of the keyboard until she bleeds in Pantone.

"Don't you make shitloads of money in advertising?" A friend from high school had asked. A chartered accountant. Where shitloads of money meant holidays in foreign countries where you could lose your name and return tanned and enlightened. Where weekends were spent on wine farms and sports events and mountains and champagne, more champagne and more.

"Not when you're a junior creative," she had answered. "But you can make good money if you're a senior. Or a creative director." She put it up as a shield. To stop the questions. To explain. To explain herself. To explain herself to herself. To understand, to try to understand, why? Why do you stay in a job that pays you shitfucknothing where you work like a monkey and create work you will never take to the grave?

Yes, our girl is a talented artist. Some would argue art direction is an art. It sure is. To survive it is an art. To produce, vomit, change, flip, render, create within tight deadlines with client, client service, boss, bossman, bosswoman breathing down your neck. Yes, to survive agency life is an art. But not the art our girl longs for. Not the art she dreamt about creating as a little girl.

She's not a little girl anymore.

Her calendar notification pops up. Review with Him in 10 minutes. 7 minutes to smoke a cigarette. 3 to pee, wash hands, check circles under eyes.

His office smells like that first day. Man and sexy and toxic. She hears a faint whisper in her ear as the larvae moves inward. She puts her hand over her ear.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" He asks as He turns to her. Askance. "Do you have earache or something?"

"No. Nothing." She places her hands in her lap as she positions herself opposite him. She feels dry. No sweat, only dry, dry skin. Barren and desolate.

He fingers a paper on the desk. "So, I've checked out your peer review and everything looks cool."

The larvae shakes inside her ear canal. She doesn't move.

"How long have you been with us?"

The larvae becomes still. She feels it rest at the back of her throat. It is unfolding quietly.

"Three years to date." To date. What a strange thing. Today. To date. Her three-year anniversary of three years. Happy anniversary to her! But there's no champagne. An email to All Staff saying congrats you little worker bitch for surviving this long.

"Yeah, cool-cool." He lifts the paper and reads another one. "All good then, I suppose. Looks like you're well liked by everyone, your work ethic is great, you've won us a few awards. Blah blah blah. The usual."

She feels a flutter in her throat and almost chokes on it. She tries to swallow, but it pushes forward. To her tongue. The tip of her tongue.

"So, anything else?"

"I was hoping to chat to you about a... You know, an increase?" Why did she put a question mark where there should have been a full stop. A big fat fucking full stop. She. Needs. More. Money. For life. To survive. To justify. To help. To drink. To have more drunk. To make art on weekends. At night. To make sense.

He sits back, a slow movement of leg over knee. He whistles through his teeth. “Damn, not you too. Sorry, lady, we’re not doing increases this year.”

And then it happens. Her mouth opens wide and a moth escapes from it.

“Why?” she manages. A question. To question the authority. To demand an answer. For the first time in her life.

The moth unfolds her wings. She knows it’s a her. It is her. She flaps her wings leisurely.

“Why?” He repeats. “Why, for fuck’s sake, because of the recession. Why else? No one in this industry will be getting increases for fucking years. It’s not just you. It’s all of us. I won’t be getting one either.” With His 50K monthly salary. CTC. Cunt-to-Cunt.

Maybe that’s not exactly what he said, but that’s what she heard.

The moth moves to His hand. She hovers above His fingers, dancing from tip to tip.

Our girl doesn’t look at Him. Her eyes are on her moth. The intricate patterns on her back and wings.

“I understand,” she says, “but I’ve worked here for three years without getting an increase. At all.”

He sighs. The moth moves away and settles on the paper on His desk.

“Okay, fine. What I can offer you is a new title, then. What are you now?”

The moth moves towards a pot of black ink. She trails her wings over it. Dips it in. She makes little powdery kisses of insect love on the paper.

“Junior art director.”

“Well, I can’t make you a senior art director, because you aren’t. So, we can make you just an art director. You can put mid-weight on your LinkedIn profile, or whatever.”

The moth kisses become bigger and bigger until they fill the entire page. She starts tearing the page bit by bit with her feelers. She throws herself headfirst onto the page and breaks one wing in the process. Her body limp, she moves back to the inkpot.

Our girl is screaming, her little girl voice inside, demanding, throwing a tantrum, wanting to believe in more, in better.

