

Before before & After after

Short Stories

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Shelter K Musavengana

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Abstract

The stories in this collection explore the fantastical, the power of memory, and the human capacity to love. Moving between the surreal, the absurd, the allegorical, and the meta-fictional, they elaborate on life's ordinary madness and the mysteries of the spirit. By challenging the either/or boundaries of the binary of realism and fantasy, the stories provoke the reader to engage actively with the text. Influenced by experimental US author Stacey Levine, the mid-century British novelist Barbara Comyns, and the adventurous Chinese writer Can Xue, in most cases, they create a playful, experimental world that exists at a slight angle to the world as we know it.

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Night flight

The day I flew above my house, past the park, over the dam and into the gum trees on the other side of town, I thought I wasn't going to stop. I had my chin jutting out and my legs straight as a board, toes pointed backwards and my arms stretched out. Sometimes I tried to stretch my hands forward like Superman but it didn't do well for balance. Every time I lost my centre and ended up dovetailing downward but this didn't stop me. I was sure there was a way I could hold the position and still stay air bound. Sometimes I liked to close my eyes and feel the wind on my cheeks but flying blind also had its risks. I flew into a flock of pigeons once. Annoyed with me for invading their space, they flew circles around me, angrily slapping me with their wings.

The day I flew past the park, over the dam and into the gum trees and saw Roy Spot sitting on top of a roof, I got quite a fright. I didn't know what he was doing out at that time of the night and I didn't want him to see me. Flying at night was illegal. I thought to quickly turn around but Roy whistled and raised his hands. I paused then hovered in the shadow of the trees to wait for him.

"What are you doing out at night?"

"I could just ask you the same."

We hovered there, legs down, arms stretched, like we were floating in a swimming pool.

"I was just watching the stars."

"I was watching the stars too... only a little higher than you."

"It's illegal you know."

"Will you rat me out?"

"I don't know. Let me think for a minute."

"If you don't rat me out I'll let you touch my feathers."

"If I touch your feathers, will you stop flying around at night?"

Roy's father was the chief of police. It was a small town. Everyone knew everyone.

“Yes I promise,” I lied.

“Let’s go down then.”

We flew back to the roof. I took my top off, setting my feathers free. Roy inhaled. I lay on my front.

“Come on then. Don’t just stand there.”

“I’ve never touched a woman’s feathers before,” he said almost apologetically.

He knelt next to me and with a trembling hand stroked the feathers from my neck down. I let out a sigh because it felt good. I hadn’t had anyone touch my feathers in a long time. When they were open, the feathers covered my back completely. They tapered off just above my bum and when they were closed they lay along my spine. At first Roy used one hand then he began alternating with the other. One long stroke with the right and then another with the left. I closed my eyes when he got to the middle of the feathers at the centre of my back where I was most sensitive. Some people said if someone pulled out your feathers right there you could become paralysed for life. Roy was gentle so I allowed him to linger. I felt him try to lift the feathers and to please him, I let them rise and then gently fall back, covering his hands with their softness. We stayed like that for a few minutes and then I turned onto my back. Roy inhaled. He reached out his hand towards my chest and I slapped it away.

“Just the feathers boyo.”

I picked up my top and threw it back on.

“See you around.” I blew him a kiss and flew back towards the trees laughing. He stood gaping.

When I got home my father was sleeping on the sofa directly in front of the TV. I crept in and up the stairs to my room, passing my grandmother’s dried feathers which hung over the stairs in a glass frame. I still didn’t understand why my father kept them but didn’t keep my mother’s. *Your mother never feathered* he said. It was ridiculous. Everyone feathered.

*

In the morning I found father limping around the kitchen.

“Are you walking today, hon?”

“I don’t know, I thought I’d stay in. What’s wrong with your leg?”

“Twisted my ankle yesterday. That Brendon Gillis was here looking for you last night. I told him you were feeling ill.”

“Oh...”

“Where did you go then?”

“Nowhere really. So you’re not going to work today then?”

“Can’t walk or fly with the ankle so I’m staying in. They’re short staffed at the office but there’s nothing I can do.”

“Ah well...” I grabbed an apple and walked out into the garden.

I sat on the bench and watched people fly past, hardly anyone walked. It was a beautiful day. Tired from the previous night’s adventures, I fell asleep. I dreamt I had many feathers, blue, yellow, orange, green and red. I dreamt my whole body glimmered with vibrant colours flowing into each other.

*

The day passed and the night came. I snuck out through the window and flew up. When I was high enough and sure no one could see me, I let out a big shout and listened to my voice echo against the silence. I flew back down to my father’s bedroom window to make sure he was asleep then headed out. I flew the same way I flew every night; past the park, over the dam, into the Gum trees on the other side of town and then over the fields if I had time. Most of the streets below me were dark but I could see patches of light from the households that were still awake. The street lights glowed in rows like airport runways. Over the dam, the water was like a big black mirror, reflecting the stars above me. I knew the risk I was taking flying during the illegal hours, but it was worth it just to be alone with the world at my feet. I closed my eyes, letting the breeze caress my face. It was a calm night.

“You promised you wouldn’t fly at night.”

I almost dropped to the ground, opened my eyes and found Roy flying next to me.

“What are you doing? You are breaking the law!”

“So are you.”

We both went silent. I’d never flown with anyone before.

“Where do you go anyway?” he asked, moving a bit closer.

“Nowhere really. I just fly around.”

“Why?”

“Just to be FREE!” I shouted.

“Shhhh. Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?”

“No one comes out at night... well, until you, I’d never seen anyone. Not even the night patrol.”

We flew silently for a few minutes.

“Can I touch your feathers again?”

I turned my head to him and looked into his deep eyes. I wasn’t sure what colour they were, probably brown. He smiled at me and his cheeks dimpled. I looked down the length of him, careful to keep my balance. He was cute and had a nice body, but definitely much younger than me.

“How old are you?”

“Does it matter?”

I thought about this for a moment. “Not really.”

“So will you let me touch your feathers again?”

“I suppose, since you are so polite about it.”

We flew down to a patch of grass. I took my top off and lay on my front. I felt his hand on my neck before he started stroking my feathers. His hands trembled and then steadied. He was very gentle. He stroked me for a while and I sighed with pleasure.

Afterwards, we both stood up and I looked at him.

“We can’t meet again.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have a boyfriend.”

“No you don’t. You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying. He works at Feather World.”

“So why did you let me touch your feathers then?”

“Because you’re cute.”

I didn’t wait. I flew up and away. I hoped he wouldn’t follow me but also somehow wanted him to. He didn’t. When I glanced back down, he was where I’d left him.

For a week I stayed at home. No night time flying. During that week, when it got dark I sat at my bedroom window and looked at the stars, imagining the wind on my face. When it was time to turn in, I lay in bed tossing and turning. Finally, frustrated, I threw the covers off and went downstairs. Without thinking, I found myself outside. Once I was air bound, I felt the weight drop off my shoulders. Giddy, I flew in figure eight circles above my house until my head spun, then set off. To be safe, I took a different path. I flew for over an hour, past the city boundary lines, further than I’d ever flown before. I flew higher and faster until I reached a wall as high as heaven. I tried to hit against the wall to break free but it was solid. I followed it to see where it ended but it seemed to go on forever. I flew up next to the wall but before I could go very far, a big gloved hand reached down and grabbed me. I tried to twist free but the hand had me tightly.

This one’s ready, a voice said

Suddenly I was above the wall, then beyond the wall and there was light everywhere. The gloved hand put me down. My legs felt unsteady. From where I stood I could see through

the wall. Strange, from the other side I could see nothing. I tried to make sense of my surroundings, turning around to get my bearings but I was blinded by the light. With a finger, the gloved hand nudged me and I flew up in fright.

There we go.

Go on. You are free, I heard another voice say.

I tried to fly back where I'd come from but the wall kept me out. I flew high up but couldn't find an opening. Trapped, I flew towards the wall and hit my shoulder against it, over and over. *I think she's looking for a way back in,* the first voice said before the gloved hand took me, turned me towards what looked like a gigantic window and dropped me on the sill. The light beyond the window was dimmer. At first I saw blurred shapes then my eyes adjusted and I could see rolling hills, green everywhere. I flew up and out the window without looking back. New smells filled my nose, everything was bigger. I flew higher and higher and higher. The air thinned and my heart began to beat faster. I turned back down, spread my arms wide and did some twirls. I plunged down releasing a joyful peal of laughter, stretched my arms before me, charged forward, then flew back up, and then dove down again spinning like an Olympic diver. I could hear my heart pumping and I stopped to catch my breath. Floating in mid-air, I looked at the horizon where the ground and the sky seemed to merge.

Pandemonium

When the alarm went off for her two o'clock, Teri was stuck. She could hear it beeping as though coming from a distant place. She stood at the window willing her feet to move but they wouldn't. Three floors down, she'd seen it all. She'd seen her walking towards the building, crossing the road and then just like that she was gone. From where she stood, Teri saw no blood, no crushed limbs... nothing. She saw people running around screaming...crazy. Chickens did that. If you beheaded a chicken without holding its wings down, it ran around spurting blood from its neck. Once all the life was gone it would just drop dead. Teri had seen one when she was seven. It was at Christmas and all the family had gathered to celebrate. Aunts were moving about hastily in the kitchen, making salads, cooking sadza and rice, plucking chickens and cleaning the intestines from the goat that the men had killed and skinned. Teri remembered the headless chicken. It ran around the kitchen, knocking itself against cupboard doors until it dropped before her. It was the same Christmas she saw a goat's head in a dish with its eyes open and tongue sticking out. She never liked goat meat after that.

That morning before Teri went to work, her sister, Kumbi, called her from town and said she needed to see her. Teri told her she didn't have the time. The thing with Kumbi was that she only ever wanted to see her when she needed money or was in some kind of trouble and Teri had had enough. The two were born a year apart making them almost twins. Kumbi was older but Teri was the more responsible one, she was always bailing her sister out of some mess or other. Starting the day with a call from her sister didn't bode well. She had a series of meetings lined up, clients to woo and contracts to sign. She'd have to file the Kumbi issue away and deal with it later.

The woman on the street wore a red coat. That's the first thing Teri noticed. It was bright red and as if in some kind of scripted scene, everyone else around her wore drab grey and black. The woman had her hoodie up, shielding her face. It was the first cold morning they'd had all year. Standing at the window, hugging a cup of tea between her hands, Teri saw a boy of maybe three or four on a child leash, pulling at the man holding the leash, probably the father. The man seemed more interested in the girl in tight jeans and hooker boots walking in front of him. Teri was about to turn from the window when she heard the sound. At first she thought it was a gunshot, a loud, terrifying clap sliced through the everyday

noises and for a second everyone outside froze. Then the screaming and running around began. Teri froze too but her freeze didn't end with everyone else because from her window she saw something else. Her cup with its half-drunk tea slipped from her hands and fell onto the carpet with a thud, the hot liquid splashing onto her stockinged feet.

From her position at the window, Teri could almost taste the fear and confusion in the air. The woman in the red coat, the man with the boy on a leash, hooker boots girl and some of the others walked over to the pedestrian crossing that linked that side of the street with Teri's. When the light turned green for the pedestrians to go, the woman in the red coat walked on to the street. The traffic was still. Everything was fine, until a louder clap. The ground opened up momentarily and swallowed the woman.

The man with the boy on a leash started running backwards, hooker boots girl ran around in circles. People in their grey and black coats screamed, some with arms raised, waving, and some clutching their bags. If this was a scene from a movie, Teri would have called it "the scene where they all go mad."

Pandemonium.

This was the story Teri told her shrink, Dr Plunder, that evening. After she cancelled all her meetings and sat on the floor in the office trying to make sense of what had happened. She couldn't stop seeing the woman, the street, the craziness. Of all the things that came to her mind that day, the most comforting was the boy on the leash... but the woman in the red coat, getting swallowed by the road, kept pushing her boy-in-the-leash thoughts out of the way.

Dr Plunder gave Teri something to calm her down. A taxi took her home that evening. When she got to her flat, she walked through the front door, past the kitchen, down the corridor and into her bedroom in a daze. She didn't switch on any lights or think about having dinner or a shower. Fully clothed, only managing to kick her shoes off, she sat on the edge of her bed, staring blankly at the wall. After a few minutes, she opened the top drawer on the bedside table and took out a bottle of sleeping pills. Teri had got these three months ago when she stopped sleeping at night after finding Nick dead with the radio in the bath. Popping the lid, she took two out, tipped her head back, threw them into her mouth,

swallowed them dry and flopped back onto the pillows. She stared at the ceiling until she slipped into darkness.

Teri was outside her office building, at the entrance, about to go in when a loud clap sliced through the everyday noises. At first everyone froze for a moment before all hell broke loose. People were screaming and running around shoving each other this way and that. Teri stood frozen as if everything that was happening wasn't actually happening where she was. She willed herself to move but her feet would not obey and so she stood there. Across the street she saw her. She'd seen her earlier and thought about a scene in a movie, in which the main character wore red and everyone around them wore black. A few minutes after the loud clap, nothing bad followed, everyone seemed to calm down. There was a boy on a child leash. The man holding the leash wasn't paying attention to the boy. Instead, he was looking at the girl in tight jeans and hooker boots walking in front of him.

The light for the pedestrians to cross the road turned green, Teri watched the woman in the red coat step onto the street. There was a deafening clap, all the windows around Teri seemed to vibrate and then a loud tearing sound ripped through them. The ground cracked open where the woman stood, fear and panic etched in her face, before it disappeared... along with the rest of her... the ground closed shut. Everyone stood transfixed.

When they were young Teri and Kumbi used to play a game in the bath, whoever could stay under water the longest would get the other's dessert for the day. They called it the drowning game. They played this game until Kumbi was thirteen, then she was too grown up for such games. She liked boys. She wore her skirts short and wore red lipstick when mama wasn't around, which was a lot. She let Billy Spawn put his tongue down her throat when she was thirteen. She let Tendai Gatsi feel her boobs when she was fourteen. She was an early bloomer. She said she and Joey Bennet went all the way when she was fifteen. Teri and Kumbi were as different as a rock and water.

This was the story Teri told her shrink.

The woman's coat could have been grey but it wasn't. It was red. She knew it was red because everything else was dark around it. She watched the woman put one foot on to the street and then the other and then she watched the woman disappear into the ground. Teri was afraid the little boy on the leash was going to be crushed in the madness... in the loud

screams and the frightened running around... but he wasn't, the man who held the leash picked him up and started running backwards... away from it all. The girl whose bum the man had been ogling was running around in circles screaming, her beautiful face no longer beautiful. The other people in their grey and black coats were all going wild, raising their hands, waving their arms, clutching their bags, screaming, shouting, weeping.

When Kumbi was fifteen, mama found a box of cigarettes and a packet of condoms in her school bag. Mama promised her the beating of a life time. When she went outside to find a suitable stick to administer the promised beating, Kumbi ran away. She was gone all day and all night. The next day mama was worried and started calling around, looking for her. People looked for her at all her favourite spots but didn't find her. No one thought to look on top of the roof.

This was the story Teri told her shrink.

The room was white and bright. Everything was white, the walls, the door, the ceiling, the chair. The whiteness blinded Teri. She saw the red coat before she noticed anything else about the woman. It was a pretty coat. It probably looked prettier because the people around the woman wore grey and black. It was the first cold day of the year and everyone looked like the weather, except the woman. Teri saw her clearly, when the first wave of hysteria hit, after the gunshot which wasn't a gunshot. The man who had the child on a leash forgot all about the girl in the hooker boots and tight jeans walking in front of him. Teri had seen him watching the girl's bum as she walked. The girl, oblivious, was busy on her cell phone. She had a beautiful face. When the woman in the red coat stepped onto the street to cross the road, the man with the boy on a leash wasn't far from her. Neither was the tight jeans and hooker boots girl. One minute the woman was there walking, and then the next, she was gone, no body, no blood.

