Love in a Cold War

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Abstract

A collection of short stories in two parts written in realist and fabulist styles. The first part looks at the post-war generation of baby boomers growing up in the American Midwest. The second half follows an American abroad and explores themes of disintegration, the shifting power balance in relationships and the terrible hole at the core of expatriate identity.

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Part 1: America

Love

The wind howled across the valley the night she was born, shaking the eaves and dislodging the bird nests so misguidedly built there. Her howls, then and subsequently, went unnoticed, as had her mother's before her. She was a flexible creature, though, and soon learnt that mother would come when she came and that protesting was of no use. So she grew in that soundless world penetrated only by the call of birds and the howl, bark and hiss of wolves until came the time when her ears closed up and she no longer noted them.

One day her mother woke her early, anxiously thrusting forth a frock the colour of the delphiniums that she despised for the attention they took from her. The lumpy oatmeal stuck in her throat that morning as the anxiety had taken over her stomach and there was no room there for food. Her parents dragged her up the dirt road to the place where it joined another road, all black and slick and unfamiliar. Along it came a bus that stopped and her parents pushed her in, and she got in and moved without ever moving her legs.

Inside that bus was intolerable, like living in a nest of angry wasps she imagined, all that noise and activity. When the bus next stopped she bolted and ran like the wind and no one could catch her. She ran through briars and brambles until her dress hung tattered and lifeless as delphiniums after a storm and when her legs could pump no more she crumpled and fell to the ground.

Eventually a silver-haired man found her and when he saw her his mouth moved and sounds came out and of course she didn't know that they had meaning and could not respond but what she knew instantly was that that man was gentle and she could trust him. He carried her to his house and sat her in a big chair and covered her with a blanket and brought her food, and she took it and ate and ate and ate. Then he took her into a small room and made her to understand that she must take off her raggedy delphinium dress and get into a big tub of water and so she slipped into the bath, her first. Then she put on the plaid flannel shirt he left lying on the chair and he put her into a bed so deep and soft that she sank down into it and it covered her with soft warmth and something in her remembered what it was like before the night the wind howled and the bird nests fell from the eaves and she felt safe.

The next morning he fed her something wild and delicious and then they walked and

walked and all the time his mouth moved and sounds came out and they met many animals and all of their mouths opened and shut and sounds came out and then she heard the familiar call of a wolf and fear jolted through her body like a bolt of lightning and she bolted again and ran and ran and ran until a fence stopped her and slashed her and she fell ragged and bloody to the ground and for the first time she cried. She cried so violently that her body shook. She cried so long that the sun set and the tears dried up and still she cried and noises came from her that made her head ache. Eventually the man came, but she didn't know it was those noises that called him, and she fell into his arms and nestled her cheek against his soft flannel shirt and cried some more, but this time it was different. He stroked her hair and made gentle sounds that soothed her and eventually she stopped and he carried her back to his house in the dusk and he repeated the rituals of the night before.

There she stayed, day after idyllic day, until the days grew short and the sun was no longer warm, until one morning she awoke and there was frost on the ground and the house was cold and the man was lying stiff on the floor and she lay down and nestled her cheek against his soft flannel shirt and stayed that way for a very long time. Eventually a woman dressed in a stiff jacket and skirt came and took her away to a big building with dozens of rooms and some of the rooms had so many beds in them that they were on top of each other. There were children everywhere and she knew then what a wasp's life must be like in the hive and she envied them for they all knew what to do but she didn't. The sounds all around her were terrible and kept growing and growing and getting louder and louder until one day her head exploded and she started to sob, then cry and then scream and scream and all she wanted was for the old man in the soft flannel shirt to come and hold her again but instead the woman in the stiff jacket came with someone in a white dress who stuck a needle in her arm and when she woke up she was in a strange white soundless room.

She was never sure how long she stayed in that room but she knew she could have stayed there forever. People came in and out and brought her things. Food, drinks, pills, shiny magazines with whole silent worlds in them. She ignored them all, except for one young woman who came every day to show her that every thing had its own special sound and she learned that if she said the words “ice cream” that the most wonderful cold food would come to her and so she learned those sounds and sat in that room and the world came to her, bit by precious bit. Then the people who brought her things started to say the sounds that belonged

to the things and one day they brought the words “chicken” and she shook her head and said “ice cream” and the woman smiled and took the chicken word away and brought her the wonderful cold food, and she smiled at her again and she felt that life could be good again.

The next day they came and sat her down and showed her pictures and made her understand that she had to leave. She could choose to go to the place with all the children or to the soundless place where her mother and father still lived but there were no pictures of the man in the soft flannel shirt. They made a mistake doing that because no child would choose to abandon her parents so that very evening she was back in the soundless world of lumpy oatmeal with nothing but the bird calls and the howling of the wolves and day by day she forgot her newly found sounds.

Eventually her parents walked her to the main road again and this time when the bus came they didn't have to push her, she got on and sat down and smiled because she had learnt that when you smile in the world other people smile and that was always nicer. When the bus stopped at the big brick building the woman in the stiff suit was there and took her to a room where the woman who taught her the sounds was and they smiled at each other.

She blossomed into a beautiful young woman at that school and it wasn't long before boys showed an interest in her but she ignored them until one day a handsome lad in a soft flannel shirt asked her out for an ice cream. Instead of getting on the bus after school that Friday she went with him to a café and they ate ice cream and afterwards they walked around town hand in hand kicking up the leaves and smiling and they did this every Friday until one day he put his soft arms around her and she snuggled into his chest thinking that she finally was safe but he did horrible violent things to her and it hurt and she bled and she started to sob and cry and then she screamed and screamed but no one came and he left her there in a heap in the leaves with nothing but the howling of the wolves for company.

Eventually she got up and stumbled in the dark and ended up in town where she walked shivering up and down the streets looking in at all the puddles of warm, yellow light shining on people sitting around tables together like in the pictures from the magazines. Eventually she saw someone who looked like the old man in the soft flannel shirt and she knocked on the door and said “help me” and he could see what had happened to her and so he sat her down and gave her hot food and then ran a hot bath and she sank down in it and

then went to the bed he had made for her and slept. In the morning the woman in the stiff jacket was there and took her to her parents where she stayed in that soundless world for a very long time and she never again tried to find a man in a soft flannel shirt.

Creation

Her stubby little fingers struggled to hold the cardboard tube steady to her scrunched up eye while twisting the other end. Frustration was forming a knot in her belly when finally something clicked and millions of fragments of colours and shapes took flight. She sucked in her breath. Suddenly they all stopped and created the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. It was a pattern, and it reminded her of the dream she'd had while they were taking her tonsils out, except this pattern was made from a million pieces that had fallen into place before her eyes. There were so many shapes that some had no names. The circles were round, flat, bloated, looped like the figure eights she did at the skating rink. And the colours! Her box of crayons had eight colours, but this had eight different greens alone! Breath still held, she allowed her eye to shift to the right. But no, this couldn't be! It was exactly the same. And so was the next one and the next one, around in a circle like numbers on the clock. How many times? Count, she told herself. Instead, “Daddy, daddy, daddy, come, look. Look!” She sat with her bottom glued to the threadbare, grey carpet, willing him to appear. But daddy didn't come. Then the unthinkable happened. She sneezed. She heard what seemed like a million shards of glass scraping against each other. Breath back in, in agony she peeked into the circle. And there it was again. Everything about it was completely different, but the repetition of that perfect pattern around the face of the circle was the same.

Something clicked into place deep within her at that moment. Her life would be a kaleidoscope, using all the shapes, all the colours to make patterns out of the fragments. There would be enough of that reassuring sameness to let her breath. And when the unthinkable happened, she would create another perfect, predictable world.

And in it, Daddy would come.

The Papers

Memories washed over her as she wound down the dusty road to the old farm house nestled in the valley. It was like revisiting the scene of a crime of passion a decade later. Katie parked the rented Golf in knee-high grass next to the rusted remains of a life-time of automobiles. Glancing around, she saw that everything was decayed beyond repair, the farm house, barn, shed, sauna, out house, all had rotted boards hanging loose, windows with glass still in them dangled precariously. She sucked in her breath and opened the front door. The door was so rotten that it came off one hinge when she opened it, a rusty screw falling to her feet.

The reek of cat piss, mould and decay slapped her in the face, and she reeled back. The place was exactly the same, only there was more crap everywhere. A path wide enough to step one foot in front of the other wound through it.

Her old man's adult life was in front of her. Every newspaper and magazine he'd read in the last twenty years, piles of *The New York Times* stacked separate from *The Daily Mining Gazette*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *American Scientist*, *National Geographic*. Each in its place. Just one book, though, *The Icelandic Sagas,* about Viking conquests he'd always tried to get her interested in. She knew he'd ordered his books from the local library, a dozen every week. That he'd died in winter was clear; the path to the potbellied stove lined on each side by stacks of egg cartons, incongruous to his twisted sense of order.

Turning left she understood why. What he'd called the kitchen was piled as high as he could have reached with milk cartons, egg cartons, the cardboard tubes frozen grape juice came in. Even the two ring, counter top stove had been buried alive by hundreds of packages from every variety of coffee cake that Sarah Lee had ever made, with the round, fluted tin pie pan washed and put back inside. The old man had gone to university, six of them, breaking the chain of ten generations of Danish bakers that he came from. It was an inheritance he was ashamed of, and it soothed her to think he'd allowed that piece of his childhood into his old age.

Overwhelmed by the stench of memories, Katie carefully backed out of the house and sat on the hood of the rusted 1950s Studebaker by the front door. The day her mother had spun off down the road without her, the last time she'd seen him as she was lifted into the

ambulance raving, “No, it's you! You're fucking crazy man!” Their last words. She gulped in the fresh air and sunshine, the aroma of grass baking in the heat, wondering if she had the strength to find the papers her cousin was convinced existed.

Katie had been on her honeymoon when she'd gotten the call saying the old man had died. They'd had to put off a memorial service until she could get to the remote farm in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Yesterday, she and her brother had rented a helicopter and flown over the 400 acres of forests and meadows scattering his ashes. A tooth had flown back and gouged her face. After his death her cousin Sven had called her and begged her to dig out her dad's letters and papers. For as long as she could remember the old man had said he had writer's block, but her Danish cousin was sure he'd lived on a steady diet of writing. She'd been moved that it meant so much to him, that somebody cared what he thought, so she'd agreed to do it. The more she'd thought about it, the more Julie became convinced that it would be good for the whole family to find out if he wrote about all those years lost to McCarthyism when he was black-balled. It was a history they needed to know. What had turned him into a bitter, paranoid recluse? Had he written about it? It was the piece they needed to put the enigma of the bastardisation of their lives together.

Breathing deeply, she went back in. This time she turned right, and it was the smell of mouldy paper that hit her. The path ended about a metre into the room, in front of an oversized brown easy chair with a side table and lamp next to it. The rest of the room was stacked floor to ceiling with cardboard cartons. *Great*, she thought, *I don't remember any of this*.

“How the fuck did he pull this off in his condition,” she wondered aloud. The answer was resting against the wall on the side of the chair. A step ladder. “Okay, here goes nothing.” She opened it out in the pathway, next to the pile closest to the chair, climbed up and hoisted the top box into her arms and crawled back down. “Pay dirt.” On the top of the box, in red magic marker, it said Jan-Jun 1990, ending two months before he died. She pulled the flaps open to reveal a stack of newspaper and magazine clippings, all marked with the name of the paper, the date they were published and annotated with his reaction to the news. Fascinated, she pulled open box after box and wondered what it must have been like to have all those ideas sitting around you.

She whistled, “His brain must have never stopped, he was so prolific!” Knowing the old man, this room would be all archives so she moved on. She backed out and went upstairs, several of the planks were rotten and she had to take the steps two or three at a time.

Straight in front of her was a closed door. Her room. “I won't go there. Not even for Sven.” She'd do anything for the tall blonde cousin she'd fallen in love with when she was eight, when he'd carved a wooden heart, put it on a velvet ribbon and tied it around her neck. She'd recently met up with him in Aarhus and nothing had changed. She still loved him, and he loved her. “We're only second cousins,” he'd joked over their breakfast aquavit. “We could get married legally in Denmark.”

Forward and onward for Sven, she thought, going to the old man's bedroom. The piles there were different, less anal, but still controlled. In one box were all the cards they'd ever made him, the letters they'd written him. There was a Valentine's Day card with a picture of her, smiling, in a neat Brownie uniform covered in badges. On it her eight-year-old idea of a poem, “Roses are red, violets are purple, no one loves anyone like I love you.” Tears spilled down her cheeks as she tried to imagine a time when she'd still been able to love him. After a few moments she moved on. She had deliberately made a dinner date with her best friend from high school, who was still a cashier at the local A & P, so she couldn't linger too long at the farm. Next, she dove into boxes containing ties, shirts, pajamas, decades of Christmas and birthday presents. She'd never missed one even while behind the Iron Curtain when the mail became so difficult. Even the brown leather-bound journal was still wrapped in tissue paper. She'd thought he would have used that, kept the millions of ideas he had for stories in it. But then the realisation hit her that he'd sent them all to her in his rare letters.

The next box revealed piles of old photos from sepia through black and white, but her eyes were streaming so heavily now she could barely see them. An aerial photographer during the war, the young father had carefully chronicled the landmarks of his new family, until the era of Instamatics, colour photographs and bitterness coloured everything. Then, defeated, he'd stopped. She'd take these for her sister-in-law, who would dutifully go through them and divide them fairly into piles, making sure they were matched to the right person. She looked around for his Nikon and lenses, but instead found a silk parachute from the war. “Oh, God, I can't believe he still had this. I always wondered where it went,” she said aloud. It

used to be in the dress-up box in the attic of one of their dozens of houses until it disappeared one day, leaving her and her girlfriends without wedding dresses, props, rooms. It had been everything to their fantasy world. This to her niece, who was still young enough to rediscover endless possibilities for it.

Another box contained all the embroidered pillow cases and table clothes her granny had made them, the coloured embroidery thread her gran used had never been vibrant, and now it was faded to a whisper. She ran her finger over the familiar patterns of birds and flowers executed in perfect cross stitch. Another box contained their school projects, Thanksgiving pilgrim's dresses and Indian head dresses, the luaus they'd all made when Hawaii became a state. Mom would love that.

The next one was different, more compact and sturdier than the rest. Letters! The top one was typed and signed Rad Bradbury, next was a stack of pink envelopes tied up in string, addressed to her father in feminine handwriting. She put that aside, knowing she would read them before handing them over to Sven. The next box, too, was more compact and sturdy. It revealed stacks of cheap, black-and-white spiral notebooks, each with a year marked on them in blue ink. “My God, this must be it. Sven had been right, he had carried on writing. Fantastic!” She took the box outside to the sun and breeze she needed to blow the cobwebs out of her head. She sat down under the poplar grove by the crick and took out the notebook lying on top. The pages wouldn't open, they seemed glued together. She tossed it aside and grabbed another one. Also glued tight, the first page revealing remnants of a spidery, blue, clearly old-fashioned, handwriting. A few words were legible, something about a chickadee feeding from his hand. The rest had all run together, a perfect blue ink wash was all that was visible in notebook after notebook. He'd used a fountain pen, she'd remembered, and she had once used the same kind of ink in an art project on washes. She lay down in the knee-high grass and sobbed. It was all lost, gone, her childhood, her history, the answers.

Of course, that one box would have been sitting under the worst leak in the roof, she thought bitterly. *And he probably put it there on purpose*.

When her sobs subsided, she fit as many boxes as she could into the Golf. Then she struggled through the high grass to the barn, opened the creaking door a crack and through the misty light saw the tractor. Eerily shrouded in cobwebs, dust and faint sunlight it

resembled the photos she'd been studying. She went over to it. There was the gas can, exactly as it had always been. When she picked it up, it sloshed. She smiled and took it to the house and started to pour it over the boxes in the living room. The thought of Sven made her pause and reminded her of another middle-aged Dane, the former student who had saved the old man's life and now had bought the farm to turn into a nature reserve in his memory.

Let it be, Katie thought calmly, and carefully closed the front door, squeezed into the small space in the car not filled with boxes and headed off down the dusty road to a rendezvous with another piece of her past.

The Rag Doll

In those days there was little time to be idle or play, but once I made a doll out of our mother's old cleaning cloths. Do you remember that doll? You called her Raggedy Ann after the dolls the other girls had then. I carefully shaped a head and tied a knot to give the appearance of a neck on a body that I gave shape to, not like my stick-thin plank. I took two buttons off my sleeping shirt, they were white and must have looked frightful on those dirty grey rags but to me they were eyes that could see me. The only ones. She didn't have clothes, never had clothes, because I was waiting to outgrow my school uniform so that I could make one for her, kept my needle and cotton to hand eager to clothe her but it never happened because when I eventually did outgrow my uniform mother gave it to you and it hung off you like clothes on a scarecrow. Do you remember old Sully's scarecrow? How he put that threadbare sport jacket on the broom stick to give it arms and make it look big? I took care of that baby, clutched her tight in my arms at night, whispering in her ear, telling her it would be okay and we stayed like that until that night he came in and took her away, ripped her from my arms, put her in your arms. “You're too big for that now,” he whispered. And then he hurt me. I remember my blood had just come and I thought that that is what it means, no more comfort for me. Now I am his. He took her place. But you were safe with Raggedy Ann for a while. Not that it mattered. You died anyway. Took your life.