The lens snaps. No Filter.

Snow Queen

It's February in Cape Town and her office is covered in snow.

I'm on the second floor. The disco music downstairs is vibrating through the walls. I hear voices, shrieks, feet shuffling on wooden floors.

I'm standing in front of my boss's glass office. A letter in my hand. I open the door. My breath catches. The cold grabs me around the neck and locks me in its grasp. It pulls me forward. I stumble over the thick snow. It leaks into my new Zara shoes. Within seconds my toes turn into blocks of ice.

I look towards the stairs that lead to the party. The coast is clear.

I remove my shoes. I plunge my feet deeper into the snow, let my legs sink into the deep cold.

4 Days Ago...

She commands me into her office via email. I'm in the middle of writing a brief, but I get up as if the Devil just bit me in the ass.

I knock on her door. She's typing furiously on her laptop. She lifts her hand once to show I may enter.

"You wanted to see me...?" I don't sit. I hover. I never know what to do around her. If you sit, you look too comfortable. If you stand, you look like a junior. Which I'm not. I'm an intern-turned-account-executive-turned-account-manager. But Snow Queen has the ability to make me feel like a junior. No, an intern. No, lower than that. Like the dust on her feet.

"Yes," she looks up from her laptop. "I'm calling an emergency meeting with Tits Up. I need you there."

Shit. Tits Up is our new client. A lingerie brand taking on Wonderbra. I haven't briefed the creatives on any of it. Shit-fuck-tits-ass.

"Sure," I say. Nodding. Peeing my pants. "What should I prepare for it?"

She looks me up and down. I try to shrink into myself. Do I look good enough? Is my hair straight enough? My make-up perfect enough? My clothes hot enough?

"Are you wearing a Tits Up bra today?" She narrows her eyes as she stares at my chest.

Thank goodness I am. A bright pink one. “Yes.” I smile.

She doesn’t return the smile, but frowns. “Then maybe you should drop a button on that shirt of yours so we can see the effect.”

I shift on my feet. My breasts are smaller than a pre-teen’s. No matter how many Tits Up bra’s I wear, I will never be a Victoria Secret’s model. Ever.

But Snow Queen wants solutions, not problems. “Okay, I’ll go change before the meeting.” Maybe I can exchange my blouse for a low-cut top. “What time is the meeting?”

Snow Queen shakes her head. “There’s no time. The meeting is in 30 minutes. Can you get some coffee for the marketing manager?”

The marketing manager. The creep with tits in his eyes and dirt under his fingernails. “Of course,” I smile, smile, smile. “Will it only be him in the meeting?”

“Yes. Him and me and you. He wants to discuss our future with Tits Up, so make sure you’re there with pen and paper to take notes.” She lifts her hands, indicating my dismissal.

Note-taker. Boss’s bitch. “Of course.”

I move out of her office with my back to the door. She returns to her laptop. I close the door behind me.

I head straight to the bathroom. I stop in front of the mirror. Breathe. Turn my head. My ears ache. I press my finger in one ear and extract it. An icicle the size of a pen follows. I throw it in the basin and watch it melt.

The marketing manager is late. Snow Queen and I are sitting facing each other at the boardroom table. Marketing manager will sit next to Snow Queen, I know it. Snow Queen is on her cell phone, talking to another client.

“Of course, darling, we will have it all ready by Friday. Don’t worry about anything.”

I look at the door. I want to run. I want to vomit ice blocks all over the floor for the marketing manager to slip on. I sit very still.

This Friday we have to present a full campaign to the client Snow Queen is talking to. An alcohol brand. I saw the first draft of the creative presentation this morning. And it’s average. Snow Queen is going to eat all of us alive, with a steak knife. With snow on top.

I jump as the receptionist knocks on the door. “Your four o’clock is here,” she says as she pokes her head in.

Snow Queen gets up. “Send him in.”

I follow.

Marketing manager marches through the door, briefcase in hand. He kisses Snow Queen on the cheek.

“Hi, Gary. You’re looking dapper, as always,” she purrs. She rests her hand ever so slightly on his arm. “Please have a seat. We’ve got your coffee waiting.”

He nods at me before taking his seat. He takes a sip of coffee.

I can’t look at him. His mouth is thick, his tongue too pink.

Dapper, my ass. His suit might be expensive, but his menacing eyes are cheap. “Ladies...” he drawls. “Let’s get this show on the road.” He looks at Snow Queen, avoids me.