Teri was stuck in a tree once, when she was eight. She'd been running away from a pack of dogs and in survival mode, had climbed higher than she'd ever climbed before. It was the Jacaranda at the end of their street. She sat in the tree for an hour. Kumbi found her, climbed up and helped her down.

This was the story Teri told her shrink.

Patsy, Pam & Pat

Patsy, Pam and Pat all had the same mother but different fathers, no, the same father but different mothers. Actually, Patsy, Pam and Pat shared no parentage. They were as different as they were the same. They each had no mother or father.

The girl and her body

The girl liked to look at herself in the mirror. She liked to look at herself to remind herself that she was a person because sometimes things happened and then she wasn't a person. It all began when she was upset and her hands turned to water. She tried to touch her face that first time it happened but the hands went right through. She thought she would cry but no tears came out of her eyes, just her watery hands. When she went to sleep, she had to lie on her tummy, her head slightly over the top edge of her bed, and her hands dangling over the edge so as not to wet the bed. The next morning, she woke with a start, she was lying in a wet patch but her hands were her hands again. Then something else happened, on her way to work someone drove into the back of her car. The girl got so angry her cheeks began to burn. She glanced back into the side mirror to get a better view of the damage but her head had turned into a ball of fire. She almost drove into the car in front of her. She wanted to cry but willed herself not to. It was too late, her hands turned to water. Trying to hold onto the steering wheel, her hands dripped through making the mat and her feet wet and soaking her trousers right through. After calming herself down the girl drove back home, her hands sliding on the wet steering wheel. At home the girl went back to bed. She figured she had some kind of illness. In bed she lay still and considered what to do. She lay on her back and tried to think of where she may have caught a virus. She got pins and needles in her feet. When she tried to move them, to ease the sensation, they felt heavy. She raised her head and looked down. Her feet had turned to lead. She wanted to cry with frustration, her hands turned to water and her head burned. Thinking to calm herself, she looked at the ceiling and at the fan turning round and round. After a while her body was her body again. She put her head back on the pillow. She'd been holding it up while it burned. She laid her hands on her sides and willed herself to sleep. At least in sleep she was herself all the time. On Tuesday after Monday, the girl went to see her GP. After explaining everything, the GP gave her an incredulous look and scribbled something on a piece of paper. *I'm referring you to a colleague of mine, Doctor Periwinkle, she deals with this sort of thing.* The girl smiled, thanked the GP and left. Dr Periwinkle turned out to be a psychiatrist. The girl knew she wasn't crazy so she didn't make the meeting with the doctor. Wednesday she went back to work and spent the day fighting off urges to run away. She didn't like the woman who worked in the cubicle next to hers. She was always pushing work onto the girl which made her angry. The girl was afraid her head might burst into flames the next time the woman

gave her extra work to do. As she thought about the woman, she felt teary and her hands started dripping onto her desk, making a mess of her paper work. She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed what happened but they were all busy, tapping away at their computers. Relieved, the girl's hands were her hands again. After that, she rushed to the ladies bathroom, where she spent most of the day locked up in one of the cubicles. Thinking to cheer herself up, she rented a happy movie on the way home from work and bought some take out. The happy movie made her heart sore. She began to feel cold. Getting up to put a cardigan on, she realised that her middle had turned to glass. She could see right into herself. There was her heart beating - red, her lungs much darker than she expected them to be, her liver, her intestines - long and twisted, everything. It was a small wonder all of her organs fitted into her tiny frame. Shaken and frightened, the girl's hands turned to water again, her head began to burn and her feet turned to lead. She reached for her phone but couldn't pick it up, her hands went right through. Calling out from where she stood frozen, she spoke to her phone and told it to *call mum*. The phone rang and the mum answered. *Mum I'm going crazy please come over*. Hearing the panic in the girl's voice the mum didn't take long to arrive. Unlocking the door with her set of spare keys, she walked into the living room and found the girl standing in the middle of the room. *Goodness I hoped this wouldn't happen*. Confused by her mum's reaction, the girl said nothing. Opening her purse, the mum took out a pair of gloves and a little round object. Putting on the gloves, she walked over to the girl. *Open your mouth and Just stay still*. The mum pushed the object into the girl's mouth. *Swallow*. In an instant the girl was the girl again. *Well, shall I make us a pot of tea then love?* The girl stood still.

The pie that wasn't a pie

I felt a sudden urge to eat pie but there was no pie in the fridge. There was a piece of cheese and some old bread. I took both and pretended they were pie. The bread and cheese could not deceive me so I threw them in the bin.

Not even for extra pudding

Today Billy stole two pork pies from the Butcher's and got caught. Mama was out and daddy was gone somewhere. Grandma took the matter into her own hands. She took Billy by the ear and led him straight to the trunk. The key turned easily and she shoved him in. I can still hear his screams. They seemed to last for hours but really he wasn't in there for very long. Grandma let him out after she made a cup of tea. He came out face white as fine chalk dust and shivering like a cold winter morning. I saw he'd peed his pants as he ran up to his room.

Billy didn't say a word, not even one, for two whole days. No amounts of prodding could move him to speak. I even offered him my pudding that first night but he wouldn't budge. I thought he would for sure because it was his favourite, chocolate and vanilla with bits of real chocolate that grandma added in as a treat. When he did open his mouth, he wouldn't tell me what was in the trunk or even how it smelled or how big it was in there. He sat at the window with his shoulders hunched and his face all angry-like, but also sad-like.

The trunk was always locked. It was wooden and old. Grandma kept the key around her neck. Sometimes Grandma polished it while muttering to herself. It used to be in my bedroom, in the corner next to the wardrobe but mama moved it after enduring weeks of my midnight screams, which only began with the arrival of the trunk. So now it lived beneath the stairs.

Billy said there were bones in there. Grandpa Jones' bones. At least that's what he said before he went in there. Now he wasn't saying anything at all. I heard him ask mama about Grandpa Jones and whether he had smelt like wet wood. I decided that was it. Billy must have seen Grandpa Jones in the trunk.

Sometimes I like to watch the trunk from the landing. I stare so hard my eyes get squinty-like and then they start to hurt. I don't want to miss anything, if anything should happen. I so wish for Grandma to open the trunk but she never does.

Farm life

The mole dug holes and hills in the garden. The holes and hills made the hound angry. It spent days racing around the garden tearing them up. The chicken refused to get involved. Land disputes always got so messy.

Cultivation

The trick when growing workers is that one has to monitor the soil constantly. If it is too dry then the crop comes out weak and brittle, quite useless really. If it is too moist then the crop comes out too tender for any hard work. Thando knew this, so every morning the first thing he did, before breakfast even, was to check the garden and see how the crop was faring. Temperatures tended to change in the middle of the night and any sudden changes, especially drastic drops, meant he could lose a whole crop.

Last night was one of those nights. The day had been pleasant, so warm in fact that Thando thought he would be harvesting his crop sooner than expected. Then he woke up during the night shivering from the cold and he knew that he would probably lose a few plants.

In the morning when Thando's man servant went up to his room with his usual morning coffee, Thando was already out in his garden. Everyone knew not to disturb him when he was there. Most people wondered why he still felt the need to get his hands dirty. He had more labourers than anyone else. Though there was a constant turnover, Thando was never short of workers. His fellow farmer friends envied him. Everything he touched seemed to prosper. His only misfortune was that his wife had died years ago leaving him with one child, Lucy, his daughter.

In a state of near panic Thando walked down each row, checking his plants. Before each harvest the crops would be shrouded in light green, almost transparent leaves and when it was time for harvest, the leaves would fall off the ripe crops. At this stage, each plant was fully grown and ready to work in the fields.

After inspecting his crop, Thando was relieved to find that he had lost only five plants. The dead ones were easy to identify. The leaves shrivelled and turned black at the edges. He pulled them out of the ground at the roots and dragged them to the incinerator he had installed in the corner furthest from the gate. It was always fascinating to him how the plants weighed no more than a small bag of potatoes before they were ripe, regardless of how tall and big they appeared.

Every year he had to go through the same process, plant the workers and dispose of them at the end of harvesting season. He'd learnt in the first few years of growing workers that they

were only useful in their first year. He hadn't known what to expect when he began so he'd spent a great deal of time observing the plants beyond the garden. In their eleventh month, he noticed wrinkles forming, as though they were ageing rapidly. After the wrinkles their skin darkened and in some cases became grey. In their twelfth month, the plants slowed down in productivity, their skin seemed dry to the touch and in some areas of their bodies it peeled off. At this point they gave off a rotting vegetable smell. At the end of twelve months that first year he'd began with the workers, Thando went to the compound and found a number of them prone on their beds. Some had shrivelled and died, leaving heaps of compost in the shape of a body. In some cases he found bodies hard and dry as wood. Some of the more resilient workers would last over a year but even then they'd become increasingly unproductive until they were quite useless.

In the beginning he didn't know how to get rid of 300 people in one go, but he resolved this problem by "hiring" migrant workers for a year and then "sending them on their way." It made it easy for him to explain why he always had new employees on the farm. It helped that when he disposed of them in the incinerator, they didn't smell like burning flesh but gave off a compost, manure stench. Thando also kept a few regular workers on the farm, locals who kept to themselves and believed they were above the migrant workers. Their attitude helped because he didn't have to worry about the two groups mixing.

*

Lucy heard the voices from the living room. Quiet whispers at first and then angry shouts. Her father and mother were having one of their fights. "I won't do it!" She heard her mother cry. Her father said something in return but it was drowned by her mother's sobs. Lucy heard something break and she burrowed deeper into her covers. She tried to think of the bird she'd found in the garden that morning. Its wing was broken so she'd picked it up and taken it to her mother for mending. It was a pretty bird with feathers streaked with rainbow colours. Heavy footsteps walked past her door, down the corridor from the living room. She sighed. At least they weren't fighting anymore.

Her grandma came to pick her up the next day. Lucy clung to her mother's legs, tears streaming down her face. "It'll only be for a little while my pet," her mother's voice sounded

wobbly. "Grandma needs someone to help her see at night. You know her eyes are not so good. We'll come and fetch you soon, I promise." And that was that.

Lucy instantly recognised her father's car as he pulled into Nana's yard and ran out to meet him. He got out, picked her up but without his usual laughter. "Where's mama?" she asked as they walked towards the house. Grandma stood at the door. She took one look at Lucy's father and threw her arms in the air before letting out a loud cry. Her father put her down and walked over to embrace Grandma. They held each other and wept. Lucy's mother was dead.

Lucy loved the open air. She loved animals and everything to do with farm life so the day she left for boarding school was a hard day. There was no one to home-school her anymore, her father said. She cried until coughs wrecked her body but her father's mind was made up. He drove her to the girls' convent, a four hour drive away and left her there, promising to visit every month.

The first time she came home from school for the holidays things were different. There was a wall around a section of the farm, near the house, that wasn't there before. She quickly learnt that the wall surrounded her father's private garden. He said he needed something to keep him busy after her mother died, something that belonged to him alone.

Boarding school taught Lucy to wake up early so every morning she watched her father from her bedroom window, charging off towards the black gate that served as the entrance to his private garden. The walls were high and no matter how many times Lucy tried to peek in, she could never find an angle that gave her access. Every time she asked her father what he was growing, he'd just laugh and say, "All kinds of things Pumpkin." Lucy offered to help him in the garden but he refused, instead offering her a small patch of her own land.

*

At nineteen Lucy was at odds within herself. She'd lived her life between boarding school and the farm but now that she had completed schooling there was just the monotony of the farm, the endless repetition that came with keeping animals and growing crops. Her father raised pigs and cows. He had impressive cabbage and maize fields. By the time Lucy left boarding school, her father's name was well known in the agriculture circles. He was

wealthy by any standards and spoiled her rotten. But being spoilt was no longer enough for her, she longed for more. From her bedroom window, she looked outside at the yellows and oranges breaking through the darkness, heralding the sunrise. She daydreamed about the day she'd leave the farm for good. She dreamed of travel, of doing something adventurous and wild, of meeting a man and throwing all caution to the wind.

Aside from her daydreams, she had nothing to look forward to on the farm, apart from the new people who came every year when her father hired labourers for the harvest. She was not to fraternize with the field workers. Her father said they were beneath her. He didn't have a problem with her spending time with the house help though, which was strange because as she saw it, help was help. Every year, without him knowing, she would sneak out to the fields and watch them working. She never heard them speak but they were always humming in harmony. She loved listening to them. Every year it was the same, they came and they went and new ones came and went but they all hummed the same melody. When she tried to talk to them, they shied away from her as if they too had been warned to stay away. When they were not in the fields they stayed in the compound. She never ventured there, it made her uneasy. There was a silence that hung over the place and often when Lucy looked over from the main house veranda, she felt cold.

A loud creaking sound brought Lucy back from her thoughts. It was the gate to her father's garden. He ought to oil the hinges, she thought as she returned to her bed. He ought to leave the gate open and knock down the walls. After all these years, her father still kept his garden to himself. Sometimes Lucy felt she had to compete with it for his affections no matter how much she knew he loved her.

*

The crop was ready. Thando was always amazed at how the final produce came in various shapes and looks. Ages seemed to vary between 18 and 35, which fascinated him since they came from the same crop. He wished he could understand their growth process but all he knew was that their final appearance depended on the original seed.

As was usual when the workers were ripe, Thando sent his regulars off on distant errands so he could harvest the fresh crop, clothe them and let them out of the garden without anyone

being the wiser. He did not need to tell them what to do because it was ingrained in them from the seeds. He just needed to show them where to work.

*

Lucy came home from running personal errands in town to find the new workers had arrived. As usual, she was excited about seeing the new people, though also, as usual, her excitement would die after a few days of not being able to make meaningful contact. This did not stop her from trying. Dropping off her parcels in the kitchen, she went out the back door to her secret spot near the fields.

The workers were humming the same melody as the ones before, but for the first time Lucy noticed one who wasn't. He was tall and fair-skinned, the colour of caramel. He worked without a shirt. His body was toned and muscular and as she watched him work, her heart beat quickened. From where she sat, he looked her age or maybe a little bit older. Watching him, her lips went dry and butterflies flapped in her tummy. In that moment she determined in her heart that she would meet him.

Lucy noticed the light-skinned worker looking at her quizzically. He put his sickle down and walked towards her. The other workers, for a brief moment, stood still watching him move from his position but all at once, went back to their work. The closer the worker got to Lucy, the faster her heart beat. She stood rooted to her spot.

The worker reached her, body glistening with sweat. He stood before her, looking directly into her eyes, not saying a word. Lucy noticed he stood awkwardly, with his head tilted to the side, but she also noticed how dazzling he was. His face looked like something from a magazine, angular jaw, full lips, dark eyes- he was beautiful.

"Hi. I'm Lucy."

"Mark15." (All the male plants were named Mark, Ben, Thebo and Joe with a number to differentiate them. Thando found this made life easier for himself.)

"Mark Fifteen...is that your name?" He continued to stare at her but gave no response. The silence hung like a veil between them. Lucy tried to push it away. "That's an odd name. Your parents must really love the Bible." She was talking fast now, hardly pausing to breathe.

“Where are you from? Are your parents here with you? No, that’s silly why would your parents be here with you?”

Mark15 continued to stare. His eyes twitched and Lucy shifted her weight from one leg to the other. Her eyes followed the movement of her feet. Mark15 made a sound and Lucy raised her head again. He was staring straight at her- into her. There were flakes of gold in his eyes. She’d never seen eyes like his before. They held her. There was something both innocent and dangerous in his look. She felt drawn to him as if he was physically pulling her into himself. Lucy felt her stomach tighten. She looked away and the spell that had held her was broken, the pulling stopped and in its place heat rose. It burned her face as she took a step towards Mark15. He sprung back instantly but continued to stare. Lucy swallowed. “Tomorrow,” she said and his eyes grew darker. They were dark green, the green of leaves in the height of the rainy season, the green of the moss at the bottom of a reservoir. “Your eyes,” she whispered. Mark15 raised his hand taking another step back. “Tomorrow,” she said again. He said nothing but his eyes bored into her. Her breath caught when his hand touched her hair. She closed her eyes and inhaled. The smell of soil and fresh vegetables flooded her senses. They stood suspended until Mark15 finally dropped his hand. She waited. She didn’t know how long she stood like that before finally opening her eyes. Mark15 was already a few metres away, moving at a steady pace. He was walking back towards the field.