The Golden Gate Bridge

She was sitting huddled over a cardboard cup of coffee in a corner of a sterile community college cafe wondering what she was doing there when a guy dressed in army fatigues walked toward her. An aging paunch hung over bell bottoms.

It was mid-year in a philosophy course on existentialism and she'd stayed away from the guys in chinos and Izods. But this one was compelling. It was clear he was intelligent, in a way that made her feel inferior. Everything he said seemed deep, experienced.

“Man this course is making me schizophrenic, but you seem to like it and I need to know why,” he muttered, his murky brown eyes squinting into hers.

“Yeah, it’s the opium,” she laughed. “But that could be the point, you know? Like, what are you supposed to think when you're hearing Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in the same sentence? Sanity? I don't think so.”

“Oh, wow, far out.” His stringy greyish hair bobbed up and down with his head, held together by a woven, coloured band tied at the back.

Did his mouth turn up slightly? His eyes loose some of the dullness? His unshaven face was pale and spooked. He screamed shell-shocked. The Vietnam war did that to you. And he was a vet. Still wore the camouflage jacket. She knew she should stay away, but at the next class the scene repeated. She in her corner, he slouched over and huddled into a chair next to her. As they sipped the paper-flavoured coffee, she asked him about his time in 'Nam. He'd been there, he said. Nothing more. Another characteristic of vets. They couldn't talk about it.

As the weeks passed, they talked more about the paradox of studying *Being and Nothingness* and *The Sickness Unto Death*. One night she confessed that she couldn't get the connection.

“Listen Susan, you're not really missing it, in fact you're right on,” he laughed dryly. “The point is that there is no point to life. There's no connection except that they were two of the first existentialists and they approached the same point from polar opposite sides. It's like going to the South and North poles from the equator. Same starting point. Opposite poles, or

in this case conclusions."

"Yeah, okay, I get it, but wrap up what Sartre says in one good succinct sentence!" she said, echoing a technique she'd learnt from a history teacher.

"They believed that life was desperate, that there is no internal sense so we have to make our own." He was getting slightly animated now, but he was starting to freak her out. "Sartre said that your actions are all that matters and Kierkegaard said that you just have to take a giant leap of faith into God's waiting embrace." He scoffed as he said that, but she swore to read more.

As the semester continued their debates heated up, occasionally attracting the chinos and pinstripes in the class. But they always ended the same, with him always falling into nothingness and her into God's arms. His gloom deepened as they delved into the belly of the beast. She tried to change the subject, but they had nothing else to talk about. Politics was out. That would lead to the war. So would any discussion of his life. She was too embarrassed to reveal hers.

She lived in a colourless condominium with her mother and her Mormon stepfather, worked as a salesgirl at an up-market boutique in Kalamazoo's first shopping mall. She modeled purple mini skirts and suede vests over mini-dresses and told middle-aged women they wouldn't look good in them. The owner hated her, but what could he do? People liked honesty. She was the top sales girl.

Susan was tall and anorexic before its time. She took over-the-counter amphetamines to control her bird-like appetite. After work, she donned blue jeans and flowing Indian-print tops. Her blonde hair was long and straight, Hang-ten style. She craved stimulation and had taken the philosophy course because Sartre had something to do with beatniks and she'd recently emerged from a period of wearing nothing but black polo necks and stretch pants.

Finally, though, they left philosophy behind and broached their personal lives. They discovered that they both had relatives in Ann Arbor so he offered to give her a ride to her brother's place the following Sunday. During the drive he talked and joked, then dropped her at her brother's apartment and picked her up that night. As they drove home through the black, fluorescent-lit night, the 'W' on the 'NI West' sign kept jumping out and beckoning to her. She was stoned, it was true, but still she knew that she needed to keep on going. The

joint she'd shared with her brother and his girlfriend must have given her some kind of courage, so she blurted out, “Why don’t we just keep on going west to California?”

He jumped at it, albeit with objections about money and jobs, friends and family. But she kept eating away at them and by the time he had dropped her off at the little cottage she shared with a friend they had made a pact to leave that night. She called her roommate and said goodbye, packed a knapsack and left.

He picked her up in the blood-coloured VW bug with a body so eaten away by rust that it looked like old lace. She had $80 and he had some credit cards. They went in the heavy layers of winter clothes they were wearing on the trip to Ann Arbor. Contrary to what she'd expected after his light-heartedness that morning, he was engulfed in silent gloom.

Fortunately the car radio worked so she sang along to Cat Stevens, James Taylor and the Rolling Stones, rejoicing like a bird freed from a life of scratching against tin. She was on the road! When the Grateful Dead came on singing 'Truckin' she freaked out, dancing in the car, before the days of seat belts.

By the third day it began to feel real. She was going to California! The closer they got the more her spirits rose and the more his seemed to drop. He spent every break in long conversations on stainless steel and plastic pay phones. Her questions about him, his feelings and anything personal were ignored. That morning, she called her boss and made some excuse about a sick aunt. She felt bad about letting him down after he'd fought to keep her against the owner's will, but she convinced herself that it was true because she had an aunt who was crippled by polio and lived in California. She also called her mother, but that was a mistake.

“Oh, Susie, don’t tell me you’ve become one of those 'Jesus freaks,'” it was the worst the life-long Episcopalian could come up with. As though her mom didn't know that The Church was part of what she had to get away from. It had been her whole life; church, Sunday school, church choir, practices, pot luck suppers, confirmation lessons, youth group, summer camp. And not going didn't help because there was always the guilt just waiting to stalk her. “Look, mom, I’m out of change. I have to hang up,” she mumbled, surprised that even now her mother could reach across a thousand miles of phone lines and knot her up.

After very little debate and a cursory look at a map, they had decided that the best way

to go West was to go South first. That decision turned out to be another mistake. At first eating hominy grits and beet greens in shiny glass-and-steel Indiana diners seemed exotic. Kentucky and Tennessee were beautifully green and not without charm; restaurants were homey and not unwelcoming. But when they reached Alabama they couldn't even get a glass of water in a restaurant.

"We don't serve no hippies here and we'll be thanking y'all to see your way out right soon," the wide-bottomed waitress drawled.

When the car broke down, the mechanic at the garage wasn't as diplomatic. "Get the hell out of here you hippie scum," he spat.

Tired, hungry, and not a little concerned about the muffler they'd wired to the chassis themselves, they crossed the Mississippi River. They were out West, where millions of Americans had gone before them to breath free. There were other harrowing stories on that trip, but the grand finale came during a night of recreational drug use in a cheap motel at the Grand Canyon. The day before Susan had walked down to the bottom of the canyon, spent the night in a backpacker's hut and walked up with the most painful calves she'd ever had. The only thing she'd had to eat or drink was a beer, thrust at her by a pair of Germans carrying a case of Budweiser. "All you need is beer; vitamin B," one called over his shoulder.

When she returned to the salmon-coloured motel with the flaking paint and broken ice machine, her fellow traveller greeted her with some "windowpane" acid. She took it, another mistake. She tried to watch the black-and-white waves on the cheap TV while Roger paced, but his depressed vibes settled in her pores. He finally sat down with his greasy head in his stubby hands and blurted out that he wasn't interested in going to California. He wasn't interested in checking out the scene in Haight Ashbury that by now was either a centre for caring hippies looking after everyone else, or a drug infested den of iniquity, depending on which magazine you read. Susan was looking for the spirit of love and flower power, free soup kitchens and clinics, people fighting to preserve trees and parks. The Dead hung out there, e.e. cummings gave spontaneous street readings there. She couldn't wait to get there.

"Look, I don't want to bum you out or anything, but I'm going to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge," he muttered.

"You're going to what?"

“Kill myself. Commit suicide.”

She was speechless, her drug-drenched brain could come up with nothing to say. Then her mother's words came out of her mouth. “But suicide is a sin! Whatever has gotten into you? Why you need your head examined!”

All night she sat huddled on the stained, thread-bare carpet in the corner and wept. As she replayed every conversation they had ever had she realised that the writing had been on the wall all along. He was depressed and just eccentric enough to think that jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge was cool. Throwing himself into nothingness. Taking the giant leap.

By morning she had decided to carry on with him, telling herself he'd had a bad trip, and as the sun rose, glittering gold against the rosy striated canyon, they silently sat in their corners of the car and headed West. When they reached San Francisco, Roger negotiated his way through the narrow streets still home to street cars to the foot of the bridge. Seeing those two miles of glowing stainless steel connecting the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay should have made her proud. Every American school child learnt that in its day it was the longest. She only felt anxious. Tried to talk to him about Kierkegaard and hope and love and therapy and millions of words flew out of her mouth.

He sat rigid and expressionless. She held her breath when he got out of the car but couldn't move. He stood there for a life time. Then he walked over to a shiny red phone booth. After a long conversation he got back in the car and turned on the ignition. Eventually, he stopped the car in a taxi rank at the airport. Anyone observing them would have seen a burnt-out, older vet handing over a credit card and keys to what looked like a model.

No one could see that he'd just gotten off the phone to his wife, who had said something nice to him.

Jack Daniel's to the Rescue

Her life changed dramatically that night she bunked her Economics class. Brad tried to convince her that the grad school tutorial was insignificant weighed up against a cocktail party attended by the nation's most powerful journalists. "For heaven's sake, you're a reporter," he cajoled. "It's a bloody crime that you gave it up to come here."

"I'm failing Economics, I need this," Laura said flatly. "I can't understand a word he's saying because of the accent. I was one of those who fought for this tut."

"There'll be free food and drinks."

"Oh? Okay," she said brightly after a moment's pause. Anything to get out of dormitory food. "But I don't know why you call me a journalist. I wrote obituaries for two years."

"Yes, and you were probably the youngest reporter to ever have a column," he responded. They'd been through this before. Her editor had passed her by for what she considered a 'real' reporting job covering a local town hall. And so she had quit and moved to Boston. She chose what they not so affectionately called "the lecherous school of flaws & duplicity" because it required only one year of Economics. Now she was not only failing it but studying how best to blow up her beloved Moscow using a bomb damage calculator issued at the first class of what they called "bombs and missiles".

So she slipped into her only adult clothes, a rather glamorous turquoise silk dress with white polka dots that she wore with penny loafers. She didn't have makeup, or perfume. But she was striking, with a full-moon face, high cheekbones and sleek, black hair that framed her face like curtains a window.

Brad picked her up in a red Chevrolet Galaxy of the sort that was popular two decades earlier. On the short ride there he briefed her on the people they were going to meet at the annual convention of newspaper editors and publishers and gave her another pep talk.

"First of all, they need women. Second, they need Russian speakers. The old-timers will hate that you went to an Ivy League school, but the editor in chief knows he needs someone like you. Absolutely no one speaks Russian and has journalistic experience."

“I was a journalist for about a minute,” she said.

“Make yourself sound experienced, and I promise you someone will be interested.”

“I'm just a former hippie who wanted to read *War and Peace* in the original,” she told anyone who was listening. But when they asked her why she had chosen a right-wing graduate school, the only thing she could say was that the Economics requirements were minimal.

When she and Brad arrived at the Hilton Hotel they walked through a cavernous foyer at least three stories high, draped in welcoming banners. She entered a roomful of men in dark suits, holding drinks and cigarettes in days when you could still smoke and drink in public. She looked around for other women to talk to, but there weren't any. What she didn't know then was that there weren't many in the newsroom either. Brad fit in perfectly in that world of pin stripes and pot bellies. He wordlessly steered her straight to a good looking, in a greyish sort of way, older guy.

They chatted about the Soviet Union in general, the Brezhnev-era torpor, the lack of good newspaper coverage of the life and people.

“It seems like there's nothing behind the Iron Curtain,” she said. “No people, they don't have a life. There's just politics.”

He agreed and asked her about herself. She told him that she was a former journalist, and she told him the truth. She explained that she was struggling to come to grips with Soviet studies in one of the most conservative institutions in America.

“I've traded Pushkin and Tolstoy for a bomb damage calculator. Tell me about y...” she started when Brad knocked her arm, spilling Jack Daniel's down that silk dress and onto a loafer-clad foot. As they bent over to wipe it up he whispered that the man was the Editor in Chief of the U.S.'s largest news agency. She stood up saying, “I'm going to cover the Soviet Union and I’m either going to do it for you or the competition!”

He gave her his card and eighteen months later she was a Moscow correspondent.

Asbestos and Atomic Bombs

My father liked to be ahead of the pack.

No, actually, he wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere near a species that ran in packs.

My father was eccentric. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* that is a person of unconventional or slightly strange views and behaviour. I'm not sure that quite does him justice, although he certainly was all of those things.

He's too damn smart for his own good is what my mother would have said. Yes, that might have been it, really, I mean how many Master's degrees? A PhD.

I was a baby boomer, born in the Fifties, an era when Americans were generally still viewed as the good guys. We had helped in the war, weren't the bad guys yet. Well no one was talking about that yet. No one except my father.

The war. That was the first problem. He was an aerial photographer and had photographed Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped. When he got back, he went to Oxford and started the first anti-atomic bomb club. They say he was never the same, but I don't know. That was before my day. You could be anything then, but not anti-American. Anyway, his views followed him home and sat at the core of the growing landslide of eccentric ideas.

He was superintendent of the school I went to when I was little. In those days his diatribes were manageable. He was passionate about recycling and made the teachers put their papers and styrofoam coffee cups in separate bins. Their resentment seeped through the walls and into the classroom I was in, though, became what nourished me. “What, new notebook? Don't you have a recycled one?” “Surely you're not going to throw your milk carton away? Don't you want to recycle it?”

Then he discovered that the house we lived in, the one that belonged to the school and was given rent-free to the superintendent, he discovered that it was a death trap. Aluminium, lead paint, asbestos, fiberglass, it was everywhere. We were all supposed to pack up and go stay with friends until they could do something about it, but that never happened, I'm not sure why. I was lying on my bed one day, all packed and ready to go to my friend's house when these guys in grey suits came in. It was really odd, because they didn't knock or even greet

me. They came in with a ladder and went up into the attic. They were checking out the pretty pink roof insulation. It was fibre glass. Then a team of guys came and took it out, another team repainted and life settled back down. For a while.

Not long after that he bought a place, it was our first place because we had been moving every year and renting. Dives. We were poor white trash from that point of view. So, he bought a farm one day. Four hundred and eighty acres of beautiful pine forests, orchards, fields, streams, berry patches. The problem was the house. It was falling down. Holes in the roof, stuff like that. And the facilities. No water, sewage. He thought we could all live in an equally rotten one-room trailer while he fixed it up. My mom didn't agree. She took my sister and left me and my brother. Eventually she came back and got me, but my dad and brother were never the same after that. Nor was I for that matter.

I remember when I first dated. I don't know how he found out, but if I went to the guy's house, he'd be out there in his old Studebaker. Stalked me. Freaked me out.

When I graduated from high school, the other kids were getting sets of luggage and cool stuff like that, but what did I get? *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. That's right, I got to celebrate finishing school with a book detailing the systematic annihilation of the American Indians right up to the final genocide of the Lakota. His word, genocide, the nutter, you didn't say shit like that then. I couldn't read it. I guess there was too much pain around me to seek out more. I wanted my heart to mend. No chance of that, though.

My father liked to be the wet blanket. The rain on the parade.

When I graduated from an Ivy League women's college with a BA in Russian and History, magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa he pitched up again. Sorry to brag, but it's important to this story.

“That's good, Susie.” Susie! I'd been called that from birth by my mother who said I was too fat to be a Katherine. Katherines were elegant. She knew that. High school and I was 5'6” and 100 pounds. I would have been anorexic if I'd known about it, instead I did over the counter diet pills, amphetamines, to keep my stomach flat. No feminine bulges for me. No, anyway, I was tired of the schizophrenia and pleaded with my family to call me by my real name, mostly they tried to comply. He didn't.

“You can get a good job as a legal secretary now, Susie. You were always such a good typist.”

Secretary! My history lecturer thought I should follow in her footsteps and apply to Harvard to do a Ph.D. in Russian History. I should have followed her advice, but I didn't.

“Oh, honey, you're not a Communist are you?” was my mother's comment. Fair enough, I guess, her life had been ruined by communism. Sorry for the detour, but this is relevant. You see, our lives were ruined by communism. My dad was hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee and found guilty. Yes, my father who didn't subscribe to any political theory was black balled for believing that atomic bombs and genocide were bad and recycling was good. The only time he could get a proper job was when four or five academics went on sabbatical. Who else could replace all five of them? No one. Only my father. So we moved every year until he bought that farm and my mom left. Then when the local universities inevitably fired him he became a substitute postal carrier. That's when he got really weird, paranoid and shit. Became a hermit. Wouldn't leave the house because he thought someone was sitting on the hill across from his door with a rifle, ready to blow his brains out.