I open my notebook, my pen ready.

“So, I have pressure from our MD about budgets and our current marketing spend.” He places his briefcase on the table, opens the button of his jacket as he sits back. “It’s not looking good.”

Snow Queen lifts the corners of her mouth. “That’s understandable, Gary. With SA’s current financial situation it’s completely expected. What can we do to alleviate your pressure?” She reveals a row of perfectly white teeth to punctuate her question.

“Well...” Gary crosses his legs. “Obviously my advertising budget is now shot to shit.”

I write ‘shot to shit’ in my notebook.

Snow Queen nods beautifully. Perfectly timed little movements of her head. “You and I can talk budgets later, but for now... We’ll continue with the campaign work as per our agreement?”

Gary nods his head in unison. “Yeah, please do. But keep in mind that we’ll probably cut the budget at a later stage. We won’t be able to put one million behind it like we originally said. More like half of it.”

Snow Queen rests her hand on Gary’s arm. “No problem, Gary. We’ve got this. I’ll make sure it happens.”

Gary looks from Snow Queen to me. “How do I know that your entire team will be dedicated?”

I swallow. I want to shout into his face. But I don’t. I smile a frosty smile.

“Of course we’re dedicated to Tits Up, Gary. The creatives have already started on ideas, and it’s going to be awesome.” My words stick in my throat, pushing through a fake tunnel of acid.

“When can I see some ideas, then?” Gary lifts a thick eyebrow.

“Why don’t you show Gary how dedicated you are, my dear?” Snow Queen is looking at me. Eyes locked on mine. I stop breathing. When Snow Queen uses the word ‘dear’ you know shit is coming. I dare not question her.

Gary looks from Snow Queen to me. His eyes excited.

“Come on, dear. Show Gary your Tits Up purchase.”

I look at her eyes, bluer than the ocean on the clearest day. She means business. This is it. If I show, I stay. If I don’t, I go.

I lift my hand, steady. I unbutton one button.

Snow Queen nods. Yes, keep going, her eyes say.

Gary licks his lips.

I look at the boardroom door, wishing for the receptionist to interrupt us. For anything. A snowstorm. The apocalypse. Death.

I open another button. And another. I stare at the ceiling. I peel back my blouse to reveal my measly breasts. I swallow tears and fire.

“Lovely,” someone says.

I close my blouse and get up. I shake Gary’s hand, not seeing anything.

“Thanks for your time, Gary. See you soon.”

“Awesome doing business with you,” he says to Snow Queen as he waddles out of the boardroom.

40 Minutes Ago...

The office party is in full swing. The alcohol brand loved our presentation and rewarded us with bottles of their premium liquor.

I’m standing in a circle with the creative team, all of us armed with shooters. I look at the group. Their eyes are bulging. They’re zombies, and I know I am too.

“Cheers!” the group shouts and throws the alcohol down their throats as one.

My eyes lock on Snow Queen standing nearby, my hand mid-air. I’m numb. I’m nothing. I turn around quickly and pour the shooter down the sink. When I turn

back, Snow Queen has already moved on. Talking to the CEO, resting her hand on his arm.

I move to my friend, who's dancing with one of the developers. I try to pull her away, but her legs are scissored between the developer's legs. I need to talk to someone, anyone. Or I need to drink to stop thinking.

Snow Queen floats towards me. She smiles her perfect teeth smile. I freeze.

"Can I talk to you?" but it's not a question.

I nod, but she's already moved away. I follow her.

Where we are going I don't know, and I don't ask.

She leads me to a couch in the lounge. There's no one else around. Is this where she kills me? On the couch? Steak knife in heart? Licks my blood and then walks away? While I die a slow death, my body to be discovered on Monday morning by the office cleaner?

"Sit." She pulls me next to her. Close. Her knee touches mine. I move away.

My knee has a cold spot where hers touched mine.

She extracts something from between her cleavage. A tiny plastic bag.

I look closer. Is this the poison she's going to force on me? No knife then?

She shakes a tiny pile of white powder from the bag onto the back of her hand.

She locks her eyes on mine while dipping her nose to it. She inhales quickly.

Expertly. Precisely. No residue remains on her hand.

"You want some?" She shakes the bag in front of my face.

Time freezes.