That night Lucy couldn't sleep. She imagined herself in Mark15's arms. She imagined herself running off with him and throwing caution to the wind. Lying on her bed, she knew that she was going to do everything she could to see him again, to get to know him. Lucy still felt the jolt of electricity that had passed between them when they stood facing each other earlier. Thinking about it made her tummy flutter and knot. She briefly wrestled with the idea of telling her father about the encounter but resolved to say nothing.

The next day Lucy spent her time trying to decide what to wear for their next meeting. She tried on several outfits before settling on a pair of tight jeans and a daring top. She sprayed on a generous splash of perfume before dashing out, just before sunset.

Mark15 was waiting in the same spot they’d met and Lucy’s heart skipped a beat. They stood facing each other, locked in the same awkward silence. Lucy raked her brain for things

to say. She tried to prod him for information about his past but all she could get out of him was a nod or an abrupt head shake.

At first Lucy thought he was shy but later, sitting under the big Mahogany tree that she eventually dubbed “their tree”, she concluded that Mark15 had some kind of speech impediment. It didn’t matter. Lucy did not care that he didn’t or couldn’t speak. She was entranced by his intense gaze.

Every day for the next few months, Lucy met with Mark15 and ran off into the woods that surrounded her father's farm. Apart from the speech issue, she noticed other odd things about Mark15. His eyes twitched constantly and his movements, when not in the field, were often jerky and uncoordinated. She'd sometimes catch him watching her intently as if studying her. His skin when she touched him, always felt clammy and a little bit cold. She noticed that his hair, which was mostly a rich black, had green strands in it. None of these things bothered her. Lucy accepted Mark15 and all his oddities.

The first time they kissed, it was a mess but Lucy thought of that kiss fondly. Mark15 had bitten her lip aggressively, breathing noisily until she showed him how to kiss gently. “Here like this...no, less teeth, tongue,” she laughed “You’re kissing not eating.” She used to imagine she would meet a man who would teach her about the world and sex and other wild and adventurous things but here she was with Mark15, someone who seemed to know much less than she did. After that first kiss, he became more passionate and that made her head spin. One moment he would be like a naïve child and the next he would be trying to tear her clothes off. It was as if he were two people locked in one body.

When they made love for the first time, Mark15 fumbled about uncertainly. They were each other's firsts. Though Lucy knew Mark15 adored her, she’d stood naked before him searching his eyes to see if he found her body pleasing. She had not needed to worry. The hunger in Mark15’s eyes spoke volumes and it fuelled her own. After that he became insatiable. Sex was all he seemed to want. Whenever they were together they would always end up naked, breathless from consuming one another. After love making they studied each other’s bodies. Mark15 would trace his fingers all over Lucy. She laughed and squirmed revelling in his adoration.

Shortly before sunset Lucy would skip home. Mark15 made her feel intoxicated. She had never felt like this about anyone. She was giddy all the time. She loved him, she loved all his contradictions.

*

"Daddy"

"Hmmm?"

Lucy and Thando were sitting at the dinner table one evening.

"Why do you never talk about mum?"

"You know how hard it is for me to talk about your mother."

"Yes, but I wish you would tell me things about her."

"Things like what? What has brought this on?"

"I just wish she was here so I could talk to her, that's all."

"You know you can talk to me Pumpkin."

Lucy looked at her father and fortified herself.

"I've met someone. I know you won't approve but I love him. We've been seeing each other for a few months and I need you to give him a chance."

"Well, if the man is suitable for you Pumpkin, I'll give him a chance."

"He is, to me"

"Who is he then? Better not be Mazoe's son."

"No...first promise not to be mad."

"I won't, I promise, as long as he is suitable."

"We-ll, it's one of the new workers y---"

The sound of shattering glass startled Lucy into silence. Thando rose from his chair, his hands shaking. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, struggling to speak.

"Daddy, he-"

Thando paced up and down the dining room floor, stopping before Lucy. "I will not hear anymore. It ends now!" He pulled himself up to his full height and raised his hand as if to strike her but instead picked up a plate from the table and threw it against the wall.

Lucy sat beneath her father's angry gaze, her lips trembling. Thando paced around the room a few more times before letting out an anguished cry. As if crazed, he pushed dishes from the table to the floor. "No. What have you done? What have you done? This cannot be."

While Thando was lost in himself, Lucy rushed out of the room, tears streaming down her face. She expected her father to follow her but he didn't. In her room she frantically put a few things into a small travel bag, grabbed her handbag and slipped out the window, taking the short cut to the compound. As she made her way down the little path, she heard the front door of the main house slam shut and knew where her father would be heading. She picked up her pace, stumbling over some rocks but not allowing them to slow her down. Finding Mark15's room was easy and getting him to run off with her was even easier.

*

Thando aged ten years over night. By the time he found out which one of the workers was seeing his daughter, the boy and Lucy had gone. Thando had not seen this coming. He had thought Lucy understood that she couldn't mingle with the workers. Sitting on the floor in his room in the dark, he ran through the events in his mind over and over again. Lucy was gone and with her the boy. In a number of months it would be a year and the boy would shrivel and Lucy, his dear Lucy... What would happen to her? He rocked himself back and forth, tears streaming down his face. He got up from the floor and went over to his bed. Opening his bedside table drawer, he pulled out a framed picture of his wife. "What have I done?" he whispered and sobbed. His shoulders shook with the weight of his emotions.

*

Months after Lucy and Mark15 had run off, she noticed that he was tired all the time. He didn't eat much and still didn't speak. They had found a room to rent in a town several hours away from her father's farm. Mark15 found work as a gardener and Lucy got a job waitressing at a small restaurant. She had begun to notice changes in Mark15's body. His palms felt callused when he caressed her. At first she thought it was because of his gardening work but it got worse. When he touched her it felt as though dry wood was rubbing against her. The skin on his back was cracked and rough when she touched him so she bought him a jar of intensive moisturiser which he lathered on but with no change. The skin on his forehead began peeling off and Lucy got him an ointment for that. When she remarked on the changes and suggested going to see a doctor, Mark15 became withdrawn. He stopped showering with her as they used to in the beginning. He would not undress before her at night unless the light was switched off. Though he was still interested in sex, he no longer spent time exploring her body. Sex became mechanical and painful until Mark15 withdrew from that too. He became more and more distant. She knew he wasn't well but no matter how much she tried to push him, he refused to see a doctor.

One night, exhausted from a long shift at work, Lucy found Mark15 fast asleep. She climbed into the bed next to him, careful not to wake him. She stayed awake for a long time, listening to his wheezing breath before she finally drifted off to sleep. Sometime in the night, she woke to a heavy smell. She lay breathing deeply, trying to place it. A sudden chill came over her. Mark15 usually held her in his arms or lay so close that she could feel his heartbeat. In the dark she reached for his arm, to cover herself with it, but her fingers touched something that made them withdraw as if stung. Unsure of what she had touched, Lucy stumbled out of bed. Heart pounding and voice shaking, she called out Mark15's name. When no answer came, she stepped closer, reaching for the switch on her bedside lamp. The shape on the bed was barely recognisable. It was Mark15 but it wasn't. The flesh on the face was shrivelled and the body, partially covered by a sheet, seemed contorted. One eyelid was open revealing a dark hole, the other closed but deflated, the eye under it clearly missing. The open eye seemed to bore into her and Lucy turned quickly away, fumbling for the sheet to tug it off the body. The torso beneath was rigid, its arms limp, half attached as though they had been ripped out of their sockets. As she looked on, the shape on the bed shifted and then collapsed. Lucy let out a cry, dropped the sheet and slipped to her knees. A

jumble of thoughts and images rushed through her mind, finally freezing on her father's face just before she passed out.

Into the ground

They chased him until he ran deep into the ground. It softened and stretched, opening for him. He became invisible... swallowed... hidden... safe.

Forever after

I lie with my head in his lap as he tells me the story of the time before time and I wonder how he knows so much, lulled by his voice I fall asleep and dream. I dream about him standing next to a lonely shrivelled tree in the middle of the desert. Its bark is dry and its barren arms are raised toward an unforgiving sun. The ground is red and hard and there are deep cracks everywhere making the surface uneven. It's like a sea of broken red clay pots. I say red but it's really reddish-brown. The sun beats down on his head and yet still he stands there, the hills behind him look like a row of freshly covered graves cast in shadow. Finally he starts to walk and I see that he has no shoes and the heels of his feet are deeply cracked like the ground. I see him look up to the sky as if asking for rest, for cover, but none comes. Above him the sky is a blinding blue and there isn't a cloud in sight, then he cries out "Maiwe kani ndofa!" and as if in answer to the cry two vultures appear. They fly around in circles above him yet still he continues to walk with his feet not leaving a mark on the sun baked earth. Above him the vultures follow.

I wake up with a start and my eyes meet his and when I tell him about my dream he seems unmoved but I know he is troubled and I imagine we are both thinking about Mbuya VaJo who had similar dreams about her husband not long before he died. After a few moments, he sighs and shifts his legs. I raise myself from his lap because I know him. I know right now he wants to be alone, so he gets up and I watch him walk out of the hut. I know where he will go, past the mango trees circling the compound, filling the air with their sweet aroma, down the path with the dry thorn bushes, past Uncle Zex's house, the cattle kraal and towards the river bed, to the Muhacha. I know he sits under that tree when he needs to think. I stay in our hut which is our cocoon. I feel safe when I am inside and even safer when he is with me. I don't know what to do with myself as I wait for him. I can't do much because my leg is still swollen from the day I stepped on the rock and fell, twisting my ankle. Everyone else is in the fields, harvesting the maize; mama, Dudu and her children, Uncle Zex, Mai vaChipo and Jabu, so I lie back onto the pillows on our mattress, facing the open door, listening, waiting. The heat and the silence take me to another place.

*

I was walking home from the river with a bucket full of water on my head, tipping slightly with each step so some of it trickled down my face. He appeared from behind a bush ahead of me and gave me such a fright, I dropped my bucket. "Haa futseki mhani! Look at what you've done!" He started to laugh so I glared at him with arms crossed. "Sori kani, I didn't know you were so jumpy." But he didn't look sorry at all and though I wanted to be angry with him I felt warm inside. I smiled. "Now what am I supposed to do?" He picked up the bucket. "Let's go."

After that day, he and I snuck out to see each other as often as we could; firewood picking, water runs and going to the township for groceries, thinking we were smart, meeting there, behind the white boulder close to the primary school until we both discovered how wrong we were the day we got home and found our mothers sitting outside my family compound. I was shaking so hard I thought for sure everyone could hear my knees knocking and my teeth chattering, but he, my brave man, stood tall, next to me, unfazed. I thought he was so full of courage.

*

I heard children's chatter so I knew the harvesters were back and before long, two silhouettes appeared at the door, bathed in the sun's waning light.

"Maswera sei Mainini?" one began, the other parroted.

"Where's Babamunini?" "How's your leg?" They spoke at the same time and I told them I was fine, the leg was fine and their uncle had gone for a walk. They didn't stay long after that, rushing off to do their evening chores before dark. I loved these children but seeing them often left me with an ache, a dark, sore thing in my heart because our boy would have been four this year. The doctors declared him dead at birth. They said he was stillborn. The villagers said it was witchcraft.

The day we got married, I walked towards him, glowing, my heart ablaze and he stood there before the priest, his gaze on me, steady. His eyes spoke to me in a way words never could. So many people came and told us they had never seen a couple so in love and I believed them because I did not think our love could be rivalled. He built me a hut in his family compound and I turned it into a home. Sometimes, like children, we would chase each other

around the trees and make such a noise people would come out of their huts to watch us in amusement. The day I believe our son was conceived was one of those days. I had just been to the river and had filled the drum in our hut with water and a little was left over in the bucket. While I was deciding what to do with it, I was suddenly drenched. I let out a scream and spun around. He had snuck in to the hut, taken the bucket and emptied it over me. He fled laughing and I ran after him in my soaking clothes until he let me catch him. We returned to our hut with our arms around each other and made our son. People whispered about how a man could love a woman the way he loved me but they didn't understand us, they didn't understand him. When our baby was born dead, they thought he would change. He didn't.

Now here we are childless, and I have been having that dream. I sigh and shake off the chill that has suddenly come over me. I must start the fire before it gets dark so I get up and limp to the door, shielding my eyes from the last sun rays, I stare down the path he took.

The village goat

It was strange but Themba had been feeling that his legs were not his legs. They were always taking him to places he didn't want to go to or places he wanted to go to but did not have the courage to. Last night he almost got caught standing outside Ntombi's house. He'd followed his legs and found himself standing outside her bedroom window. She was there undressing, possibly getting ready for bed. He stood cloaked in darkness and saw her take her top off revealing an ample bosom. Next she unzipped her jeans. At this point Themba closed his eyes but the temptation to look was too much for him.

The next time he followed his feet, they led him to the river where he stood at the bank and wondered why he was there. It was just before dawn. Themba tried to turn back but his feet refused to move. He remained stuck, staring into the water until an unusual wooden plank floated to the surface. Immediately, he waded in, took the plank and headed home. Taking the plank seemed quite sensible at the time but made no sense later. And now here he was following his legs somewhere else. He wasn't sure how it happened. He was lying on his bed, thinking about the dinner he'd just had and still feeling hungry when his legs, as they did, started itching. The walking usually followed the itching. He'd found himself grabbing his coat from the hook next to the door, his feet on some urgent mission.

Themba allowed his feet to just go because once when he'd tried to resist them, they'd become swollen and so painful, he could not move or sleep for days. That was the time they led him to the grave site. He realised where he was going, half way down the path, and forced himself to stop. He managed to turn around and started walking back to the village. Each step felt like he was dragging a dead cow. He was sure he would not have succeeded in defying his feet had he not seen Ntombi walking back from the growth point. He called out to her and she stopped, waiting for him. His feet suddenly released him and he walked back to the village. He thought he had won until later that day, lying on his bed, his feet began to itch, and then ache and then swell up so he could not move. The swelling went all the way up to his knees. He was in pain for days. After that, Themba knew not to fight with his feet.

This time, Themba found himself at the junction between the path that led to the growth point and the one that led to the nearby woods. His legs stopped there and so did he. He waited until the decision was made and the feet headed towards the woods. The deeper he

got, the thicker the trees and grass became. Themba walked on, without a choice until he heard bleating. Turning towards the sound, he walked a few paces. Across from him a white goat was grazing in the middle of a cleared space. The trees around the goat formed a circle and the grass where the goat grazed was a rich dark green. Seeing Themba, the goat stopped eating and raised its head. It had striking black eyes that stared at Themba for what seemed like many minutes. Themba unable to move, stood there...waiting.

Give me back my legs.

Themba woke up shaken and disoriented. Once his eyes got accustomed to the darkness, he got up from his bed, put on a pair of trousers and walked out of his room. It was just after three in the morning, the village was quiet except for the crickets and the distant night birds. Themba looked at his legs from the knees down and then he shook them, first one then the other. He wished he had a cigarette but he had quit smoking around the same time he moved back to the village a year ago. When he had left home at seventeen, his family objected. They told him he had a gift that could only work in the village. Themba had scoffed at this. Once he reached the city, he made friends with a guy he met on the streets and they started hustling together. They shared a one bedroom flat and made money scamming people.