My dad was an American tragedy. In one act.

The Beavers

In the end it was the beavers that got him. It wasn't as much the beaver fever, though, as the heartache.

He had spent the last three decades of his life looking after them, even though they had been as unfaithful as his wife, blind to his special brand of devotion and unmoved by his care. He had looked after the beavers better than he had his own children. And the birds, too. He had bought food for them, only the best quality seeds, but had refused to pay child support to the wife who had left him. Since that day three decades ago he had stuck to his 480-acre farm of pine trees, birch, crab apples, wild strawberries and tangles of blackberries, raspberries, thimbleberries. The birds, beavers and wolves were his family thereafter. He wasn't the kind of guy who would say his strawberries and blackberries tasted better than the ones in the shops that had sprung up all over the old mining town, but the few people who visited him did. He loved every inch of that farm and a single tear had run down his thinning grey stubble when the beavers felled the huge willow tree he had planted fifteen years earlier in honour of his daughter's acceptance into an Ivy League school he had attended. Why, they had even taken the maple tree she had sat in with her books and heart ache after her mother left.

Not a word passed his lips when the beaver family built their dam in his stream, turning it into a crick that struggled its way around every stone and pebble in its path. His closest neighbour two miles down the rutted dirt road had felt differently, but Chris was unmovable. He had even given up the Scandinavian tradition of diving into the icy waters of the stream after roasting in the sauna, although he still rolled in the snow during the winters that could last up to nine months in the Midwestern area populated by Scandinavian immigrants. And so the beavers took over. It was the big beaver, named Jan after his son that had inadvertently caused it all, even though it had been the sole member of the old man's family for about ten years. Chris had taken him into his tumbledown farm house, where the rodent filled the last piece that was left in his heart after it had been kicked out of the lodge as a two-year-old kit.

The beaver had reciprocated the devotion, lurching along behind Chris through the detritus of every milk carton, egg carton or newspaper the man had bought in the last thirty

years. Sometimes he would even sit on Chris's bony lap when he sat down to read, an activity that could turn into a two-day long marathon. They would sit there reading books and eating apples until the old man's intellect was satisfied and they went outside again. Sometimes the old beaver would go out to feed on some young willows a younger Chris had planted near the house. Jan was totally devoted to Chris in a way that only a beaver could. They were inseparable.

Things started to fall apart about three years ago. One of the younger beavers had gotten too eager and felled a huge poplar in less than half an hour, causing it to fall uncontrollably onto Jan, who was underwater repairing the lodge. The tree trapped the old beaver and he would have died a gruesome death before it ended with asphyxiation if the tragedy being played out had not been heard from a hundred yards away, where Chris was planting poplars he got free from the 4-H. When he heard the slap of a heavy weight against water, he did not wait for the tree to fall over the dam before running to see whether any of them were hurt. His gait was still strong and straight, but he struggled to get his arms out of his threadbare, shiny jacket with the skinny lapels and no discernible colour. He had jumped into the icy water, hindered by his baggy trousers held up by suspenders, just in time to see Jan taking his last breaths. It could have been the love, but somehow he mustered up incredible strength for a seventy-eight year old, and he had no difficulty pulling the tree off the beaver and dragging its forty kilos of fat, fur and scales to the bank so it could fill its lungs with air. The beaver had been down for fifteen minutes and he wouldn't have survived without the last burst of activity and heroism the old man ever made.

After that day, Chris never quite enjoyed the clear-headed health again. When he first began to suffer nausea and vomiting, he told himself he'd picked up a bug. He refused to believe he could have picked up something in the water he fetched from above the beaver dam, he was fastidious about boiling that water and adding bleach to kill the amoeba excreted by beavers. He preferred to believe he had picked up a bug from the bloody cashier at the A & P. She'd sneezed while ringing up his meager shopping. He'd not been to a doctor since the polio epidemic of his youth, and he was not going to start now. He'd seen how the medical system had killed off his pa and believed he had decades ahead of him.

As the symptoms progressed and the illness took root he knew he had contracted

beaver fever the day he had dived into the crick to rescue Jan, who had long since died. He was surprised it had hit him so long after the contact with contaminated water, and he was angry. Hadn't he saved them when the farmers were starving them out, planting the doggone conifers, wrapping the base of the tree trunks with wire so the beavers couldn't get to them? Why, some even went so far as to spread poison on the base of the trees near the streams and cricks. He had celebrated when the Catholic Church had banned the eating of beaver on Friday because, in misguided wisdom, they had taken the scaly tales for fish. And now this. Betrayal.

Chris couldn't stay cross, though, because he knew he would be better in no time, the fever would pass quickly, as would the nausea—although the headaches and the blasted listing to the left were getting worse. For a while he could still get to the library for his beloved books, which for years they had been getting from neighbouring libraries to supply his voracious appetite. He could still pick up the supplies for his infamous grape juice chili, and more importantly food for the chickadees and robins who had stopped migrating before the harsh winter settled on the state because Chris looked after them better than a winter in the south. He had been taming every form of fauna since he'd lived on the farm, possibly to make up for losing his wife and children when he'd moved there.

Then, the list hindered him from driving, killing off his job as a substitute postman; possibly the most educated one the country had ever seen. His food and library runs ended, taking with it the last contact with his species. He missed the visits to the library and bank, and the librarian and teller missed him. The librarian thought it strange that his books were overdue as he was the only long-time user who had never incurred a fine, but she had done nothing about it. The teller, too, thought it odd that he hadn't been in, but didn't give it more than a passing thought. Even the cashier at the A & P had missed him. Chris took to reading the *Icelandic Saga*, the only book he owned, for the umpteenth time. He missed chatting to the farmers when he delivered their mail, hearing the news of planting and harvesting, the birth and death of livestock. He had the ability to talk endlessly to anyone he encountered and he wasn't the only lonely old man in the area. But no one did anything. Their lives went on without him, although they would all tell you how much they loved the eccentric old coot.

One day he was stumbling to the outhouse during a blizzard. He was struggling as he

hadn't cleared the path. Nothing would possess him to do his business anywhere else, though. He fell into a waist-high snowdrift. On his left, of course. He lay there nearly twenty-four hours before one of his former students came to town to see him. He parked his car on the Canal Road and put on snowshoes to travel the two miles to his mentor's farm house. He was laden with goodies, excited to treat the old codger who had lit a fire for geology under him decades earlier. No one answered his loud knocks on the door, so he called out to him. The door was partially opened so he went inside. What he saw in that house changed his attitude about bachelorhood. The disarray that greeted him was clearly that of a man who had lost his ability to cope alone. He went back outside calling the old man's name and saw what looked like a human form under six inches of snow that had fallen relentlessly on him. By the time he was discovered Chris was unconscious and suffering from hypothermia. He was close to death. Tears streamed down the younger man's face as he lovingly picked up his mentor and took him into the house, laid him on the sofa, covered him in blankets and stoked up the fire. Seeing the phone had been disconnected he draped the old man over his shoulder, donned his snowshoes and ran as fast as he could go down the road to his car.

When Chris came around in the hospital, he was incoherent and raving about murderous hunters and ungrateful beavers. The student had left long ago, leaving behind the paper bag of goodies and a long note.

“Can I trust you?” Chris asked the nurse who for several days had been attempting to look after him, talking to him as she shaved the sparse grey stubble on his withered face. For some reason Chris had felt safe with her immediately, possibly because he was vulnerable for the first time since he had lost his family and had to trust someone, but probably because the nurse bore the same name as his mother.

“Of course, I'm here to help you,” Katrina said. “It's good to hear your voice. I wasn't sure whether the beavers had stolen that too.”

“I've got a plan for dealing with the beavers who did this to me,” he said in a voice rasping with neglect, leaning towards her conspiratorially.

“And how are you going to do that now when you can't even shave yourself?” she asked in her singsong Scandinavian English as she scraped the razor across the hollows between his high, still handsome, cheekbones.

“Give me the blasted razor,” he said, angry at his new impotence and the reminder that he couldn't trust anyone.

“Chris, you've got to get the numbers for your children so that we can alert them to your illness,” she pleaded. And then she had an idea. “I bet they could go out to the farm with you and help you take on the beavers!”

“Nothing wrong with me,” he responded. “Just need to strengthen my left side, that's all. Don't know what happened to it.” He saw the worry and compassion flicker across her face before the professional mask returned and pledged not to have to see that on a face ever again.

She called the doctor, who gave him the news about the advanced, inoperable brain tumour. The doctor gave him weeks.

“Doggone it, you're full of nonsense! You're trying to do the same to me as you did to Pa,” he shouted, quickly regaining the use of his voice. “He went to the hospital well and came out dead and I'm blasted if you're going to do the same to me.” He struggled to get out of the bed, getting wrapped up in the white sheet and unable to put his legs on the ground, he slumped to the floor.

“Chris, you have cancer and you have to let us call your children,” Katrina crooned.

“It's the beavers,” he whispered.

That night he searched and searched in what was left of his memory but the numbers were gone. Like the wife, the children, the jobs, the friends, the houses, like everything else he had treasured, the numbers were gone. The chance to say goodbye to his children was gone.

Later, in the disturbing quietness of a hospital night filled with squeaky soft-soled shoes and whispers filled with impending doom, Chris writhed and struggled, alone for the last time, a look of betrayal across his waxen face.

Going Back

I visited the farm today. That farm where everything happened, where everything and nothing happened, the place that stood silently by as my life was changed.

I was scared to go back, resisted going back. For years I didn't go back, even when he died I went to that town but I didn't go to that place, to that farm where everything changed. It's funny how it was stripped of all that, laid bare. The farm was laid bare it was so... so inconsequential. Like an old sepia postcard with the heart torn out.

I looked for the tree, that ancient maple tree that sheltered me. But I couldn't find it. There was no tree, there were no planks to hold me, give me a place where I could just be, where no one could reach me. That tree where I lived my life with nothing but it and library books to comfort me. I thought it would be there forever, that its majesty was testimony to resilience, to the ability to adapt, to change, to carry on and be despite everything.

I would lie there in the summer and daydream. Listen to the sound of leaves rustling in the breeze, feel the patterns of sunlight that played on my face as the leaves were touched by the wind. Feel the sunlight skip and dance on my face, shifting through light into shadow. Listen to the rustling, the murmuring, the whispering in my ear, listen to that tree as it sang to me. Even the tune changed when autumn came. The colours coated the leaves like wax, and as the moisture slowly dripped away they rustled, and then crackled, and then hoarse, they mixed with the ones still free and the rich deep timbre spoke to me.

My heart ached, even then, when just before the leaves fell it was so rich and then laid so bare. Naked. I remember sitting there with the encyclopaedia trying to find the words, the precise word for each colour because they all talked about the leaves turning red, orange, yellow, brown and falling down. Because those were the only colours in the crayon box they became the only colours in our minds. But when you're in the tree, clothed by the leaves of the tree, you see, you really see that each and every leaf is different. Which one is red, I thought, is it this one or that one? Or the other one? No, none of them was simply red. They were magenta and burgundy, crimson and fuchsia, and I wanted to know which one, precisely which name fit each leaf.

I know now that I needed the words for what was happening to me.

But now, now there is no tree. Did that tree die with me? Was it there the next day? Why can't I remember? Did I ever go back to that tree, climb up the ladder, rip my pants on that nail that stuck out, cut my hand, suck the blood? Did I crawl up in the branches of that tree, let it put its arms around me, comfort me? Or was I beyond that now, beyond the reach of a loving tree?

Part 2: Foreign Lands

Love in the Cold War

Laura was writing on her cheap plastic typewriter, shiny still and new. She was banging out words attesting to a love story she'd denied too long. Rain slid in sheets down the windows, a cold film whose millions of point were visible, as happens when snow is a one degree drop away. Gregorian chants flowed around her, encasing her in a cocoon.

Like a cat retching up a fur ball, she told the story of her encounter with Yuri in spasmodic jerks. She was roller skating along the Moscow River, her long black hair flying like a kite above her head. She was looking up at it and laughing when her front rollers went into a hole and she went sprawling, landing at two sneakered feet. Two arms reached down to her, and two hands grasped hers and lifted her up. The voice said the usual things, “Can I help you?” “Are you okay?” But when her eyes met his, she saw a laughing solicitude in them that opened up a whole new world. He propelled her to a park bench.

The phone rang shrilly, breaking the trance. Irritably, she said “hello”.

“Laura, eta ya.”

It's me. With those words her world regained shape and form, like patterns in a kaleidoscope, everything clicked back into place. The anxiety, guilt and exhaustion from months of sleepless nights slipped away.

“Yuri. Thank the Lord. Where are you?”

“G-g-going home,” he stuttered. “Now.” The 28-year-old man on the other end of the line could barely get the three-syllable Russian word out.

“Yuri, what is it?” The relief was replaced immediately with a new tension.

“Ciao,” he said in Italian, avoiding the four-syllable Russian goodbye. The phone went dead.

He's alive, thank God he's alive, she thought, but the anxiety was growing. She grabbed her hand bag and keys and ran to the battered old red Niva. She waved at the KGB standing guard in his hut as she exited the compound, idly wondering if he knew what was happening. Yuri had on occasion visited her flat and would be on the KGB's radar.

Not yet 5pm but already dark, the main roads were clogged with the rush-hour traffic that plagued this city like any other. Images and emotions from the months since Yuri's disappearance came and went. Day after day of working around the clock in a vain attempt to forget him, nights when sleep never came. Only one thing remained constant. A remnant from her childhood. Every day at dusk she slipped out of the office and wandered the streets, searching. Not for Yuri, he wasn't going to reappear on a Moscow street corner. It was an old habit, when her life was fractured she took to the darkening streets, peering through windows for glimpses of families gathered in warm puddles of yellow light. She knew they wouldn't materialise in this post-Stalinist Moscow of high rises and concrete, but longing took her always to the streets. She walked until her marrow froze inside her sheepskin layers. Recently, unable to bear the isolation from Yuri's world any longer, she had climbed seventeen flights of stairs reeking of cooked cabbage and knocked on a door.

A painfully thin man with a beaked nose had opened it, his skeleton discernible through his quilted jacket.

“Laura,” he said, kissing her on alternate cheeks three times. “At last you've come.”

“Vanya, good to see you,” she said. “Forgive me for staying away so long, but you know that if I'm the cause of Yuri's disappearance I couldn't put you in jeopardy. And forgive me for coming now, but I'm desperate.”

“No, Laura, it is right that you are here,” he reassured her. “We have wanted to speak with you, but of course we couldn't call.”

“What do you know?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said a young Scandinavian woman who introduced herself as Elizabeta. “That's why we are here now, we are trying to decide what to do.”

“He hasn't been arrested, we'd know that,” Vanya said, handing her a tumbler full of the Stolichnaya Vodka she had brought. “Nozdrovya.”

“Thank God for that, but what does Anna think? Her instincts are always good.”

The dim light from a single lamp in the drab, yellowing room did nothing to counter the darkness.

“Anna fears he was murdered,” Vanya said finally.

“Murdered,” she whispered. “Why?” Like Boris, she thought, but his body was left in full view, where they'd last seen him, in the exact spot where he'd slipped her the classified documents.

“... and we've been everywhere else, every police station, hospital,” Vanya was saying. “Laura, forgive me, but we need to ask you,” Vanya continued. “When did you last see him? What was the last story he gave you?”

Laura withdrew into herself and back out on to the icy streets, wandering, running from the cold searching, for warmth. Forgiveness.

After Boris's death she refused to be the dissidents' correspondent, the one who told the world of every evil move the KGB made on dissidents.

“I told Yuri no more stories, no more friendship,” she whispered. “I couldn't risk that again, not with Yuri.” Her smooth, round face cracked as she relived the pain of putting down the phone every time he called.

“But he kept calling, you know how he is. I hung up on him time after time. Then one day he stepped out in front of my car, in front of the militsia guard outside my compound, in the middle of Kutuzovsky Prospekt. I nearly ran him over. That was the last time...”

The room was silent.

“Was it the Sakharov story?” Vanya asked eventually. “Had Yuri given you that?”

“Yes, the letter from the Gulag. I tried so hard to tell him I wouldn't take any more letters. 'I'm not interested in your fucking dissident friends' I told him.'” Tears were streaming down her cheeks now. “Then he gave me the letter from Sakharov. He was risking his life to call for a ban on nuclear weapons. What could I do?”

“Laura, you had to get that news to the world,” Vanya said, holding the curtain of straight black hair away from her face and staring into her eyes. “No one blames you.”

“'We have given up jobs and comfort so the world will know the truth. We are prepared to give our lives.' Those were Yuri's last words to me.”