I shake my head.

She shrugs and nuzzles the bag between her ample breasts. "So... my dear. It's been quite a week. Busy, busy, but so great. Excellent, really. Yes?"

But she's not looking for answers.

"I want to give you some advice, because I can see you're faltering. You're not like me. I've been in this game for more than 15 years. Or is it 20? I forget. I'm excellent at it, I know I am. But you..."

She is looking at me, but past me. Her eyes dance circles around my head.

I breathe in.

"Get out while you can."

I breathe out.

She gets up just as quickly as she had sat down. She winks at me once before walking away.

4 Minutes Ago...

Her office is filling with snow, deeper and deeper. I move to her desk. I'm slow, but focused.

I clear a mound of snow off her chair. I sit and stretch out my legs, feel the cold wet through my dress. It numbs my bum, creeps up my back.

A flash of light catches my eye. I turn my head. A mirror behind Snow Queen's door. I squint through the falling snow. I see Snow Queen, but younger. Her face clean, eyes soft. It changes, distorts. She is her, iced into the woman she now is.

I sit back and exhale, the letter frozen in my hand. I breathe wisps of white clouds into the air.

Awarded

She is standing in front of the hotel's larger-than-life mirror. One hand holding a towel in place. Her hair wet. Her face pink. She carries clouds of steam on her shoulders.

A knock on the door.

She secures the towel before opening. Her friend and accomplice, her art director through thick and thin, teeters on her heels.

"How are you doing?" Art Director inquires. Her eyes round, lined with black ink, hair smoothed back, lips strawberry red.

"You look hot," she responds. Turns back to the mirror. Away from eyes that know her too well.

"Are you sure you'll be okay tonight?" Art Director enters the room. She places her small ass on the bed. Runs her hand over the duvet cover. "They splashed out proper this year, didn't they?" She smirks.

They make eye contact in the mirror and co-smirk.

"I'm ready to get the party started, but just wanted to make sure you're okay before I go to the hotel bar," Art Director says. "I think everyone's already there."

She nods. "Go ahead, honestly. I'll be fine."

Art Director fingers the dress on the bed. A black lace dress. "I'm glad to see you're wearing the dress I picked for you."

Yes. The dress. The dress she bought at The Lot the week after she bled herself out of the office. And out of her marriage. The dress Art Director said would take all her worries away and make her feel awesome.

"You didn't give me much choice, did you?" she laughs. But it feels forced. She closes her mouth, swallows her laugh midway. She wishes she could swallow her entire self.

Art Director winks at her in the mirror. She lifts herself lightly off the bed. "Don't take too long, okay? I'm going to come back if you're not at the bar in about 30 minutes."

"Fine, fine. Now go already." She attempts a smile. It threatens to crack her skull in half. "See you in less than 30 minutes."

Art Director, and her heels, and her lips, and her fine ass, leave the room.

She looks into the mirror. The towel has shifted. She lets it. It wants to fall. She lets it. She sees a woman in the mirror that's her. But not her. Breasts sagging slightly, tummy too much flesh, legs white and spotted with veins, and a half-waxed half-bush triangle. Her misery hidden between the bush. Her vagina the deceiver of her wants. Her pain.

She moves closer to the mirror. She exhales through her mouth, clouds forming on the mirror. She draws a heart on it with one finger. Why, even? She does not know. Childhood memory of drawing hearts on bathroom mirrors after long baths? Probably.

But she has no hearts to give. Not even to her husband. The man who quietly listened to her ranting about work; the man who made her tea every morning; the man who went with her to the fertility clinic when she had to face the truth; the man who endured her mood swings, her depression, her slipping, slipping away. After the last fail, she was the one who ran. Said: enough. Walked away. Packed her bags. Moved into a matchbox bachelor's flat in Gardens. And bought a dress at The Lot for the agency's end-of-year Christmas party.

But she didn't feel Christmas. Or party. Or lace dressy.

*

"You should take it easy," her kind gynaecologist had said the day he inserted yet another batch of fertilised eggs into her womb through a tube. "Try to rest for at least 48 hours."

She avoided eye contact with her husband, who coughed nervously. She knew that cough. She felt his eyes burning into her. Judging her. Wanting her to be better.

"You're married to your work," he had coughed more than once. "This is never going to work if you keep running back to work the moment you leave the hospital."