A year or two after he moved to the city, his feet had started itching. Sometimes they would itch for hours. He went to several doctors who gave him different types of creams intended to relieve the itch but none did. Themba began to notice that the itching usually came before his feet would, as if with a mind of their own, lead him somewhere. Curious, he followed his feet to all kinds of places. It was around this time that he and his flat mate began breaking into people's houses. On a few occasions they almost got caught but somehow his feet led him to safety. It was only after his flat mate got arrested that things started to go downhill. The police came looking for Themba but his feet led him out of the flat before they arrived. He moved to another city but as soon as he arrived his feet stopped helping him as they had done before. Themba's curiosity and compliance was quickly replaced by fear when they led him to a cemetery. He tried to turn back at the gate but his feet had a strong will. They led him to an old grave and stopped there for an hour before turning back to his flat. After that his feet became increasingly difficult. When they were not leading him somewhere he would trip over them or bump into people on the streets. Once

he tied himself to his bed but he woke up and found himself standing. It was this that made him decide to move back to his home village.

The sky was clear, and a million stars shone with ten times the brightness of street lights. Themba sighed and started walking towards the goat pen. He knew what he would find there but he went anyway. Reaching the pen he confirmed all the goats were there as usual except one. The village goat had been missing for a year. For as long as the goat had been missing, the village had been going through a hard time. There was no rain, crops died, animals died, people died. Bobo, the youngest in the village, was bitten by a snake and died within the hour. Mai vaEunice had a flat stomach one day and the next she woke up looking like she was about to give birth. She experienced labour pains before her stomach burst open, killing her instantly. Themba's brother went drinking one night, came back drunk throwing up uncontrollably until he passed out, dead. The storage shed had gone up in flames one day but no one knew how or why. These were the stories people told Themba. The village goat had left the village one afternoon over a year ago, just before Themba came back from the city. The villagers said the goat had unlatched the pen gate and walked out, straight into the woods without looking back. People searched for the goat for days with no luck. Once they'd given up, the disasters began.

Themba had been in the village for some months and his feet had been still. He had begun to think that all they had wanted was for him to return home. Then his legs began to itch again and soon after the itching he would find himself walking somewhere, never knowing where but unable to stop. Once he tried turning around but his feet turned right round back to where they wanted to go. Then it was the dream, the goat in the woods grazing, calling him.

Give me back my feet.

This last dream shook him so much so that he had to go to the old lady, the village medicine woman. Themba told her everything and she nodded then sent him home amidst assurances that everything would be fine. She knew what needed to be done and plans would be put in place.

Everyone gathered, including people from neighbouring villages. Word had spread that a welcome celebration was being held in Themba's honour. Along with this there would be a

ceremony to give thanks to the ancestors. As was custom, the women brewed *Maheu* in drums. Some family from the city came down with crates of Cokes, Fantas and Castle Lager. Loaves of bread, cooking oil, sugar, mealie meal, tea leaves and pasteurised milk cartons were piled up in the communal kitchen to feed the people that had arrived for the celebration early and those who would linger afterwards. The air was charged with excitement. Children played games, chasing chickens and running after the dogs. Women were busy preparing food and making sure everything was ready. Some of the men had already slaughtered a bull to feed the masses and now they sat huddled in groups passing around big jugs of the fermented *Maheu*.

The thanksgiving ceremony for the ancestors was on the third day of the celebration. Themba wore a white cotton suit an aunt had made for him for the occasion. He had been told a goat would be slaughtered. The thought made him queasy. He remembered a braai he'd been to in the city, where a goat had been killed, hung on a tree branch and skinned before being gutted. He hadn't been able to eat the meat that day.

Themba sat on the bed in his room. The old lady had assured him that his torment was about to end. From his room he could hear a radio, probably from someone's car. Thomas Mapfumo filled the air with his chimurenga songs. There was a brief moment of silence and then Oliver Mutukudzi took over. Women's voices and children's laughter mingled with the music. Some of the men who had left to go to the growth point for more drinks came back, tooting their car horns. Unable to sit still any longer, Themba got up and walked to the window. He parted the curtains and looked out at the gathering. He saw one of his uncles with a bottle of Castle in his hand, dancing unsteadily next to a Toyota bakkie. As he watched, his fat aunt Mavis joined the uncle and danced around him shaking her big behind and waving her arms. Themba chuckled. He saw younger cousins and others he didn't recognize standing around in groups drinking and laughing. The older people swayed to the music and the younger ones rolled their eyes when invited to dance. They wanted to listen to something more in tune with their generation. Themba moved away from the curtain and went back to sit on his bed. He'd been instructed to stay in his room until called for. He hadn't eaten anything that day and his stomach rumbled. As he was considering lying down, there was a loud knock before the door burst open. Before him stood the old lady and four relatives, all much older than any of the others. "It's time," she said.

Themba walked out, flanked by the relatives, two on each side with the old lady in the lead. When the crowd saw them, they all stopped what they were doing and walked to the clearing at the centre of the village, talking quietly. The music was switched off and someone began beating a drum. The group parted to let the procession through. They stopped in the middle of the clearing where a mat, a bowl with what looked like water, a big metal dish, a knife and a red cloth had been arranged on a black and white striped sheet. Themba's heart began to beat faster. He looked around for the goat.

They led him to the mat. "*Mhururu nemuridzo!*" shouted the old lady, calling for ululating and whistles to which the crowd obliged. The drummer beat the drum to match the jubilant shouts. Themba bowed his head, smiling for being so honoured, even though his heartbeat had not yet settled. The old lady picked up the cloth, put it around his shoulders and gave him the bowl to drink from. Everyone looked on. The liquid slid down his throat. He tried to put the bowl down but everything around him began spinning as darkness claimed him.

Themba was standing in the spot in the woods near the village. The goat, which was grazing nearby raised its head and stared at him. He couldn't look away. The goat's eyes seemed to get brighter. Themba felt his eyes sting and his legs began to itch. As he watched, the goat rose on its hind legs. Themba wanting to flee but could not, his feet were stuck. The itching intensified. He looked down and saw hair sprouting, covering his legs were his white trousers had been. He tried to pull free but still his legs resisted. He stood frozen as his toes melted into hooves. Unable to speak, unable to scream, Themba raised his head to look at the goat that was no longer a goat. His head swam and his body became so heavy he fell on all fours. Raising his head he watched the goat walk towards him on its hind legs like a man.

From a distance, Themba heard drums, loud shouts and feet beating down the ground. He tried to open his eyes but could not. He tried to move his body but could not. Opening his mouth to speak, nothing came out. He fell back on the mat and wondered what the old lady had given him to drink. Somewhat glad to be away from the dream, he surrendered to the sensations overwhelming him. He heard the sound of thunder, the first hint of rain there had been since he moved back to the village. With the thunder came more jubilant shouts and the drummers went wild. Some people were chanting now, their voices humming, breaking through the din. Themba tried to raise himself but his hands and feet were bound. In panic he began writhing. The more he writhed, the more the people shouted and the

louder the drums became. Themba opened his mouth to shout but a loud goat's cry filled the air. The people's voices rose to a fever pitch, followed by an explosion of thunder. The ground beneath him shook and heaven tore open before darkness once again claimed him.

Territory wars

In the garden where the carrots grew, grew tomatoes too. The ones under, the ones above. There was an invisible boundary between the two. When either tried to cross over, they shrivelled and died.

Harrison's land

Harrison received the farm in Bindura from the government in 2005 as an ex-combatant's reward. The farm had been deserted for a year since its white owners fled to South Africa, in fear of the militia who were hacking up other white farmers in the region. Harrison was optimistic about the fortune that would come from his new land. He was 50 years old and had never worked in agriculture but his dreams lay in the soil, he was a child of the soil and as such the soil would be good to him.

*

Bindura was known for its rich red soil and its yearly crop of tobacco. In an average year, the Sanders Farm yielded enough to fill a few truck-loads of tobacco and in a good year, the farm yielded twice as much. At its height of production, the farm had over eight hundred employees, some Shonas, *Moskens* from Mozambique and a few from Malawi.

It was well known that the Sanders took care of their workers, though how well, no one could exactly say. Compared to the farm house, a large two story red brick building, with decorative white paint and a well-kept green lawn, the workers compound was a collection of shacks, built from cement blocks and topped by corrugated iron roofs. There was an outside toilet, a Blair toilet as they were known, and a shower shared between four shacks. Single people got one room and families got two rooms. The foremen had houses set apart from the compound. Their houses, though small, were fitted with all the amenities. At one end of the property, opposite the compound, the Sanders had a swimming pool, always full of clear blue water. One would hear water splashing and laughter on most afternoons when the Sanders children took a break from their home schooling schedule.

Old man Sanders ran a tight ship. If any of the workers were ill frequently or missed work for more than a day at a time, they would not stay in his employment for long. He believed in getting his money's worth from his labourers and that meant making sure they worked hard every day, with the exception only of public holidays and two weeks over Christmas. There was always work to be done and if it wasn't tobacco, it was something else. On occasion, old man Sanders even had some of the workers' children do "small" jobs, something he made sure never became public knowledge.

On his first day on the farm Harrison walked around the property taking stock of what was his. The lawn around the house was unkempt and the fields were wild. The remainder of the last crop mixed with the weeds that had sprouted after Sanders fled. A small distance from the house was a wooden shack, rotting so it leaned slightly to one side. It seemed as if it had been there for at least a hundred years. Harrison didn't dwell on how much work needed to be done, he stood on the front porch of the huge Sanders house and looked out. The farm ran as far as the eye could see and once again his heart swelled with pride at being a land owner. If only he had known then that what the eye could see was not the only reality.

*

By the time Harrison took over the farm, most of the workers had already left, many immediately after the Sanders departed, and others in the months that followed. Only a sorry few remained. Among these was the old woman MaShumba. Anywhere between 65 and 80 years old, tiny in stature, short dusty hair and with visible tribal marks on her face and arms, the old lady had been on the farm for a long time. Some said she was born there.

The first day Harrison met her, MaShumba was dressed in nothing more than a long wrap tied at the neck to ensure it didn't fall off. He was excited about his new venture and had gone to the compound to greet the remaining workers when he was accosted by MaShumba, rambling on about the land boding ill for him. The ancestors, she claimed, had told her that the land was cursed and its new owner would be cursed too. Harrison didn't allow MaShumba's words to douse his excitement. He had fought for this land and almost lost his life in a mine field doing so. The land owed him so it would bear fruit and bring fortune.

It took four months for Harrison to employ enough people to begin breaking ground. He found one of the previous workers, Santove from Mozambique, and made him foreman. Everything was taking shape except Harrison still didn't know much about tobacco. In a moment of inspiration, he decided to buy books on tobacco farming and enrol in a quick agriculture course in Beatrice, just outside Harare, at a government owned institution.

Six months later, the course completed, Harrison made his way back to the farm. He moved his wife and two children from Harare to their new home with the optimism of an ignorant

man, an optimism not really shared by his family who were used to city life. Harrison gave them no choice. He had sold their town house and they had to follow.

The day the family arrived, MaShumba was there, waiting at the front porch as though she, herself, lived in the big house. Again she began talking about the curse of the land.

“Hamupagari pano,” she said in an ominous voice. She kept repeating the phrase over and over: “You will not stay here.” Harrison’s annoyance grew and he threatened to kick the old lady off his property if she did not stop with her nonsense but they both knew he wouldn’t. Having welcomed the family with her warning, MaShumba promptly left, walking back to the compound, all the while mumbling to herself, “Hamupagari pano, hamupagari pano”

*

It was a few months after Harrison and his family moved into the farm house that strange things began to happen. His oldest daughter, Rudo, fell ill. For weeks she could not shake off a fever. Doctors didn’t know what was wrong. All they could do was prescribe antibiotics. Rudo would slip in and out of consciousness and mumble in different voices. Harrison finally enquired with a witchdoctor who told him that the illness was caused by jealous relatives. The witchdoctor gave him special water to ward off the spirits that were tormenting his daughter.

This worked for a while but then, one evening, Harrison’s youngest, Susan, was found wandering on the grounds after midnight. When asked where she was going, she said she was following her friend who’d come to play. Everyone was baffled because Susan had no friends on the farm except her sister. This happened twice in the space of a few weeks until Harrison and his wife again went to the witchdoctor. This time they were given a root to put under Susan’s bed to make sure she didn’t go walking around at night.

Still it didn’t stop. Some nights Harrison would wake up to laughter coming from the living room but when he went to investigate, the room was dark and empty. Several times, Mai vaRudo, Harrison’s wife, woke up with a start at an odd morning hour thinking she had heard someone calling her.

The incidents made Harrison's wife and children home sick. They longed to go back to Harare, to peace, but he would not hear of it. He had a dream and it would be realised. He would not fail like so many other new farm owners had done, he would persevere.

After months of restless nights, Mai vaRudo packed up the children and left whilst Harrison was in the field. She did not leave a note but did tell one of the house maids that Harrison could find them at her sister's house in Harare.

In desperation, Harrison followed his wife and children but could not convince them to come back. They agreed to let him remain at the farm whilst a solution was sought for what they now referred to as "the night time problem". Harrison would go to Harare to spend time with his family during the weekends.

*

A few weeks after mai vaRudo and the girls had gone back to Harare, Harrison was woken by the sound of drums and wailing, mixed with marching boots. At first the sound came to him softly, seemingly from downstairs, then it became louder as if the marching feet, drummers and wailers were coming up the stairs. Heart pounding, Harrison got out of bed and groped for the light switch on his bedside lamp. The switch clicked but the room remained cloaked in darkness. He fumbled with the light as the sounds got louder. Finally he gave up and scurried to the wardrobe in the dark. He sat squatting in the cramped space listening to the approaching noise for what seemed like hours. The rest of the night was a blur to him. At some point he must have slept because he woke suddenly, to silence. His room was still pitch dark. How long had it been?

The next day, he went downstairs before dawn. A pale light leaked into the living room through the curtain, drawing his eyes to a piece of paper on the floor. Harrison bent down to pick it up but before he could read it, he noticed a stain on the carpet. He touched the stain with his fingers and it felt damp. He crouched to take a closer look and realised that it was blood. His eyes immediately went back to the note in his hand.

"This land is ours."

He stared at the note, stopped only when he noticed muddy footprints leading off from where he crouched. They ran outside and formed a broken trail that led around the house

to where the wooden shack that he had been meaning to pull down for months still stood. Harrison paused then pushed the door. The shed, to his surprise, was empty and he would have turned back had he not noticed a small hatch in the middle of the floor. The handle lifted with ease, revealing a set of stairs and Harrison's heart, which had up to that point been steady, began pounding. He hesitated then started down the stairs into a large room, much larger than the shed above. The light, he saw, was a naked bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. The room was framed with rows and rows of metal drawers that ran floor to ceiling endlessly. The drawers reminded him of something. A tomb, Harrison thought, no - a mortuary. Unable to stop himself, he yanked the nearest handle. The mechanism jammed at first and then opened with a whoosh, releasing a gush of dusty air. It took a moment for the dust to settle and for him to realise what he was looking at. He stared dumbly into the casket until his arms began to tremble. The sound of the bones hitting the floor shook him to action and Harrison turned, stumbling over his feet as he fled up the stairs and out. He ran with the distinct echo of Mashumba's cackling laughter trailing him until he reached the farm house. It was the last day any of the workers ever saw Harrison.

*

Years later, whenever anyone would ask Harrison what happened with Sanders Farm, all he would say was, "We are not all meant to be farmers."

The collector

Anderson's bedroom clock had been ticking loudly for a while now. He rolled over in bed and looked at the large thing on the wall. Why had he kept the clock? It didn't fit in with his room. Usually he found the clock soothing but today was different, today it seemed louder and strangely out of tune. Realising that he was not going to fall asleep again, he dragged his tired legs out of bed and pulled his body up. He looked down at his feet, large feet, just like his father's and grandfather's.