The letter from Sakharov, the Soviet Union's most famous dissident, gave the scientific rationale for ending the arms race. Its appearance on the front pages of newspapers across the globe was a blow the Kremlin couldn't ignore, but uncharacteristically, the Soviet press and television were silent. There were no vituperative attacks on the Western media for lies and hypocrisy. They had ignored it. Ominously. Publicly. But Yuri went out in search of bread that day and never came back.

“What is to be done?” Laura asked. “You know that anything I do could make it worse, I have to pretend I don't know him. Yuri's name isn't known in the West, it wouldn't help to write a story. It could make it worse for him. Wherever he is.”

She tossed her head back and drained the vodka and told them of her plan to take the case up at the American embassy, to get Yuri on the official dissident list so the US ambassador would have to demand information on his whereabouts.

“No, no Laura, not yet, there is no coming back from that. That means he would even lose his job as a janitor. Then where would he and Anna be? They would have nothing. Don't you have a friend there you can talk to first? Quietly? Find out where he is?”

“There is someone who owes me a favour, but I think he's CIA.”

“Yes, good, perfect. Fight KGB with CIA,” Vanya said. “See him. It's time.”

“You'll hear from me the second I know anything,” Laura said, buttoning her calf-length sheepskin coat.

She drove to an old area of Moscow off the Ring road where elite artists lived. There, she wandered gazing into grand 19th century apartment buildings before making her way to a more modest block of apartments and knocked on the door.

Christine and her boyfriend Seryozha kissed her warmly and settled her into a deep leather chair with a tall glass of vodka. The British correspondent's love affair with the Russian pianist had continually brought her into contact with mocking, disdainful KGB agents whose only job was to break them apart. But they had survived it for two years and now could even laugh about the crude attempts to humiliate and frighten them.

“Any news of Yuri?” the pianist asked. She shook her head.

The couple convinced her that Yuri was at least alive, if not safe.

“If the KGB wanted him dead it would be to scare other dissidents away from you,” Seryozha said. “It would be very public.”

It was a theory she could easily believe now, amongst friends. But alone in the night her imagination rampaged down pages of spy stories.

She told them of the plan to go to the US diplomat.

“Ah, the CIA agent,” Christine mused. “The one you gave Boris's story to.”

“Yeah. He owes me.”

“Good. Pit CIA against KGB. That is the only fair fight,” Seryozha said, echoing Vanya's words.

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Boris and Yuri had been inseparable as privileged children whose families spent summers in neighbouring dachas at Peredelkino, the writer's colony outside Moscow. They ran wild in the forests of birch trees, taught themselves to swim in the rivers, eagerly shared books of poetry in a tree house of dreams. Then Yuri's father disappeared and mother and son were stripped of all privileges. After that, an ideological chasm rent the friends apart. Boris remained one of Soviet communism's few true believers, a loyal member of the Communist Party whose childhood love of flying took him to a top position in the Ministry of Civil Aviation. Yuri moved into the circle of dissident writers that his father had befriended before his disappearance.

Yuri spoke about his childhood friend often and lovingly, but always with a sense of loss. Both knew that Boris couldn't risk crossing the political chasm between them.

One September day Laura and Yuri were walking along the Moscow River when a man came up to Yuri and kissed and greeted him warmly. Yuri introduced him as Boris.

“Oh, Boris, I'm so happy to meet you,” Laura enthused, “I've heard so much about you from this man. He still loves you, you know? What brings you ...”

Something in Boris's face stopped her in mid-sentence. He wasted no time in telling her that he could no longer support the party line.

“It's the Korean airliner,” he said. “The one that strayed over Siberian airspace?”

“Yes, yes,” Laura said. “They're blaming it on the CIA now, saying it was on a spying mission.”

Yuri looked puzzled so Laura quickly filled him in on the sketchy details. A few days earlier the Soviets had fired a missile at a Korean passenger plane that was slightly off course over Kamchatka Peninsula, killing all 267 people aboard. Initially, the Kremlin remained silent on the incident. The only news came from Western media reporting that the plane had disappeared.

Then the Soviet press announced they had shot down a Korean airliner that was on a spying mission for the United States.

“I was confused at first,” Boris said. “This has never happened before. Then I became suspicious. This plane was only slightly off course, it was full of innocent passengers. What have they done? So I used my security clearance to access the transcripts between the pilot and Soviet air command.”

The document confirmed his suspicion that the general in charge had not issued a warning, Boris told them. He had not even advised the pilot that his aircraft had strayed into Soviet airspace. He had simply ordered that a missile be fired at a passenger plane.

“He killed 267 innocent people just like that,” Boris snapped his fingers. “And the Kremlin blamed the Americans.”

“What other dirty tricks have they blamed on your government?” Boris asked Laura in anguish.

The documents also reported that the Soviets had retrieved the black box that would prove what happened, but the leadership had lied about that, too, saying it wasn't found, so that international civil aviation authorities had to intervene to search for the box that contained the recording of the pilot's communications with ground control. The incident had spiralled out of control. Boris was in too deep for his conscience and decided to cross the line, to join the dissidents. He wanted the world to know how rotten the present government was, and he trusted his childhood friend to know how best to do that.

“Please, Laura, take these and get the truth out,” Boris said, handing her a dirty manila

envelope crammed with papers.

“What will you do now, Boris? Where will you go? You know what this could mean,” Yuri cried out to his friend's departing back. “I'll see you soon.”

The envelope was crammed full of photos of the communication transcript. As Boris said, they were blank. Only pictures of the computer print out that logged the position of the aircraft at certain times. Only experts would be able to ascertain from that whether the plane had strayed into Soviet airspace. There were no warnings, no communication whatsoever.

The pages were blank. Laura and Yuri were stunned into silence.

Then he said, “Get out with these now, Laura, you aren't safe.”

“Yes, yes, Yuri, take care. And stay away from Boris for now!”

Laura took the documents to an embassy official she suspected of being CIA. He whistled appreciatively and shook his head in wonder. He quickly photographed them and handed them back. “Get out with these, now,” he said, echoing Yuri's words. Laura consulted with her bureau chief, who telexed London to book Laura on the next British Airways flight to London. When she arrived, the company's defense correspondent was at Heathrow Airport to greet her. An hour, later she was sitting in a hotel bar, translating the few words on the documents for him. He, too, just whistled and shook his head and then went to the pay phone to arranging interviews with his defense sources.

The next morning they made the rounds of the embassies. Everyone agreed that the documents appeared to be legitimate. With a heavy heart, Laura filed the story along with pictures of the transcript in Russian and translated into English. They appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world, translated into dozens of languages. She celebrated with her ecstatic colleagues, but no amount of champagne could melt the lump of anxiety in her stomach. That there would be consequences, she had no doubt. Her Russian history teacher's favourite phrase played like a broken record in her mind. “Kto komy? Who against whom?” How far would the reprisals reach?

On arrival at Sheremetyevo airport, she scanned the crowd for their portly, cheerful chauffeur, but instead she saw the face of her bureau chief.

“Well fucking done,” he said, hugging her tightly. “You have single handedly brought

our company out of second place and put it back in the running. But phone Yuri, I'm afraid he's been calling the bureau every couple hours."

They gossiped about the staff and other correspondents during the long drive to Laura's apartment, where she dropped her bag and dashed out to a pay phone.

"Boris was found dead two days ago," Yuri told Laura a few hours later as they walked along the Moscow hills. "His body was in the exact same place he met us."

"No," she cried, "I'm so sorry." They walked silently while the news sank in.

"And you? Anything unusual?"

His feeble head shake didn't convince her, but she couldn't cope with the possibility of threat to Yuri now.

Finally she asked, "Boris knew the risks, right? Knew this could happen?"

"No, Laura, I don't think he understood the consequences. He'd been in the bubble for too long."

"Yuri I'm going to write about this, tell the world what happened to Boris. I won't name him, but I will tell what this Kremlin is doing. It's carrying on the war against dissidents while pretending to be all reform and openness."

"Yes, I know, I told you right from the start that for us nothing would change."

"I'll give you a copy of the story when I've written it and then we can't see each other again. We've got to stop this," she said and hurried back to her car, leaving him standing forlorn in the autumn dusk.

"Soviet source on KAL massacre found dead" headlines around the world screamed the next day.

***

"You're going to ask the CIA guy to help you find Yuri," Christine nodded approvingly. "About bloody time."

Laura sat back and sipped her vodka, luxuriating in the genteel book-lined drawing room. Seryozha, taking a break from the opera he was composing, played a vigorous

contemporary piano sonata that sent his wild black curls bouncing.

“I love this flat,”Laura sighed. “This is the only time that life ever feels really good in this God-forsaken country.”

“Yes, Seryozha was lucky his parents didn't run afoul of the regime,” Christine admitted. “But, now with me in the picture, who know how long he'll be allowed to keep it...” her voice trailed off and she abruptly changed the subject.

“Laura, what about your feelings for Yuri?” she said, emptying the vodka bottle into Laura's glass. “You haven't been with anyone since you met him. You haven't been yourself since he disappeared. This is more than a journalist losing a source.”

“I know,” Laura sighed. “Since he's disappeared I've had to face my feelings. I've even started writing a story about him.

“A love story,” she admitted. “I mean I'm going to see the fucking CIA about him!”

“Yeah, that's definitely beyond the call of duty,” Christine laughed.

“But there is no way I'm getting involved with a Russian,” Laura continued. “You know as well as I do that it could never work out.”

“I'm not like you, I don't know how you do it, living here not knowing what trick the KGB is going to pull next. When you're going to get him out. If you're going to get him out. You get away with it because they've always given artists special privileges, but Yuri is political. Even if they do let me be with him, we wouldn't have a future. I'm not going to spend my life in Russia married to a fucking penniless dissident, living in a one-room flat with his mother. They would never let him out anyway.

“He's a source, and a bloody good one,” she carried on. “I can't let my feelings get in the way.”

“Good luck with that one,” Christine smiled as she saw her friend out.

The next morning Laura was ushered straight in to the diplomat she had shared the Korean airliner documents with. He had photographed them and had probably sent them through to CIA headquarters before she was back in her car. She knew he would help her if

he could.

He took Yuri's details and promised to get back to her.

“Your friend's in the maximum security psychiatric hospital outside Moscow,” he said a few days later. “I'll make sure his name comes up when the ambassador goes to the Kremlin on Friday. Good luck.”

“Oh, thank God he's alive. How can I ever thank you?”

“Let's just call it even,” he laughed, “although I still feel I owe you.”

She went straight to Vanya and told him the news.

“But Vanya, don't get your hopes up,” she cautioned. “You know how many dissidents' names are on the ambassador's list. Some have been there for years.”

“Yes, I know. But he's alive. My friend is alive. For now, that is enough. Now excuse me, I must go to Anna.”

***

Weeks slipped by, full of days in which Laura alternated between working around the clock or drinking herself insensible. Then as she sat at her typewriter writing her love story to Yuri, the phone rang.

“It's me.”

Forty-five minutes later, Anna opened the door to Laura. The old babushka wrapped the young woman in her arms and wept into her bosom. “Laura, be strong, you won't recognise him.”

The man whose height, girth and mass of brown curls had caused her to dub him the Russian bear, stood before her gaunt and emaciated. His skin and hair were grey. He could barely pronounce her name and was too weak to make it back to the chair without her help. His eyes were hollow, his speech slurred and his gait wobbly. Track marks on his arms were infected.

“Oh my darling, what have they done to you?” Laura cried. In answer, Yuri's tongue just lolled uselessly out of his mouth. The two women sat at his feet and wept into his lap as he

feebly stroked their heads.

Then Laura prepared a plate of the delicacies she had grabbed on her way out, cheese, salami and oranges. Greedily he sucked the juice from the orange and then slumped back on the chair.

Abruptly, Laura stood up kissed the top of his head and motioned for Anna to follow her to the door. “Anna, I can't stay now. I can't take seeing him like this. I'm sorry. I'll be back when I gather my strength.”

“Laura, Yuri loves you.” The words traveled like a bolt of electricity through Laura's body. “He would rather risk his life to see you than not see you,” the old woman told her. “You must come, for his sake. You are the only thing that will bring him back to life.”

“I'm not as strong as you, Anna, I don't know how you do it. Your husband, now your son,” she sobbed.

“I do it because I have no choice. My husband wrote things they didn't like and now my son makes you write things they don't like. Me? I'd be happy to just sit in my chair and read Pasternak.”

“Yes, and then you could go to the Gulag, too,” Laura said grimly. “Just hold off on that for awhile, there are rumours that *Novy Mir* is going to serialise *Doctor Zhivago*.”

“Ah, so there is hope for us?” the babushka grinned. The two women clung to each other before they noticed that Yuri was asleep and dangerously close to falling of the chair.

***

“Laura, the KGB is using Yuri to send a signal to the dissidents,” Seryozha said later over a bottle of vodka at his kitchen table. Normally they would clean a prisoner up before releasing him, but with Yuri it seemed they had increased the psychotropic drugs and deliberately let him out as dysfunctional as possible. They were arguing about how this could be happening under Mikhail Gorbachev, the vital new Kremlin leader who seemed eager to loosen the leadership's iron grip.

“It is precisely because Gorbachev wants change that they have to target dissidents.

It's the Faustian pact he would have to make," Seryozha reasoned. "Laura, don't worry, I have heard about this treatment before. He will recover."

The next morning Laura tried to talk the embassy doctor into seeing Yuri, but he refused without so much as a flicker of an eyelash and ushered her out of his office. She went to the Beryozhka, the hard currency shop, and bought anything that looked edible and took it to Anna.

It took all Laura's internal resources to face a slender, greying Yuri with dull eyes, but once she started to visit she could not stay away from the barren lifeless flat. She took him food and books, delicacies she had shipped in from Helsinki and sat and talked to him about her work, what she was reading. One day she took a small ghetto blaster and some cassettes of Russian music and poetry and was rewarded with a glimmer of life from his dead eyes. After that he came back, little by little, started to talk about literature and music again, but he never mentioned his incarceration.

"Has he talked to you about it?" Laura asked Anna as she was leaving one day. The old woman shook her head, so vehemently her thin, grey plait loosened. "You must try and get him to talk, Anna. It's for the best."

"Laura, I can't take much more of this. He doesn't speak, he doesn't move out of his chair, he barely eats."

"Anna, you need a break, go to the countryside next weekend. I'll take care of Yuri."

"I will. Thank you dear."

The Saturday broke unseasonably warm so Laura packed a picnic of sausages, cheese, bread and wine.

"I'm not taking no for an answer," she told Yuri firmly. "We're going to Peredelkino."

The stairs were a challenge, and they had to stop several times while Yuri caught his breath, but once inside the car, windows down, on the way to the writer's colony where Yuri had spent his summers, his mood started to lift.

They had always gone there to regain sanity, recite poetry, discuss the literature that, although banned, every dissident had read. They never tired of reading Pasternak aloud in

front of the author's grave. Neither of them ever mentioned the similarity between their names and that of the lovers in the novel.

Laura was reciting a Pushkin poem when Yuri broke in.

“Some times they would strip me naked and tie me down on a gurney, spray me with icy water and leave me overnight,” he said flatly. “Other times they shot me so full of drugs I couldn't move or speak. I didn't see anyone but the so-called doctors the whole time I was there.”

They lay on the picnic blanket until after the sun went down while Yuri poured out the story of his months in the institution. Tears streamed down Laura's face, and fell on to his cheeks and mingled with his. She stroked and caressed his bony body, all the while whispering in his ear, “Shush, my darling, shush, my love, you're fine now, everything is going to be okay.” Then he moved his head, and their lips met, then locked in hungry, greedy kisses. She felt his erection and her defenses melted away. They made love with a tenderness, passion, sensitivity that Laura had never before experienced. She lay sated, gazing at his ivory features and blue-grey eyes in the full moonlight, unable to do more than run her fingers over his bony body.

“Now what?” she asked finally.

“Home,” he said simply.

Back in his flat they made love again, and again Laura asked, “What now?”

“Shhh,” was all he said and they slept in each other's arms. Yuri couldn't take his eyes off her face. “I thank God for this moment,” he whispered into the night. “However brief, and no matter what happens, it will be worth it. Since I first laid eyes on you I have waited for this. You are a goddess, delicate, but so strong. Fiery, but tender. Not even Pasternak could have invented you.”

In the morning they made love again, and Laura was his.

“Jesus,” she laughed, “I can't believe I've been passing this up all this time!”

They became lovers. Yuri stopped being her source, and Vanya bravely stepped in to become an official dissident. They never talked about the future, Laura had one more year in

her assignment and could always sign on for a year or two longer. Meanwhile, Gorbachev was ushering in an era of openness and reform that gave everyone hope, even lovers. Everyone, that is, but Yuri.

Nuclear Fusion

The KGB stayed out of the love affair between the American correspondent and the Russian dissident, limiting their interference to offensive graffiti on stairwell walls and appearances out of nowhere to beg a Western cigarette off Laura when the couple thought they were alone. Recently, they'd been making love on a picnic blanket in a forest outside Moscow when a sleazy looking thug in a leather jacket appeared smiling over them. “Cigarette?” he asked. It was harmless, though, more to show who was in control and to remind the lovers that they could break up the relationship whenever they chose. Yuri lost his job as janitor at the avant-garde theatre when they got together, so every time she visited she took him imported food, canned meats and vegetables to supplement the diet of sausages and bread.