"But they need me, okay. I have deadlines. And responsibilities," she spat back. "I love my job."

He shook his head. Coughed. Turned away. His shoulders tight. And then, one day, he added: "Sometimes I wonder if you really want to have a baby."

She threw whatever she had in her hand. Hit his back. It fell to the floor. The screen of her cell phone cracked like her heart. That night she bled herself awake on

her art director's couch. Hospital. Worried faces. Pain in her womb. Her body deceiving her again. A call. Her husband's hand in hers. Their eyes locked once, and said what they couldn't. Art Director paced the hospital floor with a coffee cup in hand, making calls to their creative director, to try and get her out of work for a few days.

She nested on Art Director's couch for two days. Switched off her cell phone. Stared into space when she was awake. And dreamt of babies eating her insides when she closed her eyes.

When she returned to work, people hugged her. She felt nothing. Art Director brought her coffee, lunch, tissues, notes from meetings. And coaxed her into buying a ridiculously short black lace dress. Black to mourn the loss of another baby. The loss of her partner. But lace to signal possibility.

*

She slides into the dress. Short. So short. Her legs too white. The veins a mockery of her wasted youth. Too much drink? Too many drugs? Too much smoking? Is that what caused all her miscarriages? Her body is a temple of doom. Haggard. Tits looking down, embarrassed of her. Her arms flabby. Her hair, now blow-dried, dead tired. Hanging like a curtain of yellow grass on her back.

She checks the time. But she reads above it, below it. Her world is not real anymore. Nothing makes sense. Where is she, even? She runs a hand over the dress, feels the flower design made of soft lace. She circles a finger over her nipples. Why, she does not know. Her cell phone beeps.

She reads through broken glass: *Are you coming, friend? We're about to go into the venue and I want you by my side. I've ordered you a glass of bubbly, so move it ;)*

Bless her friend. She runs her hand over her abdomen once before exiting.

The venue is decorated with golden stars and flashy disco balls. She enters with Art Director linked to her arm, pouring tipsy words into her ear. Art Director got a head start with a bottle of MCC, and is gossiping about their colleagues. Making predictions of who will hook up with whom. Criticising the opulence of the event, when none of them are getting Christmas bonuses.

They find their seats in the midst of loud music and crazy lights. She sips from her glass of bubbly. It tastes like acid. No. Like pee.

“You girls having fun?” Their creative director hovers by the back of their seats.

“Sure,” Art Director answers for them. She lifts her glass to meet Creative Director’s halfway. “You?”

“Always,” he replies. His eyes sparkle little devils. Little Lucy’s. He looks out into the distance, until his eyes rest on the latest addition to the creative team: a graphic designer, with straight dark hair, true Cape Town-ness, and allusive, deer-in-headlights eyes. The combo that makes their creative director hot.

“You go have fun, too,” Art Director says. “See you later, on the dance floor.”

“What did I tell you?” Art Director says as soon as CD turns his back on them. “Those two are so gonna get it on tonight.”

“Hello?” Art Director waves a hand in front of her face. “Are you there?”

She follows the strawberry red of her lips. “I am. Yes, I think those two are very likely to hook up tonight.”

Art Director pats her on the arm. “Sorry, hun. I know this must be hard for you. But try to relax a bit.” She reaches over the table and scoops up a bottle of wine. She fills two glasses. Hands one over.

They sip in silence. But nothing is silent. The music from DJ Nutcase in the corner is filling every space of the large room. Voices trip over each other to congratulate, contribute, banter, flirt. It’s been a big year for the agency, everyone agrees. Many awards, new staff, deadlines met, happy clients.

She sees the smiles. Smile for the camera, bitches! CD shouts to a group of young client service girls in the photo booth. Horny smiles. Drunk smiles. Drug smiles.

The sounds filter through her brain. It’s all mush. A baby ate her ability to fake smile. To talk small. To nod, nod, nod as the CEO tells her how awesome and dedicated she is. Where is this coming from? The CEO is standing on a podium, addressing the sea of fake smiles. Art Director is kicking her under the table, her red berries moving fast.

She swims to the top. “What?” she asks.

“That’s you, get up. You just won an award,” Art Director says, clapping her hands.

She doesn't understand. An award? For what? She looks at her hands and sees blood.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Art Director's face is so close. If she moves a little closer, she can bite into it. Taste the berries and the fun.