Ignoring the clock, he made his way down the stairs to the kitchen. It was 2:15 a.m. The kitchen clock glimmered in the pale moon light that streamed through the window above the sink. Anderson stood, watching the sky and listening to the night sounds. He could probably sit at his computer and write something or he could fry an egg and sit in front of the TV as he normally did when sleep eluded him. Instead, he walked to the living room and threw himself on the sofa in the dark. The clock in the corner was ticking the night away. Anderson looked at it, his most arty clock, shaped like an LP. Where did he get this one? He couldn't remember. It may have been a gift or he may have got it in a second hand shop- what did it matter? It was here in his house. He wondered what kind of sound all his clocks would make if they were put together.

Sitting in the dark, Anderson stretched his legs and thought about his father. Anderson Hammond Senior had had a thing for wrist watches, he'd had dozens. Once Anderson had stolen one of the watches and pawned it for some football tickets. He'd thought at the time that his father wouldn't notice the missing watch but when he'd got home, he'd received a severe lashing. He saved three months' pocket money to get the watch back. It cost him more than it did in the beginning, blasted football tickets!

Anderson sat with his body sinking in the sofa, looking at his legs and long feet. He wasn't sure if the two were compatible. He often felt that his feet were too long for his legs but these were the Hammond feet and he was stuck with them. As he sat musing, the clock at the end of the corridor chimed loudly. It did that but not every day. Strangely, it only chimed some days, like today. Anderson got up, walked over to the chiming clock and stood before it. It was 3a.m, a weird time to make a noise but he had learnt to let the clocks be. He

waited for the loud gong that normally accompanied the chiming. When nothing came, he sighed then shuffled back towards his bedroom.

Back on the bed, he sat facing grandfather, the old clock in his room. Grandfather was still ticking but now in the wrong direction. Anderson was drawn in by the hypnotic sound and the rhythm of the hands ticking backwards. Things were moving but he wasn't sure if he'd fallen asleep and this was some twisted dream or if indeed he was in this state of backwardness.

Anderson felt himself change as grandfather continued moving in the wrong direction. Tearing his eyes from the ticking hands, he looked down and noticed his feet were smaller and his legs looked shorter. The distance between his eyes and his feet seemed to shrink. He raised his hands and saw that they too were miniature versions. The bed became bigger the room more spacious and the clock louder.

"Andy, are you in there?"

Startled by his mother's voice, Anderson smelt rather than felt the urine. He looked down at his pyjama bottoms and noticed the wet patch. It didn't bother him that he'd gone to bed in boxers but now he had superman covering his little legs. Hearing his mother's voice had his mind spinning. He was sure it was her but she had been dead for 25 years. He heard the sound of feet on the stairs and waited for his door to open. The footsteps passed his room and he sat glued to his bed, watching the shadow move under his door.

His whole body felt strange. He stretched his legs and stared at the little feet. He looked around the room and saw that everything was different. His football cards from his old room at the old house were on the wall. His bed creaked when he turned and Olly, his childhood bear, sat on the chair in the corner. Everything else was in the shadows. He knew though, somehow, that if he reached under the bed he would find the stack of magazines and books he'd kept as a boy.

Suddenly, there was silence, the clock stopped ticking. A breeze came in through the window, making the calendar on the wall flutter. Odd, he kept no calendars in his house. The date read October 7, 1978. Anderson stared at the foreign calendar, and the date, now boldly underlined. He looked at the clock. It stood still, silent, at 3: 25. If his memory served

him right, the door would open at any moment and his mother would walk in, dressed in one of her frilly night dresses and smelling of flowers and alcohol. She would come to the bed and lie next to him, undress him and let her hands roam. She would ask him to touch her but instead his arms would move, to the ticking sound coming from deep within taking him to another place.

Empty frames

Mary Gold woke up in a cold sweat. It was the dream again, only this time it was a boy. She lay still in her king-sized bed as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. On the bedside table the clock read 3:15am. She got up slowly and sat at the edge of the bed, waiting for her heart to slow down to its normal rhythm. She switched on the light and walked down the stairs to the kitchen. She needed water.

Mary opened her double door fridge, pulled out a jug and poured a glass. She stood in the middle of the room and listened to the silence around her. Her house wasn't far from town but it was at a distance that awarded her the level of peace and quiet that she loved.

She hadn't switched on the light but found her way easily to one of the bar stools around the kitchen table. Settling herself down, she flexed her shoulders and then rolled her neck. She raised her head to face her reflection in the wide mirror under the cupboards. Her eyes seemed smaller, dimmer somehow. Her lips were still full, her hair rich and skin flawless but her eyes had changed.

Mary picked up the water glass and started back to her room but stopped at the door just before hers. She hesitated before turning the handle then stood at the entrance. The room was as it had been the last time she looked in. The empty frames were where she'd left them; one on the wall above the bed, one on the bedside table and one near the wardrobe. She stood for what seemed like a long time before closing the door and going back to bed.

Mary lay on her back and stared at the ceiling. The clock read 3:40am. She knew she had to be up early for the conference call with some of the overseas shareholders but she could not get herself to sleep. The clock ticked quietly but in the silence of her bedroom the sound stood out. She wasn't sure if it was the ticking keeping her awake, drawing her in, forcing her to count the beat or if it was her mind, busy, unable to rest.

She could cancel the meeting and stay at home but what would she do? Everything in the house was in order. Mary rolled over onto her side and thought about the attic. Not everything was in order. She was going to have to go up there sooner or later.

4:12a.m

When the driver came to fetch Mary at 7:15 she told him to take the day off. She called her office and told her secretary she'd be working from home and to divert all calls. Her secretary was surprised. Mary couldn't remember the last time she'd not gone into the office on a work day. She wasn't excited or especially motivated. She was tired; tired of doing the same thing every day. She had board meetings, meetings with her office manager and meetings with overseas shareholders. Every day was a big meeting.

Having rearranged her day, Mary walked into her gym and stood before the treadmill. She could work out and then have a swim but just looking at the machine made her feel more tired.

Without a conscious decision, her legs started moving towards the stairs and before she realised it, Mary found herself at the attic door. She didn't want to go in, not yet at least, but here she was. Straightening her shoulders and holding her head up, she turned the handle.

The old single metal bed was in the corner with the big empty wooden frame on the wall above it. The trunk that had belonged to her mother was at the foot of the bed. Otherwise the attic was empty. Mary walked to the bed and sat down. The springs creaked and the mattress sunk in where she sat. She looked around the room lit by the sun's light coming through the little window on the roof.

Mary started to bounce up and down the bed, gently at first and then higher and harder; the bed shrieking underneath her. She started laughing uncontrollably. Her hands flew up above her head as if reaching for the ceiling. The mattress caved in with each bounce. The springs made a sound between a squeak and a whistle. The higher she went, the louder the sound. As suddenly as she'd begun, Mary stopped, the laughter gone. Breathing heavily, she sat still with her eyes closed. A tear drop escaped, making a trail down her cheek. She wiped it away.

When she opened her eyes, she looked at the trunk. It was locked and had been locked for years. She had the key of course but hadn't used it since that time, when everything fell apart. Mary looked at the trunk for a few moments and then turned away. She moved to the middle of the little bed, lay down, curled up like a ball with both hands, palms together, underneath her head, listening to something in the silence.

Mary woke up suddenly to a dark room. Looking at the window above her, she saw that the sky had become overcast with dark angry clouds. She got up from the bed and looked around, as if searching for something. She walked over to the trunk gently grazing the top with her right hand, almost in a caress. Suddenly aware of her actions, she snatched the hand back, balled it into a fist, abruptly turned and walked out of the room, leaving the door open.

Rotten from the spoon

They say a lot from the podium. Sugar coated, dialled down. They spoon feed us and we take it, our taste buds numbed by prolonged consumption of spoilt food.

Lucas

Lucas shuffled around Pick n Pay, dragging his left leg behind him. His job was to stock shelves and make sure there were no empty boxes or crates lying around. He'd been doing this job for six years now. Through his good eye he spent most of his time watching people. When he tried to focus using his other eye it sent shooting pains through his head. The regulars knew him and greeted him by name, and he rewarded them with his semi-toothless grin. During his break, Lucas went to the canteen, took a tray with the day's lunch and returned to the store room. He liked to sit among the boxes, breathing in the smells of stored goods. His favourite was the cleaning section. He would sit behind a pile of boxes, close his eyes and breathe in, hold his breath for as long as he could, then exhale. After lunch he would waddle back to his shelves.

Sometimes kids stared at him, the bold ones asked him what was wrong with him and the mean ones laughed. He'd become used to being the centre of curious glances and stares. He figured if he wasn't himself and he saw someone like him, he would also stare. It wasn't just the bad eye, the limp and the half empty mouth. Lucas' ears lay flat against his head, as though glued back. They gave him a strange appearance. Growing up, Lucas had always thought he'd make money and have plastic surgery to fix his ears but the money had not come. Apart from his Job at Pick n Pay, Lucas didn't have much contact with people. He rented a flat with a bedroom, little kitchen, shower and toilet at the back of the shop, originally reserved for the caretaker. Lucas didn't go out much. Once he walked into town and got so tired he had to sit on the side of a street to rest. He put his bag down, took his cap off to give his head some air. He set the cap next to the bag. He hadn't been sitting down for five minutes before someone threw a coin into the cap. At first Lucas had been startled and confused but when another person passed and did the same, he realised that they thought he was a beggar. He'd been embarrassed and angry but he'd kept the coins.

When he met Maria, Lucas was in the condiments aisle. He was kneeling on the floor, with his right hand reaching about under the bottom shelf, trying to locate a bottle of mixed spices that had rolled away.

"Excuse me, can you help me?"

Lucas had never heard a voice like hers. It sounded like music, soft and gentle. He raised his head. For a moment he thought he was imagining her standing before him, a bright angel.

“Can you help me?” She repeated.

Lucas’ good eye focused and he could see that she was indeed real. He mumbled to himself as he struggled to rise from his knees. When he got up, he waited for one of the usual reactions to his appearance but none came.

She smiled at him and he was mesmerised by two rows of beautiful white teeth. He wanted to smile back but couldn’t. She told him what she was after and he told her to follow him to the right aisle. He tried to walk straight as she walked next to him but that made his shuffle worse. He thought about speaking but nothing came to mind. Her scent drifted up his nose and Lucas made a mental note to check the perfume aisle to see what it was.

“Have you been working here long?”

“Six years.”

“You must know everything there is to know about the store and this town.” Was she singing to him? Lucas felt like he was floating.

“Mmm...”

“I just moved here a month ago so I’m still trying to find everything.” She laughed then and Lucas wanted to laugh with her but he began to cough instead.

“Are you ok?” her voice sounded alarmed.

“Fine...fine,” he cleared his throat.

When they got to the feminine products aisle, Lucas turned to leave but she did the unthinkable, she reached out and touched his arm.

“I’m Maria by the way. Thanks for your help.”

That dazzling smile.

“Lucas and you are welcome.” He watched her turn and walk down the aisle towards the tills, her hips swaying gently from side to side. After she disappeared into a check-out queue, he went back to his condiments.

His arm burned where she had touched him. The rest of that day went on in a blur. Lucas kept replaying his meeting with Maria and when he got home that evening he lay awake thinking about how she had touched him.

After that encounter, Lucas ventured into town and bought some new shirts and a couple of trousers. He bought expensive cologne, some new shower gel and had a haircut. He stopped eating his lunches in the storeroom and started sitting outside on the benches next to Pick n Pay during his lunch break, hoping to catch a glimpse of Maria. Lucas took extra shifts to increase the chances of running into her but he did not see until about two months after their first meeting.

She was walking down the bread and baked goods aisle with another woman. The woman was talking and Maria was laughing. She had a nice laugh. Lucas walked behind the pair, keeping a safe distance. He willed her to turn around to see him and as if in answer to his prayers, she did. At first Lucas thought to flee but he couldn't have moved even if he wanted. He had been pushing a trolley full of toilet rolls when she turned to him. She walked over and stood before him, the trolley between them.

“Lucas! Long-time no see...thought you left Pick n Pay.” It was a joke. He knew it was a joke because of the way she laughed after she spoke.

“Oh...no, no...I'm still here,” he gave her his best smile

“Well, good to see you.”

Lucas wanted to say something but Maria had already turned back to the other woman.

“How do you know that guy?” He heard the woman ask. “He helped me out once.” Lucas smiled. *He helped me out once*. Clearly their encounter had meant as much to her as it did to him. Lucas once again felt like he was floating.

The next time Maria was in the store, Lucas emboldened by their last encounter went over to her.

“Lucas...fancy seeing you here” She was funny. He chuckled.

“Are you stalking me...you’re always in my shop?”

She laughed out loud and shook her head. “Thought you needed someone interesting coming through here every now and again.”

No one spoke to him like that, like he was a real person. Most people treated him like a child or an idiot and they spoke to him as if he was either. Lucas felt his heart warm.

“So what do you do, apart from spend your time in Pick n Pay?”

She laughed. “I’m a junior attorney at Marcus & Puma.”

“Oh ok. So that’s why you can afford to be shopping all the time.”

“Hardly,” she laughed again. He liked her laugh. “Anyway gotta rush Lucas. I’m sure I’ll see you again at some point.”

“I’m sure.”

They both laughed and to Lucas their laughs matched.

On his next day off, Lucas ventured into the town centre again and walked around until he found Marcus and Puma. The building was one of the tallest in town. It looked expensive with wide black windows and grey blocks. The sign at the front, with the name, shimmered in the sunlight, a mixture of silver, grey and black. Lucas was surprised he’d never noticed the building before. He stood across the road and waited until he saw Maria coming out. He watched her walk over to a small black Polo and slide into the driver’s seat. He thought about crossing over to greet her but as he was making his mind up, she started the car and drove off.

Lucas decided to take some of his leave days, surprising the store manager because he never took leave without being forced to. The first time, he took two weeks off and spent most of that time across the road from Maria’s office building. At first he stood near the entrance but then, noticing how people had begun to look at him, he decided to alternate between standing around and sitting in Steers which was across the road from Marcus and Puma. He took the a seat near the window where he could see the entrance to Maria’s

building and willed her to come out, hoping that when she did, he could run across the street and catch her. After the first two weeks, Lucas started taking more time off work. He enjoyed watching her office building. The prospect of seeing her made sitting around worth it. One day he almost got close enough to speak to her but she moved too fast for him. He'd been standing at his usual spot when she walked out at lunch time. He decided to cross the road but by the time he got to her side she was gone. Disappointed, he decided to try and enter the building under the pretext of making a delivery. He asked the receptionist for Maria's address and was surprised to find that getting the information was easier than he'd expected. Once he had the address, his routine changed. He would watch Maria at home and at the office. He began sending her flowers. He didn't sign his name or anything and was happy to see the flowers sitting on her dining room table through the window. Encouraged, he'd sent her a box of chocolates and other little gifts.

For weeks Lucas followed Maria around but he never made contact. At first he was happy to just see her but after a while he wanted more. He wanted to hold her hand. He wanted to hear her laughing at his jokes. He wanted to be with her. Hoping to lessen the burning desire in his heart, Lucas bought a camera and started taking pictures of Maria whenever he could. He wanted to know everything about her so that when he eventually asked her out he would know what she liked. At first he took pictures of her when she was outside. Then he began taking pictures of her in her flat. She didn't close her living room curtains. He would watch her watching TV with a glass of wine. Sometimes she sat at her dining room table with stacks of papers and the flowers that he sent. Sometimes she'd be on the phone for hours. A few times he'd seen her undress but always, she moved to another room before she finished taking her clothes off. He assumed it was her bedroom. Sometimes he felt ashamed of himself for photographing such private moments, and promised to destroy the pictures but he never did. As he saw it, they would be together soon and the pictures he'd taken would form part of their memories.

Every evening before going to sleep, Lucas lay on his bed and went through Maria's pictures. He talked to her and told her all the plans he had for them. He imagined their first date and imagined them married with children. After a while Lucas was frustrated with the pictures. He wanted more.