The new Soviet leader ensured that the news flow was steady, but nothing dramatic occurred, so Laura and the other correspondents were constantly engaged at work but were able to count on occasional days off to enjoy the first rays of spring sunshine. She and Yuri spent long evenings at his little flat, drinking vodka with his friends. Once they even got up the courage to go to the movies together. Then, emboldened, they went to the circus, holding hands and laughing like children at the clowns' antics, hugging each other passionately when the flying trapeze act ended successfully. Lulled into a false sense of security, they behaved like lovers do across the globe.

Things were so quiet at work that the bureau chief and a correspondent went on holiday, leaving Laura in charge of an inexperienced young reporter in one of the world's busiest news agencies. It was against the rules for two senior correspondents to be off at the same time, but they'd all been working so hard for so long that they took the risk.

Laura was alone in the office day-dreaming over an article in a woman's magazine on how to keep your lover happy when a bell rang on the Tass news wire, alerting her to a terse statement that changed her life.

“An accident has occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant as one of the reactors was damaged. Measures are being taken to eliminate the consequences of the accident. Aid is being given to those affected. A Government commission has been set up.”

A nuclear accident. Laura had no time to think about anything, she opened her address book and started working the phone. Her first call was to the young man who'd joined the bureau a month earlier. *Jesus*, Laura thought, *of all the times to be left with a complete greenhorn*. *This kid has nothing but hubris*, she thought, and wondered for the umpteenth time how he could have landed a top job in Moscow.

At first they worked well together, “the kid” as they called him, turned out to be an asset. He a friend in Kiev, sixty kilometres from the site of the accident, so Laura sent him out to her favourite phone booth to call him for information. He eagerly related what was happening before there was any official information, ensuring that they were ahead of the pack with details of the disaster and its aftermath. On the third day, she left the kid alone in the office while she went home to get them lunch. When she came back, he was talking to his friend and source on the office phone.

“Are you out of your mind? Wow, way to finger your source. How long have you been calling him on the office phone?”

“Relax, it's not a problem, I've got this story under control,” he swaggered, dripping arrogance.

“Are you kidding me? You have just delivered your boyfriend to the KGB! Get out!”

“Oh, yeah, and what are you going to do without me? You and your Western diplomats and little Russian friends don't know shit. This is my story. I own it, and I don't need you.”

She sat down and tried to work but couldn't concentrate. She went for a walk on the Moscow River. It was hot and sunny and the babushki and mothers were out in droves with their tightly swaddled babies. She sat on a bench and let the sun melt away the tension in her face, then got up and went back to the office.

“We're creaming the opposition,” he shouted when she opened the door to see him strutting around like a peacock. “This is Pulitzer prize winning stuff,” he crowed handing her the copy of the story he had just filed.

“What is this?” she said, seeing his name on top of a story. “You filed to the wire without my okay? Are you out of your mind?”

“You weren't here, weren't at home, and look. This couldn't wait a second.”

“Well, it'd better be good,” she muttered. Then she saw the headline: *One thousand dead at Chernobyl*.

“Oh, God, no,” she said, slumping into a chair. “Your source? The one you've been calling from this office? You’ve put out a story quoting him saying that one thousand people have died at Chernobyl when there have been no other reports of deaths. Oh, God. We're all fucking finished.”

She began to call Western diplomats to arrange appointments. “You'd better hope that someone can back up this story,” she muttered.

“That matches what we've been hearing,” one US diplomat said. Laura almost kissed him, she was so relieved, but instead she rushed back to the office and filed an insert saying a Western diplomat said they had heard similar reports. It was weak, but it was something.

Meanwhile, the message wires was full of queries from New York headquarters alerting her to the fact that none of the other agencies were even mentioning their story.

Then it hit her. The diplomat who said he'd heard the same reports was the man she suspected of being CIA. He was using them to disseminate their disinformation. It was a trap, and she had walked right into it. Now, once again, the truth was a pawn in the Cold War and it was her fault.

She dialed the operator and booked a call to the editor in chief in New York City. Then she sent a message on the open message wire, her only option, telling everyone to spike the story and recall it from the international and domestic news wires but it was too late. The story had already gone out, as a bulletin, ringing seven bells on news wires around the world.

When Laura finally got through to the editor it was clear that no one else had the story and they couldn't stand by it. “We're putting out the retraction now,” he said. “Laura, there will be a high-level investigation, I hope to God you're clean,” he said before hanging up. For three days she went from the office to her apartment, too embarrassed to go out in public. Then the delegation that included the foreign news editor arrived to investigate how the biggest fuck up in the news agency's history had occurred. By then, the bureau chief was back, sheepish and chastised, but oddly elated. He had fought the appointment of the young college graduate and his instincts were proved right. Laura had secretly suspected that he'd

gone off and left her alone with him in the hopes there would be a fuck up, albeit nothing this big.

During one of their regular walks outside, he told her what the investigation had uncovered. “The kid is gay,” he said, confirming Laura's hunch. “You know as well as I do that it's a criminal offense in the Soviet Union. The source was his gay lover. He met him in his first week in town at the Ukraine Hotel.”

“Jesus,” Laura said. “He led the KGB straight to him by calling from the office. That poor sucker had no choice but to feed us disinformation. It was either that or be sent to the Gulag.”

“You’re joking, he called him from the office?”

“It was the best present we could have given the KGB,” Laura said.

After that story hit the wires, no one at the Kremlin had to take international criticism seriously. The worst nuclear accident in the history of the world had been turned into another opportunity to attack the Western media. All Soviet media talked about was how the Western press used the tragedy to spread lies and stoke anti-Soviet sentiment. It bought them time, for days they didn't mention anything about what was going on at the site, the clean-up operation, radiation levels, illness, deaths.

“I'm just glad I told New York that kid had no business in the Moscow bureau,” he said. “Not that that's much consolation. We're finished. Our credibility is shot.”

“Not if I can help it,” Laura said. “If I survive this, if they don't fire me, I'm going to Chernobyl.”

“Jesus, Laura, are you mad? Let's not even discuss the lethal radiation levels, how are you going to get there? It's slightly outside our thirty kilometre limit,” he said facetiously, referring to the distance Westerners were allowed to travel outside Moscow without prior permission.

She had a friend, she said, who had a friend who had to travel to Kiev. He had agreed to take her. The price was high, but she owed it to the company. She would have to make her own way to Pripyat, where the reactor was located, but dollars could get just about anything done.

“Look,” he said ignoring her argument. “I know you feel guilty and awful about this. But you don't have to, it wasn't your fault. There's a clear trail that points directly to the kid. The taped radio broadcasts were all by him. We know you hadn't read the copy because your initials weren't on the bottom of it.

“You made an error in judgment by getting that CIA nutter to confirm the information, but that is not going to get you fired.”

She was relieved to hear they knew she wasn't involved with it, but she knew if she had not left the office in anger that it wouldn't have happened. No one could comfort her on that score.

“None of this changes my mind,” she said. “I don't know when I'll be going, but I am going.”

“I'll have you fired,” he said.

“Fine, fire me. But I'm going and I'm going to file the stories for us.” He knew she meant it, and just shook his head in wonder.

A few days later Laura didn't show up for her night shift. He went to her apartment and the maid let her in. “I'm so worried,” she said. “Laura isn't here, her bed hasn't been slept in. She's never stayed out all night and day before.”

“Don't worry,” he said. “I think I know where she is. She'll be back in a couple days. Take some time off and we'll contact you when we need you again.”

She left hurriedly, no doubt to go inform to the KGB, but he saw the grateful look in her eye and knew she would temper what she reported.

A few hours later, the Lada that Laura was traveling in was stopped about sixty kilometres north of Kiev, just before the turn off to the Chernobyl plant. The KGB agent opened the boot, revealing Laura.

“Ah, the missing American,” he beamed a rotten gold smile. “Please, to get out.” Wordlessly, he took her to Kiev and handed her over to security at the airport, where an agent got on a plane to Moscow with her. From there, he escorted her to an Aeroflot flight to London. Her colleagues found out about it on the evening news, which aired pictures of her,

labeled “American spy”, emerging rumpled and dirty from the boot of a Soviet Lada. A sign pointing to the Chernobyl nuclear plant at Pripyat was clearly visible.

Laura knew she would be fired, but could think of nothing but Yuri, who by now would know that the affair was over, that Laura was lost to him. He would have found out on the nightly television news.

“Oh, my darling, I'm sorry,” she whispered into the sleeping night, “but it was you who taught me to risk my life for the truth.”

The Imperfect Spy

Frau Mueller looked up from her newspaper but did not greet Julie with her usual lopsided smile when she arrived late at her office in the East Berlin press building.

“Herr Wiener has been here twice this morning,” her lips turned down, a deep exclamation mark appeared between her eyes. “He asks that you meet him in the bar here after work. I tried your hotel but they said you left early this morning.”

Oh, yes, Julie mused, *I might have known that visit to the Methodist minister would not have gone unnoticed*. “Did he say what he wants? This is unusual, he's never invited me for a drink before.”

She furrowed her brow more and suggested, “Why don't you write that story you've been researching about the introduction of cash machines in the capital?”

“Sounds like you think I'm in trouble,” Julie said. “Great idea, I need to get back in the good books. Call Herr Wiener and suggest six o'clock.”

“Thank you,” she said when the secretary put down the phone. “Could you arrange an appointment for me to discuss cash machines with someone at Deutsche Bank?”

She spent the steamy July day talking to people using the new cash machines that had sprung up in the outside walls of shops and banks. The irony of people taking money out of the wall just metres away from the infamous wall dividing Berlin in two was not lost on her, but her mention of it was met with blank stares. *It's as though the wall isn't there*, Julie thought. *Another figment of my Western imagination*.

At precisely six she entered the bar at the top of the press centre. A group of rowdy Soviet correspondents were the only occupants. Julie often drank vodka with them and reminisced about the “good ole days” in Moscow and after a few drinks one of the Russians invariably took her aside and gave her tips on great stories. Publicly, though, they pretended not to know each other so that when East German officials tried to finger her sources, suspicion would not fall on them. Herr Wiener was sitting bent over a black coffee in the corner, his pale yellowish-grey skin and hair blending into the background. The perfect Stasi man, she thought wryly. His lips barely moved in greeting when he saw her, but he dragged

his tall, thin frame out of his chair and shook her hand. “You will have beer?” he asked.

She nodded.

He congratulated her on the success of her series from a three-month trip around the country, mentioned how proud the press office was to be receiving so much interest from the Western press corps. He seemed sincerely proud of her, although he never mentioned her scoops about the real number of Soviet troops in East Germany being twice the official claim, or the small town in the heartland that housed the former Nazis that officials claimed they had gotten rid of when the wall went up. Julie knew the leadership would be upset by the stories that had dominated Western newspapers, understood that was why Frau Mueller pushed her to write something favourable. She knew it reflected badly on both Frau Mueller and Herr Wiener, both of whom she was genuinely fond, and for a brief moment she even wished she hadn't promised to revisit the church that was harbouring the fledgling pro-democracy movement later that night.

“You wanted to speak to me about something special?” she finally asked.

“Yes. Your cat. Sushi. The kennels have informed me that they can no longer keep him. Regrettably.”

“What? My cat is being kicked out? Of the kennels? Herr Wiener, you're not serious.”

“I assure you that that is what they told me.”

“And you invited me for a drink to tell me that?”

“Did they give you a reason?”

The furrow between his brows deepened.

“Right, well I'll pick him up tomorrow. He can go to friends in the West.”

“I regret this.”

Several times he looked like he wanted to say something but stopped himself.

“Anything else, Herr Wiener? Or is that it? We're having a drink together because my cat is to be kicked out of the kennels?”

He didn't respond, didn't glance up from the coffee spoon he was spinning on the

Formica table.

Curious, Julie mused, something is troubling Herr Wiener. Pity, he is a good man. A mensch, we could have called him were he not East German and a Stasi man.

In fact, he ran the section for English speaking journalists, and had been given Julie as his one and only correspondent, only to commit the unpardonable sin of liking her. She'd arrived from Moscow, a lanky blonde with strong features that made her appear more handsome than beautiful. She spoke fluent Russian and German, knew her history, literature. In the few short months they had worked together he'd grown to admire her spunk and enthusiasm. He knew she could last, she was tough, the question was how long they would let her last. He was shocked to notice he was thinking of his colleagues as ‘they', not ‘us’. He'd been there when she arrived, alone except for her cat mewling from a seamless black plastic traveling case that matched her Samsonite luggage. It bothered him that no one met her. Of course he couldn't show himself, although he had to get to know her as soon as possible in case she showed up anywhere she shouldn't be.

She was booked into the Unter den Linden Hotel, and he had personally supervised the preparations; wire tap, bugging, hidden camera outside her door. He was to get her a flat, office, secretary and all the computer connections she needed.

“Do you remember that flat on the top floor of the Checkpoint Charlie block?”

“The one for Westerners? Of course. With its views over the wall.”

“It was so perfect. Modern, easy access to West Berlin. If only you'd taken that, you would have your cat, no problems,” he mused aloud.

“Problems? What problems?” That was the only word she heard.

Again, he shook his head.

She knew he was proud of getting her that flat, it was the cream of the crop, usually reserved for businessmen or diplomats. But she refused to live in a Western ghetto, wanted to live with real East Germans, get to know them.

Headquarters were furious with him. They refused to give him anything else to offer her. That's when he started to get the stomach aches. Month after month she languished in

the hotel, only going out to drink vodka with her buddies from Tass or facing Checkpoint Charlie to cross to the West to drink the Heife Weisse beer she favoured. She thought she was so clever, but of course one of the Soviets was working for him. He was surprised she didn't realise this. Their relationship was a problem, as the Russians genuinely liked and trusted her. They sat around in their flat and drank vodka, ate caviar, and reminisced about the good old days in Moscow. Gorbachev. Glasnost. Perestroika. While here, in the DDR, all attention was on stopping the bloody Christian groups and their endless chanting about the wall coming down. “Die mauer mus weg.” Ever since they had played the Pink Floyd album, *The Wall*, at the Brandenburg gate shortly after her arrival the protests had been gaining strength in the capital. She attended the demonstrations but didn't seem that interested, preferred drinking with her Russian buddies. But she wasn't a fool, she knew they would inevitably leak her some long-kept East German secret.

He and the secretary, Frau Mueller, were called into headquarters the day after Julie published a story on the Nazi stronghold. Their bosses were furious with them, couldn't believe they had let that slip through. Herr Wiener was tasked with threatening her, intimidating her. He knew it wouldn't work, though, wouldn't stop her from doing her job. She was obsessed with something she called ‘the truth’. He wanted to give her the German philosophers to read, perhaps a little Kant and Schopenhauer, to blur the edges a bit.

Then she published the story on the Soviet troops along the Czech and Polish border. The leadership was humiliated, it was bad enough that they admitted to 300,000 Soviet soldiers in their country, but she let out the real figure—half a million. He didn't sleep that night. At 8:05 the next morning, his office phone rang. He was summoned. He was to invite her for a beer that evening. That was it, but he knew what it meant. He loathed being part of it, but he could see that she had to go. She was drawing too much attention to their failure to get on the Soviet bandwagon of restructuring and reforming the country, to their lies and hypocrisy, and most dangerously, to the growing protests at the wall. His office was now being flooded by requests from American and English correspondents. Even six months earlier the attention would have been welcomed, but now it had to be stopped. The order to “deal with her” had come from the top, they said, Erich Honecker himself.

“Well, I must go,” he said unfolding his frame from the chair and emitting a heavy sigh.

“Anything else?”

“No, no, it’s nothing.” He did not meet her eye. He paid the bill and raised his trench coat collar against the cold grey night air.

She dropped in at her office to check the telex and then followed him out into the eerie night. The Mohrenstrasse was dark and dismal, the modern building like a boil amongst the bombed out shells of Berlin's former architectural glory. The abandoned buildings in the vicinity stood as they had the day the war ended, broken glass, bullet holes visible in the dark. She would have been frightened, but she knew the Communist regime wouldn't allow anyone to hurt an American correspondent.

She got in her rented Fiat Uno and drove down Friedrichstrasse. As she approached the corner of the Unter den Linden where her hotel was located, a truck pulled out next to her, obscuring her view of the intersection where the big black Soviet Chaika was waiting. Its driver stepped on the petrol and smashed directly into her. She'd be arrested, of course, as the DDR had a zero tolerance for driving under the influence of alcohol, a little known fact that even the car rental agencies didn't advertise.