A hand is pulling her up. She feels an arm around her middle. She smells berries on her neck.

"Thank you," she whispers at her art director, but DJ Nutcase blows her words away before it can reach her friend's ear.

The CEO is pumping her hand. "Well done, lady. You deserve this over and over."

A solid object is placed in her other hand. It feels like a brick. She wants to hit him over the head with it. She looks to her friend. Berry lips are posing for the camera. She looks where she is looking, but only sees flashing lights, disco balls. The arm is around her middle again, leading her away. Can we keep going? She wants to ask.

A tequila shot is waiting for her on her return. Then another. And another. The food tastes dry. No one eats dessert, but orders Red Bull & Jägermeister instead.

A blur of faces, dancing bodies, legs pushing into each other, mouths leaning into necks. She is under a disco ball, alone. It drips icy cold water on her head. It spreads through the cracks in her skull and lulls her. She slides from the venue, her hands wrapped around her award.

When she enters her hotel room, she reads the inscription.

Talent of the Year 2015 awarded to [her name and surname] for excellence and dedication to the Agency.

She looks closer. The award is in the shape of a bird. A golden bird. With a small beak. Long tail.

She places it on the bed. She undresses in front of the larger-than-life mirror. She observes her naked self. She fetches the bird from the bed. Pushes it against her breasts, her abdomen, between her legs. She feels it growing warmer. Its feathers fluff under her touch. The beak moves against her skin until it nestles between her breasts.

Through The Line

Copywriter meets her best friend outside the gallery entrance. Two coffee cups in hand. Her friend is wearing a new shirt and baby vomit on her sleeve. She knows better than to ask. It's 7am and nothing makes sense.

"This better be good," her friend says. She sips from her coffee cup. Lifts her sunglasses from her eyes.

Copywriter sees the dark circles. A reflection of her own. Shadows of stress, stretched hours, sleepless nights, caffeine binges, demands. They have been running the advertising highway alongside each other for years. From interns, to juniors, to mid-weights, to seniors, to creative group heads of copywriting and design respectively. Designer has the added anxiety of balancing a marriage and a baby with the pressures of The Job.

*

A billboard for life insurance. An image of a wholesome-looking woman in corporate attire, lifting a smiling baby in her arms. The headline: "You CAN have it all." The subhead: "For you and your loved-ones."

*

They sip their coffee in silence. Neither of them morning people. Copywriter feels her brain's cogs slowly starting to turn. She hears the scrape of metal, from cog to cog, caffeine lubricating the action.

"Is he inside already, do you think?" she asks. The 'he' being Creative Director. The 'he' who had told them to gather at 7am on a Tuesday morning in front of the hip new gallery *Art On The Wall* in Woodstock.

Designer glances at the front door. "Possibly."

Copywriter drowns her cup, looks for a nearby bin. She spots one close to a traffic light. She extends her hand to her friend. Designer hands over her empty cup. "Thanks," she says. "I needed that."

Copywriter steps from the newly painted red platform of the gallery entrance to the pavement. She spots a mound of human poo, a dirty diaper and a broken bottle

on her way to the bin. She throws the cups in the green bin with profanities written in black on the side. When she turns back to the gallery entrance, she looks up. Broken-down houses to her left, a forgotten park on her right. The glossy gallery with its red platform, turquoise door and burglarproof windows a joke in the centre. A new client with aspirations of turning the art on the streets into art on the walls.

When she and Designer had peeked inside the envelope delivered by hand by Creative Director the night before, they had been interested. Curious. Their exhaustion momentarily forgotten as the smell of a new brief wafted into their noses.

“This is the client we’ve been waiting for,” Creative Director had said. “A client with vision. Passion. A sustainable approach.”

They had bent their heads over the CONFIDENTIAL (a red sticker in the corner of the envelope) document, eager for something new. Heart. Real. Beauty.

“We’ll meet at their first property, the gallery *Art On The Wall*, tomorrow morning at seven sharp,” he had concluded before switching off his desk light for the night. “Make sure you’ve mulled over all the info in the doc before then.”

They had nodded. Sure. Yes. Of course. Their bodies agreeing, their minds screaming. Copywriter thinking of her empty food cupboards and needy cat waiting for her at home. Designer thinking of her husband and baby, who would be asleep by the time she got home.