The day Lucas finally decided to tell Maria about his feelings and ask her out, he wore his best shirt and trousers, and even managed to put a tie around his neck. He doused himself with a generous amount of his cologne and went to his spot across the street from her office. When he saw her coming out of the building he smiled and started towards her. His heart was full of excitement and his usual shuffle felt like a bounce. He was halfway across the street when he saw the man coming out of a BMW parked next to Maria's car. The man walked towards Maria and opened his arms to her. She stepped into them for an embrace. The man's head came down and she raised herself onto her toes, turning her face for a kiss. Maria then walked round to the man's front passenger door, opened it and climbed in. The man climbed back into the driver's seat, closed the door, started the engine and drove off.

Lucas saw everything crumble before his eyes. He stood in the middle of the street until a car horn brought him back to reality. He threw the red roses he had in his hand on the ground, tore the tie from his neck and dropped it next to the flowers. Turning from Maria's office building, he dragged his bad leg back to Pick n Pay, to his place. Back in his flat, Lucas pulled out the photo album he'd filled with Maria's photos. Maria laughing, Maria working, Maria drinking wine, Maria undressing. He flipped through the pages and his hands began to shake. Maria looked up at him laughing at something, standing at the entrance of Marcus and Puma. Maria sitting on the grass at the botanical gardens with a book in her hand, Maria walking to her car in a short red mini dress, Maria walking from FNB after she'd had her hair cut into a bob, Maria working at her dining room table with his flowers before her. Lucas let out an anguished cry and began ripping the album pages out. He took the pictures out of their sleeves and tore them up. He picked up the picture of Maria on his bedside table, that he'd had framed and then threw it against the wall. After that he lay on his bed sobbing.

He didn't go to work the next day, or the next or the next. No one came looking for him until five days had passed. Two colleagues from Pick n Pay knocked on his door and heard no response. Finally, they called for the manager who had spare keys to the flat. Walking in, the smell of a disinfectant assaulted their senses. There was no sign of Lucas. Every room was empty.

The night to come

The bulletin was on the wall. Jane Hovis had been shot, three bullets in the chest and two in the head. She lay dead, ice cold, blue, in the middle of Eland Street. No one touched her, at least not since the shooting. Before that, many touched her. Jerry read the bulletin twice before reading it a third time. Closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, opened his eyes and read the bulletin again. Jane Hovis had been shot.

The guy who shot Jane knew her well, well enough to shoot her. It was one of those love stories gone bad, at least that's what the bulletin said, but Jerry knew otherwise. Jane called him three, maybe four days ago, hysterical. She was crying about being found out or finding something out about something. He couldn't make sense of any of it. She was talking fast, hysterical. Now he was here and Jane was dead. Nobody had touched her, which was custom for her kind. She lay there on the street, surrounded by yellow tape. From the bulletin wall, Jerry walked back to his run down Bakkie, checked that it was locked and dragged his feet towards Eland, to Jane. She was there, two holes smack bang in the middle of her forehead - one above the other, maybe quarter of an inch apart. Three holes on her chest, leaving a mess of flesh where Jane's beautiful left breast had been. The bulletin said Jane was blue, she wasn't, she was purple. Her eyes were still open, gold where they had been green. That happened with her kind. Squatting down on his haunches, Jerry's eyes swept over Jane. He decided then, looking at her frozen face and once beautiful body, that he would bury her or burn her. He was surprised that she was still whole, apart from the bullet holes. The wild dogs hadn't had a feast off her limbs. But then again what was he thinking, it was Jane, the dogs wouldn't have touched her.

Jerry walked over to the back of the bakkie, opened it. Took out a few black bags and spread a couple on the floor. Walking back to Jane, he saw curtains twitching. Hell, it was the middle of the night, why would anyone be up in this part of the country? He ignored the curtains and continued towards his dead body. Without much effort, he hauled Jane up onto his shoulder. 50kgs, he was sure she weighed no more than that. He put the body in the back of the bakkie as gently as he could, slammed the top down, climbed into the driver's seat, pulled the door shut and started the car. He drove for an hour out of town, into the woods. Turning the car off, he sat in darkness. He couldn't burn her; the chances of her exploding were too high. Her kind did that. He wasn't going to die because she called

him. Jerry lit a cigarette and inhaling deeply, he leaned back in his seat. He couldn't remember if there was a shovel in the boot. He closed his eyes and thought about Jane, Jane alive, Jane with both her breasts intact.

He must have fallen asleep because he was startled by howling. Wild dogs. He thought about getting out of the car and decided not to. It was 2:15, a lot of night to cover. Pairs of glowing green dots stood mid-air before the car. Jerry's heartbeat went into overdrive. He had a torch somewhere, probably in the back. He turned the key in the ignition to switch on the lights. The beams exposed five, maybe six of them. Instinctively, Jerry locked his door. They weren't doing anything, just standing, watching him, watching the car but it was their eyes, glowing in the dark that gave him the creeps. Jerry turned the key to start the car, no joy. Why had she called him? He tried to start the car again. It hissed, coughed and stopped.

Outside, there were now eight or nine of them. He couldn't be sure. The car was surrounded. It had to be Jane's stench... but they didn't eat her kind. Why did she call him? Sitting there, watching the wild dogs watching him, he remembered the tale of Bobby Thorn.

Bobby Thorn was born a certain way, a special way. He grew up among normal country people, raised goats on the farm with his parents, who many believed, were not really his parents. The story was that Bobby Thorn was given to them, after his special birth. When Bobby turned 16 he died in an accident and when his parents went to bury him in the woods, as was the custom then (it was bad luck to bury someone near your farm, even family) they were never seen again. But Bobby was. The story was that Bobby was seen hitchhiking out of town days after he'd died. Everyone said something happened in the woods. A search party was sent out for Bobby Thorn's parents but they were never found. Country people said a lot of things.

Jerry thought about Bobby Thorn for no reason at all except that he was sitting in the middle of the forest surrounded by wild dogs. Stupid folk tale. He tried to laugh but the sound came out dry and croaky. 3:10, still a lot of night to cover. He decided to switch the car lights off. Sets of bright green eyes stared at him, brighter in the darkness. Jerry switched the lights back on.

He pressed hard on the horn, blasting the silence with its loudness but they were unmoved. Sinking deeper into his seat, he watched as one jumped onto the bonnet of the car. The others drew closer too, eyes on every window, razor sharp teeth, dangling pink tongues, panting. Jerry closed his eyes, opened them and looked straight into a pair of startling green-gold eyeballs. His heart beat wildly, his palms were clammy. The dog's gaze drilled into him. Slowly, Jerry saw it raising its right paw and start to draw a circle on the windscreen directly in front of him, with a glass cutter.

Under and around

She went under and around and then sideways and then under again. When she came back up, the chains were gone and so were her teeth.

Mercy

Mercy looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and took a gulp of the green drink. It tasted as bad as it did the first time she had it three years ago. She had to drink the mixture twice a day. When she skipped a dose, her skin became dry and when she skipped two doses, it started to flake. When she skipped more than that, her skin began to peel, as though subject to sunburn, or a bad allergic reaction. Her palms peeled first and then it spread up her arms. She'd never allowed it to go further than that without taking the green drink. Often she wondered what would happen if the mixture ran out, or if her doctor, Philmore, wasn't there for her.

Looking at herself one last time, she walked out of the bathroom, past her bedroom, the little kitchen/dining room area and out the front door. She had a busy day ahead of her, phoning people who did not want to be phoned and selling things people didn't really need. This didn't bother her. She loved her job. She never had to deal with clients face to face. Of course, half the time, people hung up on her and were rude but she didn't mind that.

Her colleagues went out every weekend but she never joined them. The men thought she was cold, the women thought she was stuck up. Still, she was never short of men asking her out, the brave ones, who thought they had what it took to break down the "ice queen's" walls. Mercy knew all the names they called her but she didn't care. Since moving to Dunborough, she had made it a point to keep to herself. The longest conversations she had with anyone were with Philmore. She also spent some time talking to the blind boy who always sat at the corner opposite Spar, near her flat. They'd become friends of sorts and seeing him at that corner gave her some sense of comfort. She pitied him his life and yet she envied him, the protection given him by his lack of sight.

*

When she got home after work, her routine was always the same, strip, shower and wash the clothes she'd worn that day, before sitting down to eat. She had to wash her clothes every day to prevent the liquid that seeped from her skin ruining the fabric. She didn't sweat like most people, rather her body excreted a kind of thin gel.

Mercy didn't like the sticky feeling that came at the end of every day but more than that she didn't like the fact that she couldn't be close to anyone. She'd had a boyfriend once, Suzu, who'd pushed and pushed for intimacy, for sex, until one night, slightly drunk, she defied her doctor's instructions and invited him back to her place. This was in the previous town. They'd kissed, groping clumsily in the dark because Mercy refused to switch the light on. It was going well until her top and bra came off. Suzu had slid his arms around her naked back, caressing her neck and shoulders, when his hands stuck. Mercy had tried to pull herself free by wiggling and twisting but this only made it worse. She wanted to cry. Suzu had stopped kissing her neck and his eyes had grown big and round. He didn't say anything but Mercy could feel his heart racing against her chest. When, after a yank, he finally managed to free himself, her skin came off with his hands, stinging as it pulled off her back. Mercy moved to Dunborough after that.

*

The day Mercy came to him four years ago, Philmore had just been fired as a research assistant at the National Science Laboratory. They paid him off for the rest of that year and referred him to a psychiatrist. Philmore took his cash lump sum, rented a flat that he turned into a lab. He travelled to the tropics and brought back some illegal specimen for his experiments. He collected different kinds of reptiles, drugged them and smuggled them back into the country. He was determined to prove his theory to the Science Society.

The day Mercy came to him was a turning point in his research. In truth, she didn't just come to him, Philmore found her. He had seen her on the bus on numerous occasions. She always covered her hands and the skin on her face was dry and peeling. At first he thought her condition was simply eczema or an allergy but he soon realised it was something more. He began taking the bus every day at the same time to observe her. He watched her for months before he gathered the courage to speak to her.

As Mercy departed at her regular stop one day, Philmore stood suddenly, blocking her path, she faltered, dropping her handbag and the collection of magazines she had been clutching. He apologised and helped her gather the things up before following her off the bus.

"Let me buy you a cup of tea to make up for spoiling your morning."

“No, that’s ok, thank you.”

“Please, I insist. There’s a coffee shop just round the corner.”

He watched her hesitate.

“OK, but I only have a few minutes before work.”

After that Philmore made it a point to run into Mercy at least twice a week. He sensed a loneliness in her and fed on that. He would walk her to her office or they would sit at the coffee shop, which became a regular spot for them, and he would tell her about his life, his family, his job. He told her he was a doctor taking a sabbatical to do some research. He wooed her with science until she opened up to him and told him about her skin condition. She’d been to several doctors but none had been able to help her. Philmore told her that fate had brought them together. He was working on a cure for rare skin conditions such as hers. She took everything he told her without question and when he invited her to his lab, she came willingly.

Philmore could hardly contain his excitement that first day. Mercy lay on his exam table. He administered a drug that knocked her out - for the purposes of the examination he told her. Once he was sure she was anaesthetised, he stripped her naked, took some pictures and with a dictaphone in hand walked around the table.

“Subject has severe generalised maceration exuding a serous gel that is sticky to the touch. Possible pustular psoriasis on hands, feet and back. Signs of hypoparathyroidism on the neck and hyperkeratosis on the face with fissures visible on the chest. Subject perfect for research experiment. Note-Human test subject 1.”

This was the day Philmore started Mercy on the green mixture.

*

Philmore was the only one she could trust. After the Suzu incident he arranged for her to move to Dunborough. Mercy had hoped for a swift recovery but her condition persisted. She had become more and more dependent on the green drink. Philmore assured her it was normal, all part of the process and she trusted him completely. He’d told her that he had asked for an indefinite extension on his sabbatical to focus on her and come up with a

solution to her dermatosis. He believed the disease was more widespread than anyone realised and it was his duty, no, their duty to come up with a cure.

Philmore gave Mercy clear instructions not to build any more close relationships as they might jeopardise the research. The thing with Suzu had upset him more than Mercy had expected. The day she told him, he went into a rage. He castigated her for her irresponsibility. Why would she compromise her recovery by allowing a man to touch her skin? She had never seen Philmore that angry.

Now settled in Dunborough, Mercy thought about Philmore and his feelings for her. They'd been together for almost four years now - together in science, but since Suzu, she had begun to sense that Philmore had deeper feelings for her. She, however, felt nothing more for him than gratitude and a deep fondness. He was her only confidant but she relied on him more for his help with her skin than anything else.

*

Three years of close observation and Philmore felt his research was coming along perfectly. He'd almost thrown everything away when Mercy told him about her love affair. Knowing that she had almost been with another man almost tore him apart. He had to contain the situation. He found a remote town and sent her there. He would meet with her once a month. In order to continue to follow every detail of her progress, he found her a flat and before she moved in, had cameras installed in all the rooms. In the evenings, after spending the day with his reptiles, he would relax with a bottle of beer and watch her. Some nights he did not sleep at all.

Her routine was the same. She left in the morning at 7:15 and returned at 4:30. When it was hot she came home at lunch time and had a shower. Recently she had started shedding in the shower and Philmore liked to watch her psoriasiform dermis disappearing down the drain. He documented the changes in her skin colour and texture and made notes on whenever she shed.

She slept naked and he would sit on his sofa, listening to her breathing softly. At times when she had a restless night, her breathing would come short as if she was gasping for air.

As he watched the rise and fall of her chest, his eyes would trail down the soft curves hidden by a thin sheet and imagine himself next to her.

It was one of these days, watching her that everything changed.

*

The heat was relentless. There was no escape. Mercy, unable to bear it, had taken the day off work. From her bedroom window, she watched the after work passers-by drenched in their sweat, dragging their feet, fanning themselves, fighting a losing battle.

Finally she collapsed on the bed and lay watching the beads of sweat forming between the mounds of flesh on her chest. She'd already showered twice in cold water. Each time she'd stood under the stream watching her skin slide off her body. It didn't hurt when it happened and Philmore had told her it was all part of the process. Things would get worse before they got better. It seemed to be working. Since he'd upped her dosage of the green drink, her skin no longer oozed the sticky gel. It had become quite smooth, almost slippery to the touch. Mercy traced a finger over her thighs up to her belly and then let her palm rest flat above her belly button. Too hot to do anything, she fell asleep.

She opened her eyes to darkness, woken by what sounded like an explosion. It had grown dark while she slept. A flash of light cut across the night sky and then another loud crack like the sound of a whip being hit against something hard. From her bed, she watched the grey clouds that had gathered from nowhere unleash the force of the rain they held.

Her body, confused by the sudden change in temperature, began throbbing. Her skin felt tight and swollen. Mercy fumbled for the bedside lamp, flicked the switch but it didn't turn on. An irrational fear gripped her. Unable to calm her breathing, she tried to sit but her legs felt heavy, immobilized, as if they were bound together. She gathered her weight on her arms and tried to swing her left leg free. Her body rocked to the right. She tried to rationalise what was happening, her legs must be caught in the sheet. Mercy reached down to free them then stopped. What she felt made her heart race. They were her legs but something was wrong. There was no space between them, no dip, no break separating her thighs. Her breath started coming in sharp gasps. Her whole body trembled and her legs like

a big tail, slid off the bed dragging the rest of her body down. She struck the floor hard, her legs flapping against the carpet as pain shot through her hips and chest.

*

Philmore sat glued to his seat watching the transformation. He breathed heavily. This was a breakthrough of enormous proportions but all he could think about was how her skin would feel under his palms in that moment. He wanted to touch her tail, to trace the seam where her legs now met. He had to bring her in to complete the process. Philmore grabbed his car keys and made for the door. It would take him three hours to get to her, an hour and half if he put his foot down.