It all went as planned, he heard later. When she stumbled onto the boulevard, confused and concussed, her blonde hair matted with blood, she was taken to hospital, where instead of treating her they left her to shiver on a gurney until the timing was right for a blood test for alcohol levels. The results were predictably gratifying, so they arrested her and took her in without so much as a phone call. When she got out the next morning she disappeared, presumably into the boot of the big Volvo driven by the BBC correspondent, a position that still carried diplomatic immunity, a vestige of the Allied occupation after the war. He and her British boyfriend got out her belongings, but they didn't get the cat. Quite cynically 'they' held on to her beloved Sushi until her company paid for the rented car his people had totaled, its insurance canceled due to the minute quantity of alcohol in her blood.

The diplomat who debriefed Julie at the U.S. Embassy in Bonn four days later listened to her story, went to a file cabinet and came back shaking his head. The exact same thing had happened to one of their diplomats the previous year. Like Julie, the woman was young, single and spoke Russian and German. She had to go. The Americans would never again risk sending someone competent to East Germany.

“Well done, Herr Wiener,” Frau Mueller said over drinks at his flat the night Julie disappeared. “I can see that you are not proud of yourself, but remember she brought this on herself.”

“Call me Hans,” he said.

On the High Wire

Julie was sitting at a huge round wooden table in a bar in Bonn, surrounded by colleagues and catching up on the gossip and news when he walked in, dressed in blue jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. He caught her eye and walked straight toward her, found a seat and sat down. He was devastatingly good-looking, with the square, chiseled jaw and cheekbones of a model, not her usual type at all. Her guys were rarely gorgeous, and if they were it was coincidental. After greeting the others, he turned his attention to her, introduced himself as Rupert, and everyone else in the room disappeared. She got lost in his silky voice, which combined plummy British and high South African. It was irresistible. *Now I know what a bedroom voice might sound like,* she thought as his words played her, like a piano.

They chatted about their jobs, her obsession with the East bloc, his rabid anti-Communism, how he had spent years in Bonn and never visited the East. “Looks like we're divided by the Iron Curtain,” she joked.

“But tell me about you. How can you endure being away from your country now?” she asked. “I mean it's basically in the middle of a civil war, isn't it? People on all sides murdered daily.”

“Yeah, it's a mess, but I think the good guys are winning,” he said. “So, how is life in East Berlin?”

“Hard. It's so hard. So bleak and unforgiving. I feel for those people. Because they can receive television signal from the West they know what they're missing,” she said. “I loved living in Moscow, mostly they were happy living in ignorance, not a clue what was going on in the rest of the world. Just drunk and happy. But the Ossies, grown men, complete strangers have broken down in tears when telling me about their lives. And it's not materialism, no, they've got tonnes of stuff compared to Russians. It's the wall. And the knowing.

“But, hey, tell me about South Africa.”

“Well, ask someone who lives there.”

“Whoa...” she said, but they were interrupted be a voice across the table.

“Hey, Julie, we're all waiting to hear about East Berlin,” a television correspondent asked her. “So what are the Ossies saying about this trip?”

Talk at the table turned to the reason they were all together. The East German leader, Erich Honecker, was visiting West Germany for the first time since the Communist state had been established after the war. She passed on the various opinions of diplomats. It all pointed to Moscow, the new leader there. The thaw in East-West relations would start here, where the Cold War started, she said. They swapped notes on how they were traveling, where they'd be staying, made plans to meet up again.

She didn't see Rupert again until three days later in Munich. High-flying TV reporters didn't have to do the grunt work, follow the story minute by minute. That was her job. Half the Western press corps was in the sauna at the Four Seasons Hotel when she went in. Rupert was one of them, a towel around his waist while the rest of them had on swim suits. He was quizzing her on the source for her last article when a burly German Frau came in with a stick and lifted up his towel, nodding approval at his nakedness. “Take off your costumes or leave,” she told the others. “This is not healthy.” Nothing could compel her to strip in front of her colleagues, so she left, but not before making a plan to meet Rupert in the hotel lobby that night.

They wandered from beer garden to beer garden, mostly talking about their work, until finally he asked her about how she got expelled from Moscow.

“I know you were kicked out, that you were trying to visit the site of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Jesus, you're legend. But what about that Russian lover you left behind?”

“Wait a minute,” she bristled. “Who says what?”

“Oh you know, a gorgeous single woman pitches up in a bar in Bonn and guys talk.”

At that she laughed, “Okay, I admit I did ask the girls about you.”

“I know,” he said. “You know my story. But I don't know yours, no one does.”

So she told him. She told him about the Russian dissident she had fallen in love with, about his courage, his passion. How she hadn't been able to be with anyone since she left Moscow more than a year earlier.

“Well, you're with me now.”

“I do seem to be,” she laughed.

“Come one, let's go,” he said.

They returned to his hotel room and talked and drank until they collapsed on the bed.

It was a different story back in Bonn, though, where they had an entire week to explore each other's bodies and psyches before Rupert was to disappear into the Spanish countryside for a month. Julie dreamt of visiting him when he emerged to take up his new posting in Madrid, but the day before he left her foreign editor called and told her to pack her bags and catch a flight to Bahrain. The first Gulf War had broken out and she was to cover it, an assignment that would have thrilled her a month earlier but now filled her with dread. There were no vacations from wars, she knew, and something inside her told her that Rupert would not still be single when she emerged.

She turned the job down. Three weeks later she was in a German bar in Madrid when Rupert proposed. When she got back to Bonn she quit her job, packed her bags and bought a one-way ticket to Madrid.

Three months later, Rupert and Julie were married in an ancient church in the English countryside. After the honeymoon, Rupert carried her over the threshold of a villa in central Madrid. Sun streamed through high windows and bounced off Spanish-tiled floors in the three-storey surrounded by similar houses overflowing with people. In the evenings, Spaniards of all ages gathered in the streets, playing or talking until late into the night.

They stayed there for day after day of love-making and getting to know each other. She was drained, emotionally and physically, from the stress of three difficult moves in one year. She handed herself over to Rupert. He did everything for her, called her taxis, made the dinner reservations, did the grocery shopping. She didn't speak a word of Spanish and didn't have the energy to take on another language.

After five years behind the Iron Curtain, Julie exulted in the bars and cafes that were always so full of life and vitality. There had been few opportunities to eat out in Moscow, and then only at tourist hotels with limited menus. In Madrid, the restaurants only opened after the last drab, dreary Moscow restaurants would be closed for the night, the two or three items of

pickled whatever on the menu long since sold out. She laughed joyously when she encountered her first traffic jam on the Calle de Castellana at four one hot summer morning when the bars closed. Eventually her energy returned and she divided her time between writing and redecorating the charming ramshackle house. She bought the white lace curtains the Spanish housewives favoured, pulled up ancient carpeting to reveal more Spanish tiles, painted the greying walls white. Even cleaning a kitchen that hadn't been touched for decades gave her satisfaction. Throughout it all were long, boozy lunches, followed by long, boozy evenings of love. Julie wasn't a domestic goddess, and her one attempt at a dinner party resulted in embarrassed Spaniards choking down raw fish.

In the early days of their marriage it didn't matter that Rupert didn't know about the things that defined her, like what it meant to be from the American heartland, the values and life style that implied. She introduced him to her favourite radio programme, Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion,* whose deadpan monologues in the "News from Lake Wobegon" about heat waves with no fans and ice fishing in the elements, denial and abstinence, came straight out of her Midwestern childhood. Listening to them was the only time she felt that she was herself, that she belonged to a tribe. Even the Americans she came into contact with abroad couldn't relate to it, as they were mostly the East Coast elite.

She tried to explain to him what it was like growing up with her father, a prophet who was always fighting government policies and trying to raise awareness about the environment, American Indians or nuclear weapons decades before these issues became popular. Being surrounded by religious fundamentalists on one side and television programmes like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* on the other left her dreaming to be one of those housewives in heels and pristine dresses with a brood of children and a husband who was always right, good and moral. When the Sixties came along, she was thrown into pure turmoil, couldn't adapt, wanted the dream, needed it to be real. She got lost, torn between two worlds.

Rupert rarely spoke about his childhood and when he did it was to tell her stories about growing up in the big house in the Eastern Cape, how his parents were never home, always at parties, the club or abroad. How he had spent most of his free time with the domestic worker, kept a cricket bat under his bed. He still left all the lights on in their house and

generally didn't go home if she wasn't there. She happily get lost in his pain, and used it to forgive more than she should have.

Theirs was a Fitzgeraldean existence of expatriates wallowing in wealth and privilege, and they were the golden couple, snapped up by diplomatic and journalistic circles eager to present them on a platter. At first Julie found it odd that diplomats would ask Rupert's opinion on the unrest that was flowing through the East bloc. Rupert always responded, “Ask Julie, she was a correspondent there for five years.” But when one curtly replied that he was interested in Rupert's opinion, she bristled but bit her lip. The next day she had calling cards made up that identified her as a circus trainer, but no one ever asked her what she did so they stayed tucked away in her hand bag.

“At least now I'm in touch with the lost me,” she joked. In answer to Rupert's quizzical look, she told him about her childhood spent trying to walk the tightrope, which inevitably was the clothes line and, just as inevitably, ended in hospital.

She was disappearing. The only thing that kept her going was her writing, but after a life time of reporting the facts she wasn't sure what to write or how to go about it. She played around with short stories and travel pieces, but everything kept turning into memoirs.

She sat down at the computer as soon as Rupert left for work and kept at it until they met for lunch five hours later. She would take a taxi to the Serrano, where she'd meet him at the bar under his studio. Often his staff would join them, the camera and sound men, researchers, secretaries and stringers would all wander off to lunch together. She had never enjoyed drinking at lunchtime but quickly acclimated to the Spanish lifestyle, often falling into a taxi in the late afternoon to go sleep it off so she could start over again in the evening. Something was missing, though, she needed something else. It came to her in a dream. In it, she was a librarian, the master of a comfortable and familiar universe. Safe. It made sense. Her father's inability to hold down a job had meant they moved every year. Every year there was a new house, a new school, new strange, cruel children. Julie used to take solace in the public libraries wherever they went, befriended the books. Dr Seuss's words had enchanted her, Nancy Drew became her role model and constant companion, librarians her friends.

She made some enquiries and discovered there was an American library not far from their house. The building was different to the dark brick libraries she remembered from her

childhood and had seen in the dream. It was low, modern concrete and glass set in a courtyard with a fountain, coloured oleander blooming around it.

The librarian looked up at her and smiled when she entered.

“Do you need help?”

‘‘Well, yes, thank you. It's my first time here and I'm... I'm researching circuses.”

‘‘Oh, how fascinating. I'm not sure what we've got, but why don't you start with the Encyclopaedia Britannica while I go through the card catalogue for you.”

‘‘Oh, that is so kind, but you needn't. I've got all the time in the world.”

Lilly and the Lion

Lilly Beatty snuggled into the leather of the Mercedes Benz, chatting happily to her worn, stuffed monkey. In the front seat, her parents talked animatedly about the elephant calves they would be visiting at the Eastern Cape farm.

“I can't believe our luck,” James Beatty told his wife. “Elephant calves for sale, no questions asked. Darling, would you like a little baby ellie?” he called to his daughter.

“Uh huh,” she replied as they pulled off the dusty, bumpy road into a long driveway through the gold and orange bush.

As soon as the car stopped she jumped out and ran off to explore the farm, kicking up a cloud of red dust that coloured her white bobby socks. She didn't notice the elderly man with the shotgun who came out to greet them. The adults chatted for a few minutes, and then went off in the direction of a distant watering hole.

When they returned an hour later, James Beatty was leading an elephant calf the size of a pony.

“Daddy, daddy, look at my baby lion!” Lilly called out. “Can I have it, daddy, please? I want it. I have to have it.”

“Now, now,” her mother replied absently, not taking her eyes off her husband, lost in his inspection of the young bull.

“No, I want this lion! He's mine. He loves me,” she stamped her little foot, crossed her arms and tossed her white-blonde ringlets.

“No, Lilly, you know quite well that is simply out of the question!” the statuesque blonde replied, without glancing at her daughter.

A loud wailing followed, finally catching her mother's attention. She glanced at the little girl and froze. A lion cub the size of a full-grown Staffordshire was settled into her soiled, candy striped pinafore. She was inside the enclosure, surrounded by other cubs.

“Get out of there, now! Lilly, are you mad?!” she called. “James, James! Look at your daughter!”

“Daddy...”

“You are not going to have a lion cub, and that's that!” the mother shouted. “We've got our own lions, and Tammy and Tony are perfectly trained and going to live a long time. Now pull yourself together and get out of there!”

The little girl didn't budge. Eventually, the tall, muscular man in a navy blue suit sauntered over, but his pace quickened when he saw his daughter. Her head was nestled into the lion's, their hair and fur mingled to form one wild mane. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. At that moment he saw into the future of the Brian Beatty Circus and knew he would have that cub despite all the risks and that his Lilly would be its mistress. He smiled his encouragement, then turned to the old farmer. A heated conversation ensued.

“No, no, no. No lion cubs of mine are going to a circus!” the man said.

“Now, now, old chap, let's be reasonable,” Beatty cajoled. Brian Beatty's great grandson was not a man who took no for an answer. His daughter would have that cub, and his wife and the old farmer be damned. He draped his arm over the man's shoulder and turned him away, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket.

A few minutes later, Lilly was nestled up in the back seat with the little lion cub. The elephant calf stood by, forgotten. All the way back to Grahamstown, where their wagons were circled and preparations were underway for the performance the next night, Lilly held Leo in her arms, whispering and singing to him as the cub nuzzled her hand. She giggled and kissed him and told him to stop tickling her. Her mother sat stiffly in front, as far away from her beloved husband as she could, but she bit her tongue saving the battle for when they were alone with the little bit of privacy their luxury wagon provided. The cub would be returned.

Lilly knew from an early age knew that she would rule the ring as the first lady lion tamer. She was a Beatty, after all, and nothing else held the respect of the rough circus people like the lion master. At the age of seven, she was prescient enough to know that she and her lion had to grow up together or she would never be the best, the mistress.

Ever since a man had first walked into the ring with a lion more than two hundred years earlier, the public was fascinated by the sight of man facing a wild animal with eight centimetres of claws and a mouth that opens wider than his head. The Brian Beatty Circus

had followed all the latest methods in lion taming since a man first went into the ring with a crow bar and beat his animals into submission so that he could win the admiration of his audience by putting his head in its jaws.

Beatty was proud that his pair, Tammy and Tony, had been trained using the modern four-legged chair and bull whip, methods that had more to do with confusing the lions and teaching them about personal space than punishment. Lilly cried every time she heard the whip crack, though, clamping her hands over her ears and running as far away as she could get. She always left the circus before the grand finale, a lion jumping through flaming hoops.

Back at the camp, Lilly, hugging the cub to her soiled breast, ran to show her Leo to her circus friends, going straight to the lion tamer. “Jude, Jude, look! Look at Leo, he's mine!” she called out excitedly. A wiry, sunburnt man in overalls came out of a caravan beaming. “Lilly, you’re back, did you get the elephant?” But when he saw the cub draped over her shoulder, his smile faded. Lilly didn't notice, and ran on to the next wagon.

That night, Leo feasted on steak fed from his mistress's hand and drank water from the outside spigot cupped in her hands. At bedtime, her father lay a soft woolen blanket at the bottom of her bed and Leo curled up. As soon as he left, Leo crawled into Lilly's arms and they drifted off to sleep. She didn't hear the angry words in the night, the visit from the lion tamer incensed by what he knew was a threat to his dominance of the circus ring. Nor did she hear her mother's words before she slammed out into the airless night: “You mark my words, this will end badly.”

When her parents arose, late, the next morning Lilly was already in the dirt field with her hula hoop and a bag of chicken pieces gently and patiently whispering to Leo to step through the hoop, rewarding him when he clambered through, all paws. Unbeknownst to her, the excited clap she made every time Leo followed her hand through the hoop reinforced the training, accustoming the lion to associate the clap with a command, followed by a treat.

“You see, I told you so,” Beatty said to his wife. “She's a natural. Those two are going to be the biggest thing the Brian Beatty Circus has ever seen.” The mother turned on her heel and walked away.

Lilly and Leo were popular amongst the circus folk, strings of children followed them around and their parents frequently visited the wagon, delighting in the rare contact with the

normally caged animals. Leo would take pride of place on the sofa next to Lilly.

Gradually, though, people stopped coming and the whispering grew to a roar. It was time to put Leo in a cage like the other animals. That was part of the preparation for performance, being locked up and deprived, and then suddenly let out into the ring where a non-stop series of meaty treats would appear. Circus people knew that a previously tamed animal could turn at any moment and savage his trainer despite decades of love and trust between them. So they stayed away, muttering about how unnatural it was. How James Beatty had lost the plot. They would shake their heads at the mother, who was never seen in the same room with “the little couple” as her daughter and Leo were called.

Lilly became increasingly isolated from the other children as Leo grew into his paws and claws. She never developed the social graces that even the crudest worker took for granted. As she became alienated from the others, she turned more to Leo for comfort, solace and friendship, telling him all the joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures of her narrow life. Her father watched indulgently, waiting for the day when the two would emerge into the lights of the big tent. He relived the moment over and over in his mind. He could see the newspaper headlines as the goddess and her leonine god performed with the sensitivity and precision that only two lovers could.