“Woodstock, you weird and disgusting beast,” Designer says now, spotting the dirty diaper. Her Southern Suburbs mouth forming a prune.

Copywriter sees movement between the red platform and the broken-down house next door. A human mound under a blanket. She looks closer. A foot peeps from the frayed edges of the blanket. Dirt and broken nails.

As she moves around it, a door opens. A woman exits through the peeled paint of her front door. A broom in hand. She stops when she sees the two of them.

Copywriter and Designer look at her. Copywriter lifts her hand in greeting.

“Good morning,” Copywriter says.

A small face appears in the door, his arms outstretched to his mother. He pushes his head through her legs, sees the two women. The mother turns away from them, whispers something to her son, and starts sweeping her porch rhythmically. The small boy stares.

Designer and Copywriter make eye contact. They both look down.

Copywriter moves to the red platform. She pushes the gallery door. It opens with a soft click. “Shall we do this?” she asks, smiling. She holds the door wide open for her friend. She doesn’t look back at the small boy.

Designer touches Copywriter’s shoulder before stepping inside the gallery. “Love your enthusiasm, babe.”

*

A pamphlet pressed into bored hands at red traffic lights. Images of lofty apartments, artisan bakeries, coffee shops, bicycle parking bays and happy faces forming a collage of a would-be world. The headline: “Make Woodstock your new happy place.” Columns of copy explaining the property boom, the newness, the awesome, the hipster wet dream come true.

*

The gallery is eerily quiet. There is no one at the would-be reception area. It smells of paint and new and money. Copywriter stares at the walls. Artworks covered in white cloaks line the walls.

“Probably for the big reveal,” Designer says, following Copywriter’s gaze.

They stand. Backs to the gallery entrance, facing the gaping mouth of inside. It takes Copywriter a moment to wrap her head around the space, her cogs now fully turning. She sees: a square of a room with granite floors, white walls, a revamped chandelier dangling from the roof. Two doors on opposite sides leading to – art? Creative Director’s new office? Client’s lair?

“This place makes my skin crawl,” Designer says, her voice a whisper. She crosses her arms over her chest and shivers.

Copywriter sees goose pimples on her friend’s arms. Little pocks of skin reacting. Fighting the new, the unknown.

“Hello?” Copywriter calls out in the direction of one of the doors. A call to match the sound of the gallery. Hollow, uncertain.

“Should we just try one of the doors?” Designer asks. “Surely Creative Director is in the back somewhere, waiting for us?”

Copywriter lifts her iPhone from her handbag. Time says yes, messages say nothing. “I think so. Let’s try the door on the right.”

Designer nods. She links her hand through Copywriter’s arm. The warmth of her friend’s skin makes Copywriter relax. She smells a mixture of perfume, skin and baby on her friend. Her mind finds rest there.

They walk towards the door.

A ripping sound trips them. Copywriter’s heart contracts. Designer’s hand releases her. She looks down to where Designer is looking. One of Designer’s heels had ripped from her shoe and lodged in a crack in the floor, like a broken tooth.

“Fuck, man,” Designer says, balancing on one foot. “I knew I shouldn’t have bothered with damn heels.”

She whips off both her shoes, stretches her naked toes on the granite floor. She removes the broken heel from the crack, tucks it into her oversized handbag, along with the shoes.

Copywriter wants to laugh. She breaks a smile, a giggle escapes. “You are just fantastic. Trust you to break in a new client’s office.”

Designer smiles. “Let’s hope client doesn’t mind classless women.” She sighs. “Let’s try again.”

Copywriter and Designer take each other’s hands. As if it’s the most natural thing in the world. As if they’ve been doing it their entire lives.

The door opens before they reach it, sending Designer half a step back in a shriek, while Copywriter holds on tight.

*

A print ad for this season’s shoes. In all of the colours of passion, love, sex. An image of two women next to a glittering pool – one blonde, one brunette – wearing bikinis and high, higher, highest shoes. Two men in the background, cleaning the pool with oil on their bodies and animal in their eyes. No headline, no body copy, no slogan. Just the image, and the client logo at the bottom.

*

Creative Director fills the doorframe. He is not a big man. His charisma fills the space between pauses, awkward silences, client questions.

“There you are!” he says. He glances from one woman to the next. His eyes rest on Designer’s bare feet. He cocks one eyebrow.