*

He let himself in Mercy's flat and found her where she'd passed out, still unconscious. He stared for a moment then, unable to contain himself, he knelt next to her and traced a hand over her new body. The skin was still hers but so much smoother, more slippery than it had been. The tail was elongated, tapering into a neat point where her feet connected. Philmore took a syringe from the bag he'd brought with him and gave Mercy a shot. He kicked off his shoes and sock, peeled of his shirt and pants and without taking his eyes off her, sat on the bed. She began to stir and his heart beat accelerated in anticipation.

Mercy blinked against the thin film that coated her eyelids. She could see light, a slight blurriness of semi-differentiated shapes. When she tried to move her legs she was struck by a new burst of pain, so bad she nearly passed out.

"Mercy, it's me. You are safe. Try to calm down."

Gathering her thoughts, she raised her head and saw a hazy Philmore, sitting on her bed, naked. This could not be real.

"Philmore? What's going on?"

He stood up and she noticed he was indeed completely naked. He reached down and stroked her hair. His touch felt real.

"What's going on Philmore?" Her voice was a thin rasp.

“You don’t have to worry about anything. Everything is fine.”

Mercy put her head back down. She willed herself to wake up.

“Just lie still.”

Her upper body began to feel strange. Philmore got up and began walking around her, excited energy emanating from his body. “Just stay still. Everything is fine.” She pulled herself up to sit, reeling against the pain that came with each movement. Failing, she twisted onto her stomach then slowly rose to full height, her weight on the bottom part of her body, her back arching, her head forward.

Somewhere below she could hear Philmore whispering, “I did it! I was right all along. They will all see. I did it.”

“I cured you!” He shouted

Mercy rose higher, watching Philmore walk towards her, her head darted forward as if to strike him. He jumped back with a laugh and a cry. She looked at him through her hazy eyes and saw him for what he was. She darted forward. Philmore tripped and fell, now the laugh gone, his eyes were full of terror. She slithered around the room a few times then rose again to full height before him. Opening her mouth to its full width, she swallowed him whole, head first.

Family history

Grandmother

My grandmother can fold herself in ways that put little babies to shame. She folds herself in half and then tucks her arms and legs in to make a human cube. She can stay cubed like this for hours watching TV, because her face is still facing outwards. When she gets tired or bored, she unfolds herself and you can hear her bones clicking from the next room.

Grandmother said she learnt this trick from her grandmother who worked in a circus. I asked her which circus because as far as I knew there was never a circus in our parts of the country. Grandmother said it was the circus from the other place. I asked her what other place and she said, the place people went before the before and after the after.

Grandmother was a queer one. I asked her to teach me to fold myself just like her grandmother had taught her but she shook her head. She said she couldn't, as I hadn't been to the other place yet. She died in her bed folded up and my mother wept when they buried her in a small square coffin, specially made.

The toaster

There's no reason why a person can't change their nature. By this I mean there's no reason why a person cannot decide to be a dog or a cow or a chicken. In fact, a person can even change to become a metal object, like a kettle or a toaster. Uncle John did that. Everyone knew how much he loved bread. He liked his bread toasted to crispy perfection and buttered, or fresh from the bakery, soft and warm. He even liked the bread my aunt made and my aunt didn't make great bread. Uncle John ate bread for breakfast, lunch and supper, as a side, a main or anything else. When we sat to eat together, he always made us butter our bread using alternating strokes, first long and then short, from top to bottom. He said the bread could feel when it hadn't been buttered right. This was the same when dipping bread in soup, he said we had to make sure the bread was at the right angle when it went into the bowl otherwise it wouldn't taste right. According to my aunt, everything changed after a dream Uncle John had. In the dream, a man appeared and asked Uncle John if he could change into anything what would it be. Without hesitation, Uncle John said he wanted to be a toaster. Why, we asked my aunt, in chorus. Why, if Uncle John could be

anything, would he want to be a toaster? My aunt said she believed it was so he could be close to bread all his life, so he could be part of the art of making beautiful crispy toast. At this point, we, who sat around listening to this tale, sucked air into our lungs in anticipation. She, the story teller, paused for effect before giving us the punch line: "The next morning I woke up with John gone and a new toaster in the kitchen. It's the toaster right there." We all turned our heads towards the toaster we'd known all our lives and we looked at it as if for the first time.

The light keeper

My uncle John believed in keeping lights. He was one of the few light keepers I'd ever heard of. Long ago before the before, he left a note in the garage. I found it one morning when I was looking for stuff to make a fishing rod. I must have been meant to find the note because when I started reading it, I knew my life would never be the same again:

When feeding a light you should have gloves on. The little light that you place in the big light should be kept in its jar until the exact moment of feeding. Depending on the size and age of your light, you should not let it out of its container, which you would have received on obtaining the light, if you obtained it legally. You ought to stick to the two stipulated feeding times- one at 9am and the other at 9 pm. The 9 am feed is the most challenging as the average light tends to blend in with daylight making it difficult to locate the feeding pocket. For an easy morning feed, ensure that the light is in its container in a dark or dim room. The night time feed is simpler for obvious reasons but in case you are new at keeping lights, ensure that all other lights are switched off when night time feed comes. The darkness makes a good boundary around the light, enabling you to feed it easily. Once your light has grown to fill the container and begins to break through the seams then it is time to release it into the world to fill sections of darkness. If you suffer from withdrawal symptoms, it is advisable to obtain another light before the one you are raising comes of age.

My sister Lucinda

My sister Lucinda ran away with the man she created in her bedroom. We never saw him but we always heard her talking to him through the closed door. Before she ran off, she said she'd found true love in her computer. She said not to look for her or try to bring her back. To make sure we couldn't trace her, she took the computer and all its cables, and the little desk that sat in her room. Father said we were never to mention Lucinda's name again. Mama never stopped weeping. She died shortly after the nameless one left. Some say she choked on tears. Father buried mama in her flower garden. He said she would've liked that but I wasn't so sure because he planted poison ivy right next to her grave. Everyone said my family was crazy. They said the crazy blood was passed on from my great grandmother on my father's side. Father denied it. He said the crazy came from mama's side. I tended mama's grave and had father's dug next to hers when he died. Doctor said he had a brain aneurysm that popped. Neighbours said it was the crazy in his head that killed him. Whatever the case, I was glad the crazy skipped me. I planted poison ivy next to his grave so he and mama could match.

The place in the lake

We were walking in the park, near the lake when an abnormally large duck came from nowhere. It chased us, quacking terribly. It moved with incredible speed for a duck, supernaturally fast, until it caught little Jo by its beak and dragged him towards the lake. I ran after it, splashing through muddy puddles. Finally, I lunged and managed to grab little Jo's leg but the duck was too strong for me. It kept its grip on little Jo's arm and ran on and into the water. I gave chase but fell flat on my face at the edge of the lake. When I raised my head, the duck and little Jo were gone. I stood with my toes touching the water for a moment, considering my options. I could not imagine going home without little Jo so I fortified myself and waded in to the dark water. The sand at the bottom felt slippery. Weeds rubbed against my legs and something slimy grazed my heels. I got waist deep then started to turn around, thinking it best to go and look for help, but my left foot slipped and I found myself submerged. I tried to right myself, but I couldn't, my feet were stuck to the bottom, caught in something. I reached down to free them and a hand touched mine. Startled, I

opened my mouth to scream and immediately started choking on the water. I was drowning, I knew this, but I was more afraid of the hand at the bottom. Finally, in one last effort, I swallowed my fear and reached down again to untangle my legs. The hand was still there. This time it gripped my fingers and didn't let go. It spoke to me, or at least something spoke to me inside my head, "Just let go, it's ok. You can be a duck too."

The hole and the shed

The bleach filled Lloyd's nostrils. His chest felt tight. He needed to rest but he couldn't. The hole was probably just over two feet deep. He had to keep going. Lloyd heard the school bell ringing. It was his ears. Bells in his ears, drums in his chest. His father had a heavy hand. When Lloyd was thirteen and he left new bags of fertilizer out to be ruined by an unexpected storm, his father's hand came down hard on his head.

Lloyd had chosen a spot behind the shed, away from the vegetable garden, away from the grazing fields, away from his mother's flower beds. When he started digging, the ground was soft and wet and easy. Three feet, a bit more. When you planted certain trees you had to dig deep so they had room to grow. His father taught him that. He said it was the same when building a house, if you wanted a strong house the foundations had to be deep. Until the shed, Lloyd followed his father around like a pup. When he was in grade two he won a prize for coming second in his class, his father, proud, picked him up and threw him in the air. He was seven, maybe eight then. An owl hooted from a distance and a bat flew past him. Lloyd continued digging. When he stopped to rest the bleach wafted up his nostrils. Sometimes his mother sat before him in the darkness, before the light came, and spoke to him from her place on the other side. It was the same all the time- *remember to brush your teeth before bed. Remember to polish your school shoes before bed. Remember to use the bathroom before bed.* This one was because he wet his bed way into the time he shouldn't have. *Remember to make sure the stove is switched off after cooking. Remember to let your father know when you'll be home late. Don't spend all your money at once, Always look after your brother.* He missed her. She smelt like flowers and wore pretty dresses. When she laughed, it was contagious. She made the best chicken pie he'd ever had. She called him her prince and secretly slipped five dollar notes into his underwear drawer, surprise gifts she always denied giving, but he knew it was her. It was one of their many games. When his little brother came along after Lloyd's eleventh birthday, she did not change. She made him feel warm inside, and safe, always safe.

It was deep enough now, he was sure of it. Lloyd threw the shovel down, wiped the sweat from his brow, reached for the black bag he'd brought from the shed, tried lifting it, his shoulders hurt and his arms burned. The bag leaked onto his boots, the bleach wafted up his nostrils. The bells in his ears were louder and so were the drums in his chest. He half pulled,

half dragged the bag to the edge of the hole, stood to catch his breath before kicking the bag in. It landed with a thud. Picking up the shovel, Lloyd began the job of covering the hole up. He could smell himself, sweat and mud, his father's smell. Until he was thirteen he thought all men smelt like that. Sometimes Lloyd faked his bath, his mother always caught him out. *You'll never get any girls smelling like that, princes don't stink, better learn to love soap and water.* If she should smell him right then, sweat and mud, and bleach. Bells in his ears, drums in his chest. The shovel was cold. His hands slid up and down its long neck, gripping it as though chocking it. He liked how it made him feel. He scooped up the soil from the heap next to the hole and threw it back in the hole, covering the bag, *dust to dust*

When his father's friend Uncle Sipho came over to the plot, they put on a show. Lloyd was the star. *String him up, string him up.* It got really good for them after a few pints, but really bad for him, naked, looking at the ground, upside down. His ankles bled and burned. The hole was almost full, it was just before dawn. He continued filling it up until all the soil was gone. An old dirge came to his mind. His mother knew he was out there. She knew he was out there because she sent him. She didn't say it in words like one would. He saw her in a dream and she told him to do what needed to be done- *remember to brush your teeth before bed. Remember to polish your school shoes before bed. Remember to use the bathroom before bed. Remember to make sure the stove is switched off after cooking. Remember to let your father know when you'll be home late. Don't spend all your money at once. Always look after your brother.* In the dream he wanted to tell her that he stopped wetting his bed 13 years ago, that he no longer wore school shoes, but he could never speak.

He wasn't sure what to do at first until he saw them, his father and Uncle Sipho, grey haired, dirty, drunk, laughing. They were sitting in the shed, both doors open, drinking *Kachasu* and talking about the animals they caught and skinned. It wasn't that though, it was his little brother, swinging upside down before them, bare, lifeless. Bells in his ears, drums in his chest. He waited for Uncle Sipho to leave. *Always look after your brother.* She was there with him then, proud. The hole in the ground was not a hole anymore. There'd be no more swinging. The cock crowed three times, the dogs barked, stirring from their slumber, the cow bells jingled, the goats began bleating. Lloyd stood for a moment watching the beginning of the sunrise.

Workers

All able bodied workers should write their names in the left column and all non-able bodied workers should write their names on the right. Whether able bodied or not, there's pen and paper for all.

Felling a tree

Moyo hacked away at the invaders, sweat dripping from his torso. He'd been at it since five a.m. and the sun was now high. It seemed the more he cut them down the more they came, as if summoned. Moyo stopped to rest and take a swig of his water before continuing. He couldn't let them take over. He knew what allowing them to grow and run free would do to his land.

When he had inherited the farm from his grandfather, it was infested with Black wattle. Everywhere Moyo turned, among the legitimate vegetation, the invader rose. The alien vegetation originated from Australia and was known for its aggressive, invasive characteristics. If the Black wattle was not uprooted, it fed off the other plants and took the food meant for the original vegetation. In essence it was a land leech.

At first Moyo had thought burning some of the trees would solve the problem but it hadn't. More had come up. He'd then thought to just let the trees grow, underestimating the power of the Black wattle's destructive nature. He'd started noticing his own trees and other plants looking weak and sickly. He realised that they weren't getting enough food from the ground because of the alien. At last, Moyo acknowledged that the only way to deal with the problem was to chop the trees down and pull the stumps out. He and his men had been at it for over a week but it seemed there were hundreds still standing.

They'd been sawing away for three days before Moyo noticed the change. The trees seemed to lean closer to each other each day he and his men worked. He was probably being fanciful but he was also fairly certain the tree trunks were thicker than when he'd surveyed the area he wanted to clear out. The closer the trees were, the harder it was to safely get rid of them. Moyo watched his men chopping furiously. Day four had been a long day, not just because of the tree density but because of the heat. Five p.m. and it felt like the middle of the day. He called his foreman over and told him to dismiss the men. They'd earned a good evening's rest, the work would continue the next day.

That night, Moyo woke up abruptly. He wasn't sure what had woken him until he heard the sound. A soft wailing floated into his room. As his eyes got accustomed to the darkness, he got up and walked to the open window. Straining his ears he heard the sound again, drifting in, carried by the breeze. As he listened, screams rose, mingling with the earlier sound.

Moyo didn't know of any funeral in the area and the wind wasn't strong enough to carry cries from any place far. He closed his window and walked back to his bed. He would find out more from the workers in the morning. Unable to sleep, he lay in bed until the cock crowed signalling another day of work.

When he got to the site he'd marked for clearing, Moyo found his men huddled, whispering. He didn't need to be told why the men were disturbed. The trees had definitely moved closer to each other. He looked around and noticed that the stumps they'd left the previous day had been removed and the ground closed up in their place. He signalled to his foreman.

"Did someone work late into the night?"

"No boss. We just found everything as it is."

"Hmm... Ok, well let's get to work. No point standing around."

"But the trees boss..."

"I'm sure they were like this yesterday. Let's get to work."

Moyo wasn't sure at all. In fact, he was sure of the opposite. The trees had been further apart the day before than they were that morning but he wasn't going to share any of his thoughts with the men. The work still needed to get done.

The workers put their glasses and earplugs in before picking up their axes and chainsaws. Following the section of land Moyo had marked out for that day, they took their positions. With the previous night's sounds forgotten, Moyo sat on the tractor ready to pull out tree stumps. He tried to focus but the trees seemed to lean into each other more making it hard to pick out the lay of each tree. The change in the distance between them made it difficult for the men to find the right position to work in. Moyo watched as his foreman squeezed between the trees trying to find a way around the problem. It was going to be almost impossible to use chainsaws, let alone axes. He could tell the men to leave it and call someone to the farm to help with the situation but he did not want to waste a day.