By the time Lilly turned thirteen she was so headstrong her mother couldn't control her. She walked out of the wagon one day to see her daughter perched atop the lion and something snapped. She flew at the girl with a stick screaming at her to get off that disgusting beast. Lilly tossed her head and nuzzled into Leo's mane, and they trotted away.

That night she heard her mother's harsh, angry words late into the night and snuggled up closer to Leo. When she got up, her mother was gone. For a while, her father paid her extra attention, coming home at lunch time, but soon he drifted into his old ways. Lilly raised herself and her lion as best she could, in complete isolation under the indulgent eye of an absent father.

Circus children are always on the move, traveling from town to town and show to show, sometimes to as many as a hundred towns in one year. They are never parted from the circus for things like school or holidays, but they have each other and distant relatives and friends they've accumulated in destinations over the years. They are known to intermarry, and more

than one lesser boy in the circus hierarchy fell for Lilly as she blossomed and grew into a wild beauty, tall, lithe, her toned and tanned limbs crowned by a mane of golden curls that tumbled to her waist. She didn't seem to notice, though, and never returned the interest, always looking instead into the huge eyes of her beloved Leo who was always at her side.

One day her father came home early and sat her down. “It's time for you to start training Leo for the flaming hoop,” he said. “Jude is going to help you.”

“No, I won't! You know I won't do that to Leo! My act will be unique. I will ride Leo around the big top.”

But James Beatty stood firm for the first and last time in his life. He insisted that his daughter would make circus history. Lilly Beatty would go into the centre ring and smiling turn 360 degrees with her eyes glued on the audience while her lion jumped through flaming hoops. She would break eye contact with the wild animal under her control. She would break the unwritten law of circus trainers. That's what the Brian Beatty Circus had to offer the world!

They fought about it for months, but Lilly couldn't bear the icy silence punctuated by harsh words from her only person. She was seventeen when she told her father that she was prepared to do as he asked.

“Leo is ready to go into the ring and jump through flaming hoops for me,” she said proudly. Her father, always certain she would come around, broke out the bottle of French champagne he had been saving for the occasion and cajoled his daughter into joining him.

“To the king and queen of the Brian Beatty Circus,” he said, his blue eyes misting over as they clinked glasses.

Lilly knew the danger in breaking eye contact with her animal, but trusted her Leo implicitly. He had grown up jumping through hoops for her. In return, her father had agreed that she could fulfill her dream. She would climb onto Leo's back and circle the ring in triumph. This, too, would be a circus first. And she had a secret, she'd been keeping from her father for months. Jude, the aging lion tamer, had recently befriended her and offered to get a message to her mother when her debut took place. Finally, mother and daughter would be reunited. Lilly couldn't wait to see the years of disapproval melt into unadulterated awe when her mother saw her astride her Leo.

It was decided that her debut would take place in Grahamstown, where they had been performing that fateful day when Lilly and Leo met. Where Leo first jumped through a hoop. Banner headlines in newspapers throughout the province announced the arrival of the next king and queen of the Brian Beatty Circus.

The day broke hot and still. All day men from the press tried to get to Lilly and Leo, but they stayed secluded in their lavish wagon. Lilly's father was busy making arrangements for visiting dignitaries, politicians, the press. Decades had passed since the South African circus had introduced a new talent and news of the circus heiress had been whispered about in circus families for years. The show had sold out before the wagons crossed a wheel into the Eastern Cape.

Only Jude was allowed in to see Lilly that day. It was assumed he would pass on last minute trade secrets about lions in the spotlight for the first time. He carried a backpack, out of which he pulled a letter that he handed to Lilly. She left him to read the long-awaited note from her mother and penned a reply at her delicate yellowwood desk in the wagon's study. The meeting had been set for 10pm at the Graham Hotel. Overcome by emotion, she lingered in the study. When she emerged, Leo was agitated, but Lilly put it down to his sensitivity to the decade old antipathy from the aging trainer. She though of nothing but her mother witnessing her triumph.

That night, she bathed in milk before sliding into a heavy, gold sequined gown. The Beatty seamstress had devoted months to it. They had had numerous fittings and when the seamstress zipped it up it cupped her tender body like a sheath. The old woman drew in her breath and averted her eyes, unable to bear the head to toe golden shimmer intensified by the flicker of the dozen scented candles that burnt every night in the girl's bedroom since her mother's disappearance.

The old woman sat nervously with the girl and her lion, listening to the cheers and laughter coming from the big tent. They were waiting to make her carefully choreographed entrance for the last act.

Finally, the golden couple arrived side-by-side at the main entrance. Seven spotlights swivelled in their direction and lingered on the pair. The master of ceremonies called for silence, the drums rolled and the girl mounted the lion's back. A collective gasp came from the

audience and they rose to their feet as Lilly, circled the ring on Leo's back. When they reached the door, the audience sat hushed for what seemed like an eternity before jumping to their feet with wild applause. The girl's hips swivelled seductively as she and her Leo swaggered to centre stage. A dark young man approached her with the flaming hoop and she took it in her slender fingers. The audience clapped, Leo understood that as his cue to jump through the hoop. Unprepared, she faltered briefly before she unfastened her eyes from his and turned her head to the side and smiled at the audience as she began her 360 degree rotation.

Leo jumped through the hoop and his golden mane caught fire. The audience let out a collective gasp and jumped to their feet as though in one body. Lilly beamed to acknowledge the miracle of their feat, never taking her eyes from the audience. He turned around and jumped through the hoop again, this time his whole coat was in flames. Again and again he jumped, his eyes glued on Lilly, until he dropped at her feet. She looked down to see the flaming body of her only love, one smouldering paw wrapped around her slender ankle. The audience stood immobilized as Lilly slumped to the ground. Flames licked at her through her golden mail armour.

A handsome woman rushed out of the shadows toward the conflagration and rushed toward the girl in time to hear her daughter's final words. “Leo, my love. Take me with you.”

The Snapshot

In the snapshot she is smiling and running towards the photographer, her golden ringlets crowned with a hat to match her jacket. She is on the deck of a ship and she is happy. This perfect childhood memory is pinned to an easel in her art therapist's studio.

“I don't know why I brought this one in, it makes me miserable,” she said, sprawled out on the crimson art deco sofa. “I don't understand how a four by four piece of paper can have so much power. Granted, sepia makes everything look romantic.”

“Tell me about this little girl,” the therapist prompted.

“Well look at her! She's so bloody well turned out and happy!”

“But, that's good, isn't it? Why, do you think you were so happy?”

“But that's just it, I can't remember being anything but miserable in that family.”

“Okay, but little Jean is having a happy moment. Why do you think?”

“Well, look at her. Someone's done her hair. She's dressed beautifully. We had hand-me-downs and bowl cuts.”

“Is that what makes two-year-olds happy? New coats? Hair dos?”

“I don't know, I don't remember. But why not?”

“Who are you running to? Who's the photographer?”

“Well, I suppose it's my dad. He was an aerial photographer during the war.”

“Looks like you're happy to see him.”

“Looks like it.”

“How do you think you felt about him? Given how happy you look in the photograph?”

“Oh, fuck it. She loves him. Look at her. She looks so innocent. So trusting. He must have loved her, too.” Jean was crying now. Gently, Greta pushed a box of tissues toward her.

“Our relationship was so complicated, so fraught,” she moaned. “The thought of that innocent joy just... just....”

“Just what?”

“Makes me feel bereft. All those years she spent hating him, feeling unloved, when all along he might have loved her...”

“And you had feelings for him?”

“She might even have loved him? What if she *loved* him?”

“Yes? What if?”

“Her life was loveless. What if there could have been love?”

“You felt unloved, you mean.” Greta waited for the sobbing to subside. “Her?” she continued. “Why are you referring to yourself in the third person?”

“Me,” Jean choked out after a long silence. “Me, okay? Me! I must have loved him.” She was sobbing now, curled up in the fetal position on the couch.

“Ah... love. That's painful for you, isn't it?”

“Oh, God, all those miserable lonely years. All that hate. All that bloody senseless loss. Whoever said it's better to love and lose than never love at all was wrong. Better to never love. But you can't tell a two-year-old that I suppose.”

“Jean, our time is almost up, can we pick this up on Thursday?”

She blew her nose, straightened her skirt and left. “Fuck it!” she tossed back over her shoulder.

“Jean, that was good. What you are doing is hard. See you Thursday,” Greta replied softly.

Jesus, this is not what I signed on for, Jean thought as she climbed into the Discovery. She started art therapy by chance, really, when she went to a talk about how it could help children with learning difficulties. She was teaching in Soweto and had quickly realised that the children's reality wreaked havoc on their ability to learn. At the end of Greta's talk, Laura had asked if this was something she could apply in a classroom of children with mixed languages and very little English.

“How could I use art to help these children?” she asked after explaining her struggle

teaching township children.

Greta had looked into her eyes for a moment and replied, “You can help them by helping yourself.” She handed Jean her card. “Come see me.”

Do I really look so fucked up, Jean thought, *that a woman I've never seen before thinks I need therapy? If I can just help these children I'll be okay.*

A month later, she was opening the door to the Art Therapy Centre filled with apprehension that quickly melted away as she crossed the threshold to face a two-storey-high wall of cottage pane windows. The remaining walls were laden with wooden shelves overflowing with things that glittered and glowed, beckoned and bemused.

In the weeks that followed she found parts of herself she hadn't known existed. One night they made vessels out of clay, the requisite metaphor for containment. The next she sat on the floor at a sand box, lost in sand castle memories from her childhood, blissfully making dwellings a la Gaudí, and populating them with unicorn families. Then a self portrait; stardust glittered in her eyes, the blonde ringlets flying around her head home to butterflies and dragonflies.

The next week she was making another self portrait, a collage, half angelic, half dark and distorted, when she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder.

“Jean, what are you doing?” Greta asked her. Jean awoke as though from a dream to find herself gouging at the portrait with a pencil, stabbing it again and again. Tears streaming down her face, she gathered her things and left. Greta followed her to the door. “It's time.”

Now, she was deep in art therapy, unable to turn a snapshot of herself as a toddler into a painting. She was suffering from so much muscular pain that her doctor made a tentative diagnosis of fibromyalgia. One of her colleagues convinced her to try a session of Body Talk, a form of therapy so new that even Google revealed nothing.

She went in desperation, but when the women asked why she was there she heard herself saying, “abandonment”.

“My mother abandoned me when I was thirteen and now my husband is abandoning me. He's not leaving me, I mean he's still living with us. But I feel like I'm running a bed and breakfast. He's gone emotionally.”

Then she lay down, fully clothed, on a bed, while the stranger moved her arm about like it was a crane, all the while making weird tapping motions all over her body.

“You've got one of the most talkative bodies I've ever worked with,” the woman said after an hour. “But it's telling me a different story. The loss your body is holding occurred not as an adolescent, but when you were a small child of about two. Can you think of what that might be?”

Jean shook her head, paid the woman and left.

She awoke in the middle of the night, thinking about the photo. They were on a ship going to England to live with her gran while her father went to do research in Morocco. *Abandonment,* she thought. *That photo is about the first time I was abandoned*.

Then she remembered a book she'd read about a woman who had recreated her life with snapshots. She'd chosen the happy ones, put them in an order that told a new narrative, and it had worked. The woman changed her life. Jean went down to the study with a box of old photos and worked long into the night, ripping up the snapshots that brought up negative emotions and placing the other ones in a pile.

One photo wouldn't fit in. It was taken at the entrance to a fair ground, they were all smiling on this rare family outing. She was about seven years old and was beaming. She remembered how she hadn't slept the night before, she was so excited. As usual her father wasn't in the picture. She remembered the shiver of delight she had felt when her mom, who paired each child up with an adult, said, “Jean, you go with your dad.” If you get separated, she continued, come back here and wait for your partner. The day hadn't begun when her father disappeared. She remembered being slightly relieved that they'd been separated so close to the entrance, afraid she wouldn't have found it otherwise. So, she went and stood there. And stood there. And stood there. Her curls wilted, her dress was soaked in perspiration. She could see the Ferris wheel, hear the music on the Carousel. She smelt popcorn, peanuts, saw people walk by tearing strips from their candy floss. She was still standing there at the end of the day.

The Lost City

“Turn on CNN, quick,” her husband said hastily when she answered the phone.

“Why,? It's the middle of the … ” she asked, but the line went dead.

Jean turned the television on in time to see what looked like an airplane flying into what looked like the World Trade Centre. She slumped into the nearest chair and watched with a sense of unreality as the plane disappeared into one of the Twin Towers. Then it happened again. She thought they were replaying the footage, but it was going into the other tower, the one that wasn't belching out smoke. She couldn't move, could barely breath, she sat there frozen.

At some point the insistent ringing of the telephone brought her back into her skin. She had forgotten to pick up her children. She got in the car, drove, forgot where she was going, eventually arrived. The children were standing anxiously by the gate with their friend's mother. She made her apologies and muttered something about how airplanes were flying into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon. “The United States is under attack!” The woman looked at her quizzically. It was frowned on to forget your children.

She stopped and picked up take-away, put it in front of the children in the play room, popped a video in and returned to her chair in front of the television.

At some point that evening the doorbell rang, so she answered it. It was a young woman who had worked as a domestic briefly some months ago.

“I've heard the news about your country,” she said. “I'm so sorry, this must be so awful for you.”

She came in, made them tea, sat down. They sat in front of the television together.

“When this happens to us, when terrible things happen in Zimbabwe, we sit together,” she said. Then she got up to leave.

At some point Jean's husband came in, mumbled something. Was it platitudes? He sent the children to bed, changed, went out. She carried on sitting there, a tissue box at her side.

For days she sat in front of the television, it was the only time that anything seemed real. She saw the people jump because the news played endless reruns of the most horrific scene of a falling men. She watched the firemen go into the burning buildings. She understood that many didn't come out. She watched rescue teams searching endlessly through the rubble. She watched New Yorkers talk about what they had seen, heard. She watched Americans comfort each other. She watched that very closely.

The phone didn't ring, nor did the doorbell.

She wondered whether anyone she knew was working at the World Trade Centre. Someone from her graduate school perhaps? She didn't know how to find out.

When the planes went into those towers it felt like they were flying into her. She felt them go in, find the spot where her Americanness lay dormant, brutalise it into life. Of all the people she knew in that big African city, the dozens of people she had wined and dined, lunched with, worked with on volunteer committees, the only one who understood was a Zimbabwean.

Jean's husband didn't take the time to understand, was settling into a new job. After decades in front of the camera, he'd recently crossed the line, moved to the dark side. His first foray into management had gone well and he'd signed on new advertisers. He was dizzy with success, looking at the figures on his computer screen, thinking about how to cheer up his wife, who'd slipped into a black hole since 9/11. Then the young producer he'd been working with before his move appeared at the door.

“Well look at you, this is amazing!” she giggled, glancing at the huge corner office with balconies on two sides and views out to the Magaliesburg. “Can I run something by you? There's no one else whose opinion I value like yours.”

“No, no, that's fine. Come in. Drink?” he asked, grinning as he pointed to the wet bar in the corner.

“Sure, why not?”

“How's it going with the new reporter?” he asked, handing her a glass of Chardonnay.

“Well, he's green,” she said, launching into a litany of complaints that ended with: “He's not you, but no one is.”

He reached over and stroked her naked thigh.

“Right,” he said, abruptly getting up from the armchair across from her. “What was it you wanted me to look at?”

She leant over his desk to point out the copy on his computer screen. Her sleek, golden breasts visible through the low cut blouse and lacy bra.

“Drink after work?” he asked.

She nodded.

Guy took care of his hard on and then the guilt returned. He had wanted to resist her, had hoped that moving upstairs would keep her away. But again, she overpowered him with flattery, with her breasts and thighs there for the world to see, but only for him to nuzzle and fondle. *She's like my kryptonite*, he thought wryly.

“Right, now what was I doing?” he said aloud. “Oh, yeah. Getaway. With the family.”

He loved his wife, her zany love of life, the passion she brought to everything, but he could not tolerate the depression she'd slipped into since the Twin Towers had been attacked. It made him feel helpless. Night after night he'd come home to find her either sitting alone in front of the television, a box of tissues at her side, or asleep in bed, zonked out on tranquilizers. Lately, her sleeping was all he saw. His new job required more entertaining, and that meant more excuses to be out late. In the old days, Jean would have loved any excuse to throw a dinner party. But not now. “It's weird,” guy said aloud. “She's the most un-American American I've ever met, but it's like she was physically attacked.”

God, I'm such a prick, he thought. *I've got to make this up to her*. He decided to blow the bonus he would receive on a weekend at Sun City. He went online.