“The floor ate it,” she says, pointing to the crack in the floor behind them.

He shakes his head, a smile opening between his tanned cheeks. “Lucky for us, client won’t be joining us today.”

He steps back, extends his arm into the room beyond. “Ladies,” he says.

The women let go of each other’s hands. They enter the room, Designer first, Copywriter next.

What they see is more white. A circular room. More artworks hidden under white cloaks. But the artworks in this room aren’t lined against the walls. There are shapes in hotchpotch positions under cloaks.

Statues? Copywriter wonders. Furniture? Ornaments?

Creative Director moves between the objects with ease. The women share a look, unsure.

“Don’t worry about these,” he says as he makes his way to the other side of the room. “Client calls this the Wolf Man’s Room. I don’t know what that means.”

The women follow their leader. Who seems to be heading for another door.

Copywriter is behind Designer, her hand too far to reach. She sees a breath of movement from the corner of her eye. She stalls. Was that her imagination? The cogs churning fear, foreboding, anxiety? But then she sees it again. A ripple of movement under a cloak. Yes, it is there. She checks the walls for windows. Woodstock wind? But no. Windowless room of the Wolf Man. Whatever that means.

She tries to get Designer’s attention, but she has already reached the next door.

She inhales deeply, the scent of animal, turpentine and something familiar yet strange stings her nose.

Before she closes the door behind her she catches a glimpse of a stone paw from under the cloak.

In the next room is an office space with sleek desks, plants, green and black chairs.

Creative Director opens his arms to the room. “Welcome, my girls, to our very clever client’s new office space.” He looks not at them, but above their heads.

He makes himself comfortable at one of the desks. His body moulds perfectly into the black designer chair. It hugs his back, holds him in comfortable arms.

“Please sit,” he says.

The women each pick a green chair, position themselves opposite Creative Director’s desk.

Creative Director folds his hands into each other, places his elbows on the desk. “As you’ve hopefully observed from the material I gave you last night, our client is seriously into the business of sustainable solutions.”

He sits back. “This entire office is equipped with recycled furniture. Amazing, right?”

The women nod. Amazing. Right.

“He wants to turn Cape Town into South Africa’s first completely sustainable city. Starting with this place, *Art On The Wall*,” he continues. “His plan is to revamp old buildings one by one, starting with Woodstock and Salt River, and turning the muck of the city into beauty.”

Copywriter wonders if she should be making notes. But she has read all of this in the document already. She has mulled over words like art, sustainability, real, revamp, redo, re-Woodstock the entire night.

“And this building was created through sustainable planning, using only sustainable material, and so on?” Copywriter asks.

Her knowledge of sustainability is limited to what she’s read on city websites and what Google gave her when she searched ‘sustainable creative ideas’. What is it, really?

Creative Director shrugs. “I’m not sure. But the point is, this project is the beginning of something great. And we get to start it with our client.”

Designer leans forward. “How exactly will we do this? Are we the official agency for the client, or what?”

“My question exactly,” Copywriter adds. “And what’s the story with this office space?”

Creative Director smiles. “That’s why I love the two of you. My smart, sassy creative heads.”

He looks above their heads again. “We are indeed going to create the advertising material for our brilliant client’s projects. They’re looking for a Through The Line campaign. And...”

He looks at the desk. At the wall behind them. At a green chair. A black one. A plant. “There is space for two of us to move in here, and start our own creative studio. To cherry pick clever young interns to join us, and so on.”

The women look at one another. Close the short distance between them by joining hands again. Two? Of them? The them being the two? Or him and another?

“Now this part isn’t easy for me...” His eyes rest on the door behind them. “But I can only pick one of you.”

Copywriter knows it before she hears it. Creative Director grew up as a copywriter, he is a copywriter, he is it. She is not. Creative Director and Designer are the chosen few. The two. The ones to launch a new client into world peace.

*

A radio ad. With nothing but white noise.

*

Copywriter looks at her friend. The baby smells on her. The vomit a reminder on her shoulder. A husband at home. A home with a garden. Flowers in the garden. Bees and birds and baby plucking grass with a small fist on Saturday mornings when mother and father are tending to their beloved garden.

She lets go of her friend’s hand.

*

Wolf Man sees her approaching. Her feet naked. Her movements strong. Her smell pungent. He waits. His breath lifts the cloak in small puffs.

She has seen him, he knows.