As he sat there, one of the men raised his axe and hit one of the trees nearest to the clearing. A sharp crack resounded and in the same instant an eerie moaning sound filled the air. The sound chilled Moyo's blood. He glanced around, could he be the only one who had

heard it? He sat still, attentively listening. There was nothing, Moyo assured himself. The man with the axe swung again and this time the sound was unmistakable, a soft cry that seemed to come from the forest. With each swing the sound became louder, tearing at him, putting his teeth on edge. He watched as other men found their spots and with their chainsaws and axes began cutting trees. The wailing became a scream. The sound of many voices crying filled the air, competing with the sound of the machines. The veins at Moyo's temples began throbbing. The sound of the wailing and screeching and cracking and sawing made him feel like his head was about to explode. He blew on the whistle at his neck, signalling the men to stop. Without explaining anything, he told them to leave the work for the next day. Baffled, the men picked up their equipment and walked back to the farm. Moyo sat on the tractor for a little while longer. The sounds gone, he wondered if he'd imagined it all. His eyes swept over the trees before him and again felt a sudden chill creep up his back. He was probably just tired, nothing that a day's rest and plenty of water wouldn't cure.

That night Moyo woke up drenched in sweat. He kicked the covers off and got out of bed. The room was dark and silent. He walked over to the window to cool himself but stumbled back, startled. A dozen hairy wooden arms groped at him through the open window. Moyo stood frozen for a second then rushed to switch on the light near the door. The room was empty, silent. He walked to the window, hurriedly closed it and went back to his bed. Just as he was drifting off, he heard the wailing again, this time much louder, as though it was outside his window. He listened for a moment, hoping that it was the wind but the sound kept growing. A choir of voices, the harmony of tenors, altos and sopranos moaning gently and then the sharp screams. Moyo lay utterly still for a moment before swallowing his fear. He had to investigate. Throwing on his robe and a pair of tennis shoes, he walked out of his room, through the corridor, out the front door and into the dark.

The trees were everywhere. They came as far as the stoep at the front of the house. They stood in what looked like endless rows with a narrow path that began almost at Moyo's front door and disappeared into the forest. Moyo's heart raced. He assumed he was in the middle of one of those lucid dreams where one is dreaming but aware of what is happening. He walked from the house into the forest trying to make sense of his dream. He walked until he stumbled on thick roots that had somehow risen to the surface. He did not

recognise the area even though he knew his land like the back of his hand. He tried to get up but his feet were tangled. He looked down and saw that thin roots had coiled themselves around his ankles. As he tried to break free, their grip tightened. Something that felt like a hand landed on his back and forced him down. Moyo tried to scream but his face was buried in the dark soil. He tried to move but he was pinned down, his body sprawled flat. He managed to turn his head and wished he hadn't. He wished he could wake up in that moment. The trees were moving. He could see them walking on their roots, moving closer to each other forming a wall around him. He opened his mouth but a small tree appeared from nowhere. With a single motion it placed its knotted roots over his face, silencing him.

*

Moyo could hear dogs barking. He could hear people talking but he couldn't speak. He was stuck and his mouth was sealed. He remembered walking out of the house and he remembered the trees, then the darkness. He knew he was upright. He tried to look down to see what was keeping his feet grounded but couldn't. The voices got closer. Now he could make out the voice of his foreman. Moyo tried to open his mouth to shout out. He saw one of the men pick up an axe. He saw him lift it and swing it. Pain like he'd never felt before coursed through his body and finally Moyo heard himself scream.

Rocks or crocodiles

There's a bridge between Southerton and Northerton which looks over a magnificent waterfall. There's a gorge in the middle where water flows rapidly creating mist that hovers like a white cloud over the falls and around the trees on either side. People travel from countries all over the world to see this great wonder. During winter they come in their coats, juggling flasks of tea and coffee with binoculars. During summer you see them scantily dressed, the women with big sun glasses and wide hats and the men in their sport team branded caps (a large number of Manchester Uniteds, quite a few Arsenals, some Chelsea, some Brazil). You see them walking around, holding guide books, pointing here and there, and acting like they know everything there is to know about the place. What most outsiders do not know, something they will never read about in a guide book, is the area's troubled history. The waterfall and its bridge were a bone of contention between the Northies and the Southies for centuries. Wars were fought over who had rightful claim to the falls. Many lives were lost. After generations of bloodshed, the two countries, which were really meant to be one, decided to share the falls. To ensure that each side stuck to this agreement, a border line was drawn across the bridge.

Something else the outsiders did not know was that since the division there had been a steady rise in suicides. In fact in the last month, a total of 323 people gave their lives to the falls. In this week alone, five people were reported to have gone over. On Monday, an old lady who had been walking up and down the bridge on the South side, suddenly ran across to the North side, and, grabbing the rails before anyone could stop her, flung herself off the bridge into the raging waters. Two grown Siamese twins jumped over on Tuesday in an act of defiance. They were scheduled for separation surgery. Witnesses said they cried out that they would not be parted before they dove from the bridge to their death. On Thursday, a man threw a baby off the bridge, before jumping in himself. The old folks said the water was contaminated with blood. They said it was the cries of the lost that beckoned people. Suffice it to say, the people on both sides believed that the falls and its bridge were cursed.

A foreigner who'd come upon the tale of the curse came to investigate the validity of the story. He came with cameras and notepads and all kinds of equipment, including a force gauge to measure the pull of gravity in each particular suicide spot, a planimeter to determine the centre of gravity and the dimensions and distance of the bridge, and his own

meteorological devices to try and measure the weather conditions at the falls and see if they influenced the suicide victims in any way. He camped out near the bridge observing the falls and the people of the area. Every morning he would rise before sunset, disappear into the nearby bushes to relieve himself, after which he would have a quick bucket bath. He had the same breakfast every day, beans on bread and a cup of coffee made with water he boiled on his small gas cooker. After breakfast he would take his backpack and camping chair to a spot near the bridge where he'd spend most of the day, jotting things in his note book. Every so often he would take one of his gadgets and record information relevant to his cause.

Finally, after two weeks, the foreigner felt he'd recorded enough information, including accounts of a number of people jumping off the bridge. Being a scientific man, he did not believe in curses. Using the data he collected, he reasoned that the bridge was a suicide hot spot because of its height and the fact that one was guaranteed a certain death. The probability of one surviving such a jump was almost non-existent and in the event that one did survive, there were still rocks and crocodiles to contend with. Taking into account scientific data proving that people were more depressed in overcast regions than in sunny ones, the man concluded that the constant misty cloud and fog that hung over the falls and the surrounding areas was a contributing factor. Satisfied with his assessment, he wrote his findings in a journal and packed all his equipment. He folded his tent and stacked everything neatly in his rented 4X4. He walked over to the bridge for one last look. Putting his hands on the rails, he leaned his head back and felt the wind and the gentle mist on his face. He lifted one leg up and over the top to straddle the rail. With his eyes closed and face lifted up, he raised his arms above his head, let out a Tarzan cry and hurled himself towards the waiting waters.

Warnings:

About Dogs

My Grandpa had a dog once, his name was Jo. Grandpa and Jo were so close that when grandpa's beard grew, Jo grew a beard too. When grandpa's hair turned grey, Jo's coat changed colour too. It was a union most did not understand. We all accepted that the two were essentially one. The day Grandpa died, Jo did not get up from his bed on the floor in Grandpa's room. We all thought he was dead too and it made perfect sense that he would be but he wasn't. For sure he was depressed or at least grieving the loss of his other half but he wasn't dead. After Grandpa's burial, Jo walked around moping. We tried to get him to come out and play but he was mostly content to sit at the window in Grandpa's old rocking chair. Sometime after the funeral Jo went missing. We searched everywhere before thinking about the most obvious place. Jo was lying on his side, on top of Grandpa's grave, his eyes blank, his tongue dangling out of his mouth and his legs stretched out. He'd killed himself.

About Fish

Three fish lived in our fish tank. A blue one, a grey one and a yellow one. Of course they had more scientific names, but the only one who could identify exactly what type of fish they were, was my sister. They were her fish. One day she left me in charge of the tank. She told me how to feed the fish and clean the water. Following her instructions, I poured a little bit of the cleaning powder I'd bought into the tank. It was a new brand, the sticker on the bag said it was harmless to fish. After that I went about my business. When I came back a few hours later, the fish were all heavily bloated and the water seemed strangely low. I scooped them out of the tank and into a shallow dish with water. I went back to the cleaning powder bag and re-read the label. There was a warning I'd missed: *the following types of fish may confuse this product with food*. It listed the types. I didn't recognise any. Unsure what to do, I pressed their middles gently with my index finger and they made a squishy sound. I watched them for a minute then decided to call my sister. Before I could, the fish blew up, like tiny water balloons, their little insides flying about in a shower of brown liquid.

About Cats

We had a cat in our house. A very pretty white cat with startling green eyes. She loved to sit on the sofa and groom herself, or let one of us brush her beautiful fur. She'd purr softly and stretch her legs in contentment. As cats do, she cleaned herself regularly. In her case, probably more often than the average cat. One morning we woke up and found her lying on the carpet in the corridor, dead. When they autopsied her (mum insisted she'd been poisoned) they found a ball of fur stuck in her throat and in the ball were tiny shards of a broken mirror.

About horses

Our field horse refused to eat. She refused to do anything, which was really strange because for years she'd been happy to work. Pulling her out of the stable in the morning had become quite a chore. We had to coax her out with carrots and apples and, at times, even chocolate. When that stopped working, I pulled her reins from the front and my brother pushed her from behind. When we eventually got her outside, hitching the cart to her was an absolute nightmare. She raised her front legs and kicked up quite a fuss, we had to call our father out to help. Then when that was done we walked to the fields, the horse stopped every few steps to graze. When we tried to prod her along she raised her head at us and flicked her mane before continuing with her feeding. When we eventually got to the field, the horse flatly refused to move. No amount of pulling or pushing could change her mind. She sat on the ground with her head raised as if to say, *I've given you the best years of my life... no more.*

About Hamsters

The hamster didn't go anywhere but it probably walked further than a lot of people. Everyday Hammy walked on his treadmill. Round and round and round. He only stopped to eat and sleep but even in sleep his chubby legs would be moving. We bought a second hamster to keep Hammy company. We set this one up in her own cage, full of the basic necessities, right next to Hammy's cage. The new hamster wasn't as round and cuddly as

Hammy because we'd rescued her from the SPCA after they'd rescued her from some abusive home. We knew she would thrive with us and we were sure she and Hammy would get along. A week after she moved in, we started noticing Hammy behaving strangely. He stopped sleeping and stopped eating. He would be on his treadmill almost all the time. At first he walked as he normally did, then he began running faster and faster and faster. On the other hand, Tabby, as we'd named her, just ate and slept and sometimes sat watching Hammy. As we suspected, all she needed was a good home because her fur started to shine and she became quite round after some time. Hammy, in contrast, lost weight. At first it was cute then it became disturbing. We took him to the vet who said there was nothing wrong with him. He was having some kind of midlife crisis. Tabby looked like Hammy and Hammy started to look like Tabby when she'd first moved in. After a while Hammy looked like nothing we'd ever seen before. It was a small wonder he was still alive. Deciding there was nothing else we could do, we took him back to the vet and left him with a note: *On a self-destructive path.*

We are Absalom

The stars were not in the black but above it. We all knew this and had stopped thinking of them as part of the sky. It was common practice for people to have a star named after them. The way you thought about your star was very important. The star would either shine brighter or it would dim and eventually die. When Absalom got his star, he had big plans. He would think nurturing thoughts. He would think loving thoughts. He would love it into supernatural brightness. As it happened, Absalom was not a very loving person. He had a wife once. The marriage was arranged by his parents after they realised that Absalom was doomed to a life alone if left to his own devices. He was awkward with women, always had been. His wife didn't understand this. She constantly tried to engage him in conversations about movies, music and books, but as hard as he tried, Absalom always stuttered before falling into silence. He began avoiding her, communicating mostly through small notes he left on the fridge door. Finally, he came home from work one evening and found the house dark and his wife gone. There was no note on the fridge door or message on the phone, just an empty wardrobe in the bedroom and a microwave dinner left on the kitchen table.

For a while it was just him and the dog. After his wife left he'd fed the dog scraps from his table but there was rarely anything left on Absalom's plate. The dog went hungry most days. Finally, it took to chewing Absalom's shoes. It started with the old shoes then went on to the slightly newer ones. When it realised its message wasn't getting through, it ate the just-out-of-the-box pairs. For that, the dog received the beating of its life. Afterwards, it licked its wounds, took its fake dog bone, the only thing it owned, and walked out to a life on the streets.

Absalom was alone, except for the star he'd just had named after him. The Association of Star Distribution & Naming had sent him a welcome pack with information on how to think nourishing thoughts towards one's star and how to understand its intricate workings. *Stars are so distant that they appear as points of light in the night sky, the introduction to the manual read, they appear to scintillate because of turbulence in the earth's atmosphere. Stars generate their own light by internal nuclear fusion reactions. As the owner of your own star you can spark and multiply these reactions. Your loving thoughts can generate kinetic energy and electromagnetic radiation.*

Absalom read the manual twice before setting up the star gazing gear provided by the association.

- One telescope.
- One telescope stand.
- One sky map.
- One sky map manual.
- One compass

He unfolded the sheet of paper with the star's coordinates, and using the sky map looked for his star. With a blanket, he sat in his rocking chair on the balcony of his bedroom, a balcony he'd had built for this very purpose. Once he located the star, he smiled up, his coffee-stained-teeth smile. To connect with the star, there were a series of phrases he had to say,

Hello Absalom (the welcome pack noted that you could rename the star once you'd established a connection.)

I am Absalom

You are Absalom

We are Absalom

From where he sat, the star seemed to blink twice after the last statement. The welcome pack said this was good. It meant there was an understanding. That first night, Absalom sat watching his star all night. *Hello Absalom, he said again and again.*

He was happy. Finally he could love and be loved back. During the day he would go about his daily routine, waiting for the night. At work, packing computer accessories into boxes, he could zone out and think about his star. Beautiful and bright. He'd found out through a Star Owners Weekly magazine that when a star was happy it blossomed. Some owners gave testimonials in the magazine about how they had nurtured their stars and how in turn the stars had responded by shining bright. Absalom wished he could touch it. He slept less and less during the night because he didn't want to waste any of the time he could spend with Absalom. It was bad enough daylight came every day and the star retreated to wherever

stars went during the day. As time went by Absalom became more and more agitated with the way the night and day were arranged. He quit his job and spent his days in bed with his curtains drawn. At nightfall, he got out of bed, showered, whistling a tune and his spirits lifted. He dressed and went out onto the balcony for his nightly date. His star was there burning bright and blinking its welcome.

One night Absalom sat on the balcony convinced his star had moved a few inches to the left. Named stars were not supposed to move. Absalom moved his chair to better position himself to talk to the star. Through his telescope he observed it move back to the right but further than its original position. Baffled by this behaviour, Absalom consulted the brochure that came with the welcome pack for an explanation. He found none. He picked up his telescope again and saw the star blink several times. When it blinked it seemed to change colour. Its usual yellow-white glow became orange and red and bright yellow and then a blend of the three. While he sat, still undecided on what to do next, the star blinked and then went dark. Absalom got up from his chair, his telescope still trained on the last spot he'd seen the star. He'd done everything the welcome pack told him to do. The star couldn't be dead. He dropped the telescope and began pacing up and down the length of the balcony. When he finally turned his head back to the sky, there was his star. *Why did you do that? Where did you go?* The star blinked twice.

Absalom called the Association to speak to someone about his star's unpredictable behaviour. The customer service operator he spoke to asked him if he'd made sure of the connection with the star in the beginning. Absalom was certain he had. He was told to make sure that he'd followed the right coordinates. Was he certain that he hadn't in fact been pouring his affections onto a satellite or some kind of meteor? Absalom was certain it was neither but he went out to check anyway. Once he confirmed that his coordinates were right, he called the association back.

"I'm afraid you have one of the rare ones. They are a fluke really, but you can't change them. You are stuck for life. The only way to be parted now is if one of you dies," the man on the other end of the phone told him.

Absalom went back outside and fixed his eyes on the star again. From where he stood, it seemed to be blinking at him rapidly, mocking him. Resolute, he stared hard at it.

Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, were Absalom's only thoughts for days after that, until the morning he didn't wake up.