On a whim, he booked a suite at the Palace of the Lost City, Sol Kerzner's wild, imaginative re-creation of a lost ancient civilisation set in tropical gardens, surrounded by lakes and cascading waterfalls. There was something there for everyone. The children would love it. He knew Jean would go nuts about the expense, but thought that once she got there, saw the place, she might be able to let herself go. If the pictures he'd seen on the internet were even vaguely true, the marble palace was crazy over the top, their suite had a baby grand piano. It was the piano that sold him. His daughter Sasha had taken up the piano and

was obsessed, practiced every free minute. This way he could reassure her that her dad was going to do everything possible to help her out.

“Drop everything,” he said, grinning from ear to ear when he got home, late again. “We're going to Sun City for a few days. A belated birthday surprise. It’ll do you good to get away, take your mind off everything. And besides, I need to check out my gambling technique to see if it still works.” He’d winked a her, reminding her of more carefree days. “Pack your best, we're going to spoil ourselves.”

A smile crossed Jean's face as they approached the resort. Nestled in the volcanic valley, surrounded by the Pilanesberg Mountains, it shimmered like a mirage in the distance. But the smile slipped away as their BMW pulled up in front of the Palace Hotel.

“No man, have you lost your mind?” she moaned. Her face hardened as she took in the life-sized elephant statues lining an immense bridge. The palace itself was lit with the glow of hundreds of candles, decorated with Renaissance frescoes, hand-carved furniture, mosaic-inlaid floors and towering columns of false tusks and palm fronds.

She didn't say another word. He was grateful for that. She seemed to let go as they settled into their suite, which was three of the biggest rooms he'd ever seen. The bedrooms had enormous beds and en-suite marbled bathrooms. The kids were thrilled to have their own over-sized television and turned it on immediately, squabbling over which programme to watch. Then Sasha saw the piano and swooned in ecstasy, sat down and played *Fur Elise*.

“That's fantastic, darling,” Guy said. “Gosh, but you picked that up fast! I'm so proud of you.”

The skinny child beamed awkwardly with pleasure.

Husband and wife drank the complementary French champagne and he tried to calm her anxiety about the expensive suite with a tale about a huge discount on the rooms and a bonus he was going to receive. He felt that his wife forced him to lie to keep life bearable. Everyone was in high spirits as they went their separate ways, agreeing to meet later for cocktails at the pool.

Now, he was deep in the belly of the casino, in a dark cave out of the glaring sunlight and opulence. He put another coin in the slot machine and pulled back the arm. Some years

ago he'd devised an algebraic equation for beating the one-armed bandits. He sat at the bar sipping neat Cuttysark while deciding which machine to colonise. He chose one and changed his cash into casino tokens. He had already used most of the three dozen coins he calculated he needed to hit the jackpot. Only three left. Usually it didn't take this long. Had Kerzner changed the formula programmed into the machines? No, he would have heard. Two apples. This could be it, he thought. But up came the lemon. “Damn,” he whistled. He needed this win. His wife was right, booking the most expensive suite in the resort had been rash.

Jean was enjoying the spring sun with Sasha as they strolled across the Bridge of Time toward the Shrine of the Sacred Monkey. She was still obsessing about the elephant statues lining the bridge. The tusks look amazingly real, she thought, but surely even Sol Kerzner wouldn't use ivory. She was still churning up inside with mixed feelings about the extravagance of these few days.

“Mommy, look at that monkey!” Sasha called with delight. All the gawky, braided ten-year-old cared about was the circus, music and animals, she didn't have a moment for anything else. In Johannesburg she had joined a club at the zoo, where, for a huge fee she could spend her weekends cleaning out the cages and enclosures under the supervision of the workers. Some of them were fantastic with the children, though, it was worth the expense. Sasha would come home with tales about the animals, their behaviour and relationships and little known facts. “Mommy, did you know that...” was how everything she said started these days.

Just then, Jean heard a rumbling come from deep inside the Earth and it seemed like the ground moved. It was moving, she was swaying. An earthquake had struck, impossible but true. *Oh, my God, not another disaster*!

Sasha grabbed her hand gleefully. “Oh, cool! It's the earthquake!”

“What are you talking about? We don't get earthquakes in South Africa,” Jean said in an automatic attempt to reassure her but the panic was visible on her face.

“No, it is an earthquake, but it's not real, silly,” Sasha laughed, tossing her blonde plaits from side to side. “They make them here all the time. You see those cracks in the paving? Soon they’ll move back together until the next time. Isn't it amazing? Isn't this place too cool?”

Mickey, too, was enjoying the warm September sun at the Valley of the Waves. He'd been missing his father lately, wanted to talk to him. He didn't think his dad had made the right choice going into management. He felt sure that the reality of spending his life making rich people more money was going to get to him. The boy saw and understood things beyond his twelve years, knew it would end badly and he couldn't stand the thought.

He could feel the Asian girl under the umbrella next to him looking at him. Boy, she was not shy! He couldn't be sure she was Japanese, he didn't have a clue how you could tell, but he'd never seen anything so... words left him... so mysterious. He could feel her almond-shaped eyes staring at him, but her face was expressionless, he couldn't tell what she was thinking. He felt shy about exposing his body. *Hell, I wonder if she'll follow me into the water?* he thought, tearing his long, sinewy frame from his towel and sauntering toward the artificial lake, muscles rippling like a sleek cheetah.

He went in and lolled around for awhile, wondering why everyone thought this place was so amazing it looked to him like an overgrown swimming pool. Sure enough, the girl got up and walked toward the water's edge. *What the heck*, he thought with nonchalance, *I might as well say something to her*. As he was paddling toward the shore a huge wave crashed over him, taking him under water for what seemed like forever. When he emerged he was choking, retching and miserable. The girl, thank God, was nowhere to be seen.

Intense, he thought, *so that was what everyone was talking about. That was a wave equal to the best the Wild Coast had to offer.*

Back in the belly of the casino, Guy had bottomed out, gambled away his money and hadn't won a token. Thank God for American Express, he thought. No limit. We'll enjoy this weekend and worry about tomorrow mañana.

The next morning they were collected in a luxurious Land Rover for an early morning safari at a neighbouring game reserve followed by a champagne brunch. While Jean went shopping, Guy hit the casino in another unsuccessful attempt to fill his depleted pockets.

He didn't recognise the woman who opened the hotel room door to him a few hours later. His wife was wearing a black lace dress, cut low to accentuate her cleavage, and tight to show off her perfect ass. Her normally straight, dishwater blonde hair was shining like gold and framing her face in ringlets.

“So, Mr Chandler, are you ready for dinner?” she teased. “The children will be having room service and movies in their room, so it's just the two of us.”

Guy ordered a bottle of French champagne and oysters for starters. Over the second bottle, Jean leaned over and, blushing, whispered in his ear.

“Come on, let's get out of here,” he grinned.

He didn't wait for the door to close on the lift before slipping his hand under his wife's dress. He fumbled to unzip his fly.

“Oh, yes,” he groaned into her ear as the lift door opened.

That night they made love again. Jean's jaw clenched as she drifted in and out of sleep, visions of a falling man merging with one of her husband's hand sliding up another woman's thigh. She thought of the price she'd paid to keep her husband for one more night, the price she would pay in the coming months as the war on terror progressed.

The Dream Deferred

Sasha bounds down the steps and disappears into the crowd of children in the playground and that's where she stays until her mother drags her to the car at the end of the day. Mickey clings tentatively to his mother's knees as he picks his way down the steps his first day at nursery school.

He is oblivious to the climbing frames and jungle gyms, sand pits and water drums set out under the trees. He doesn't want to explore anything inside the bright, chaotic rooms; not the child-sized instruments in the music corner, the finger paints and oversized paper set out on easels, the overflowing box of clothes in the dress-up corner nor the colourful picture books scattered around bean bag chairs in the reading corner.

The moment arrives when all the mothers are sent on their way, and she peels him from her legs and leaves him there crying, but because the fence around the school is slatted she can see a teacher pick him up and comfort him and she stops crying.

The scene is repeated day after day, and sometimes she can't take it so she scoops the anxious boy up and takes him along with on her day of errands and shopping and house work and gardening, trying to make it as boring as possible, but it doesn't work because he is so happy with his mommy.

Then one day after school while she is standing around chatting a dozen or so girls converge in one room dressed all in pink, pink leotards, pink tights, pink shoes. An overweight woman waddles in, puts on some music and begins to teach the girls a new way to stand. It is called first position.

This is it, the little boy is hooked. He won't leave. He sits mesmerised in the corner, unable to take his eyes off the ducklings being transformed into beautiful swans before his eyes. This goes on and on, week after week, until one day the boy says, “Can I do ballet, too, mommy?”

“We'll see, honey, I don't see why not,” she says, holding her breath. She asks the teacher, who says no, she's never taught a boy before, but by now the boy who watches the ballet classes is famous in the school, and the principal intervenes because she is worried

about the timid little boy who still hasn't slotted in. She begs the teacher to take him on and the woman reluctantly agrees.

A boy is going to do ballet. The news goes around the nursery school like fire on a windy day.

“Boys can't do ballet,” is the girls' unanimous, immediate pronouncement.

So, the principal intervenes again and sits down with the girls and tells them how, in fact, the ballet can't go on without boys. They have to hold the girls up sometimes and show them off so that the girls can do all their beautiful things.

So, it seems that he is to be allowed in. But when the day comes he sits in the corner and refuses to get up and no one knows why not even the mother holding her breath in the corner and everyone thinks well that was a tempest in a teapot.

He eventually settles down and the children's lives are full with play dates and birthday parties and Jean loves all of it. *My children are having the happy childhood I never had*, she thinks and the thought satisfies her through all the times when Guy won't.

Jean goes through more than her fair share of hard times in her marriage, but the children are happy and so she is too. Then they have to decide which primary school to send them to and Jean and Guy fight endlessly. She wants them to go to a good government school where they can be together, but he is adamant they get the private education he so desperately wanted as a child and that means separating them.

“But Guy, all their friends are going to the former Model C school. It's lovely, and they need to be together. You know as well as I do that they don't belong in single sex schools! Sasha's a tomboy and Mickey won't fit in. All his friends are girls. And we went to government schools and didn't fare so badly!”

“We can't take the chance anymore, the government schools are in trouble and they're going to get worse.”

So the twins go to the private schools on their doorstep. They are separated for the first time. On the first day, Guy takes Sasha, who is more beautiful than ever in her pale blue pinafore. Jean takes Mickey, who is diminished by his khaki uniform, long socks and heavy shoes and already wilting under the sun blazing down on the Johannesburg ridge.

Sasha finds new friends and quickly fits in. Her teachers can't praise her highly enough. She is bright, popular, fearless, a leader. Mickey's teacher never finds anything nice to say about him, though. He can't sit still. Doesn't know his colours. Not learning his words. Doesn't have any friends, sits by himself at break.

They persevere, though, and then the boy starts having nightmares and sees monsters and snakes and spiders everywhere and he is afraid to close his eyes on school nights. This goes on and on and gets worse and worse until one day he hides in the cupboard under the stairs and sobs because he still doesn't know the word “who” and it's been in his box for two years and by now he knows that everyone is right and he is a stupid boy.

The mother never takes him back to that school and when she goes to get his stuff she hears his teacher screaming at the kids, so she picks up his books and all of them are empty except for his name and the date in exquisite print on blank pages, and she leaves thinking how her sensitive boy would have had to hide from that shouting.

She takes him to the remedial school where they test him for three days before saying he might be uneducable. They hold a special board meeting to see if they can increase a class by one and they all agree because this is a boy in crisis and so they take him and put him in a lower grade. They say they have never done this before.

None of this worries Mickey, though, because after school Jean takes him downtown to a children's ballet class at the national ballet school. She pulls black tights and a white T-shirt out of her bag and Mickey changes without a word. Shoulders back and head high he enters the airy spacious studio and takes a place at the barre amongst a frothy cloud of pink tutus. A man walks over to show him first position, but the boy has already assumed it. The man beams at him and nods at the pianist to begin. Mickey smiles back and sinks into a flawless plie.

The White Room

Nkosinathi was watering the roses, enjoying the light spray splattering back and mingling with his sweat when the oppressive stillness was broken by loud wailing from inside the house. The sound was a ragged mixture of weeping, screaming and swearing, and it carried on and on. This is good, he thought, she's angry. He'd been waiting for this, they all had. The house had been too quiet, she'd been too calm, almost happy. The boss had been around a lot lately, and they'd been laughing like in the early days. She didn't know about the other, though, the one who was making him happy. But Nkosi did, they all did. It sounded like now she, too, knew that he was going to move out of her bedroom and into the other's.

Then he caught a glimpse of her, rushing from the house to the garage, her hair flying madly, her arms full of the treasures they had collected over the years. Inside the garage, she hurled porcelain figurines and vases over and over against the concrete floor, shards bounced back and nicked her legs through the sheer, white skirt, but she didn't feel it.

Why doesn't she stop this, simply walk out of that garage and into a new life? She'd been down this road before and knew that sanity was a choice, that she could choose at any moment to stop the downward spiral into the vortex. This was not even news, she'd suspected the women for years, everyone had. She had come so close to breaking the ties, had found a good lawyer. But then he'd started coming around again, so friendly, so pleasant. Even the children had said they thought daddy was coming home. Were they, too, in that dangerous place when rising expectations, hope, is killed?

She got the broom and swept the shards into a dustpan, put them in a bucket and washed them, put them aside to recreate her life in a future, better moment. The potter's wheel beckoned her, and she went, knowing that work would calm her. She wedged clay as she had been taught, throwing all her weight, her life, into it. Sat at the potter's wheel, deftly centering the clay and drawing it up to form an egg-shell thin, fluted vessel to hold, contain. She made another, and another, soothed by the spinning of the wheel and the repetitive up down movements of her hands she was one with the clay.

Outside, Nkosinathi took in every sound. He was frightened by the quiet, relieved when the swearing started again, this time more violent as, he thought, the extent of the humiliation

and betrayal sank in. She was throwing something against the walls now. “The fucker, he just played me along 'til he was absolutely sure about her, that she was ready!”

Now it was quiet again, and he could take no more. He grabbed a broom and rushed in. She was flinging herself around wildly. He dropped the broom, went over to her, spoke soothingly to her, tried to calm her, put his arm around her. “You must stop crying now, you will make yourself sick,” he said.

“Leave me alone,” she shrieked, reeling outside. Why didn't they just leave her? Couldn't they see that she'd cried too much, taken too many pills, needed to rest?

“Please God don't let us go through what we went through last year,” the elderly African whispered, his body remembering the shock of finding her that Sunday afternoon she thought she was alone, comatose on her daybed, with the pills. Always the pills.

He went into the house. Everything was quiet now. Too quiet.

She was in her bedroom reading the Bible, in the desperate hope that it could do what only the pills could. Ease the pain, get her through this moment and back to that dull ache she had long ago learned to live with. But he’d just ended twelve years of marriage in an SMS. There was nothing she could do with the anger, the pain, the humiliation, it kept growing and growing inside of her, the minute she let it out it came back ten times stronger.

Then something clicked, she was bathed in peace, calm. “They'll be better off without me,” she said. “Finally, the children can have the happy family they deserve.”

She went downstairs to the liquor cabinet, took out her best decanter of cognac and matching glass. Woodenly went back upstairs, swept the contents of the medicine cabinet into the skirt of her dress, went to her room, her own room, and locked the door. Poured the amber liquid, emptied out the pills. “They're so pretty,” she thought as she lay down and put one on her tongue and washed it down with the burning nectar.

She lay sunken into the bed somewhere between consciousness and coma. Able, still, to lift her arm, elbow anchored on the mattress, crane-like to pick up the glass on the bedside table, swivel it to her lips, sip the burning amber and hold it in her mouth while the arm repeated the swivel to the table to pick up a pill, any pill. The sheer white curtains breathed deeply in and out, as though encouraging her to take life into that place she was sending it

from. Her body lay heavy on the mattress, but somehow light, unbearably light as though she could levitate. The curtain grazed her bare leg, but her skin was insensible, benumbed, she knew only because the white against tan was vaguely pleasing.

She had come instinctively to this place, like a wounded animal to its cave and locked the door behind her, but not before taking the cognac from the cabinet under the watchful eye of Nkosinathi, who was ironing nearby. She had known what this room was for when she first saw it, known the windows had to be extended, floor to raftered ceiling, on three sides. That they must be shrouded in white gauze. That the white wrought iron bed and rich mahogany bedside table would complete it. And her. A hadeeda emitted its high pitched squawk and she responded by swiveling the arm over for the heavy crystal glass. Sipped the burning nectar, over for another pill.

How many times had she repeated the motion? Two? Twenty? For how long? The light was softer now, no longer shards of glass in her eyes. The air pleasant against skin. Her arm swiveled over one last time and came back with her journal, the one with the angel embossed in gold. She opened it and began to write.

She didn't hear the outer door being smashed in, then the next one. She didn't feel his tears flowing onto her face as he cradled her in the white quilt and carried her to the car he couldn't drive. She didn't know he would sit there and wait.