

This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis

Part B: Portfolio

Gray

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University by

James Fouché

October 2021

Thesis Abstract

My thesis is a crime fiction novella. I'm moved by the idea of developing feasible, relatable characters with flaws – a staple of the crime fiction genre. I also appreciate how crime serves as a platform from which to launch into human drama, the way James Ellroy does in *The Black Dahlia*. While my protagonist endures trials on a near Jobian scale, the narrative meditates on the consequences of crime and conflict in a satirical way. Writers like Ross Macdonald, Raymond Chandler, Flannery O'Connor, China Miéville and Derek Raymond have inspired me with their sharp imagery and unconventional characterization techniques. These techniques accelerate the ease with which a reader can step into the shoes of any given narrator. Their writing is crisp, uncluttered and uncomplicated.

CHAPTER 1

I was about to pass out when the car drew to a halt. The hum of the motor died down. There came a click of a locking mechanism letting go, then a wave of light spilled over me as the car's boot groaned open. The morning sun crawled deeper into the boot space and wrapped around my body, drawing the ache out of my joints and the cold out of my muscles.

The grey bag covering my head added to the claustrophobia. Though porous enough, it revealed very little. The only movement I made out was through a narrow slit when I looked down. The bag had the characteristics of a large woollen sock. It certainly smelled like one.

Car doors slammed shut and muted voices became a stream of street lingo detailing illicit events as bragging rights. Through the wool, I made out two shadowy figures against the blue skyline.

Seconds later, two sets of hands tugged at my clothes and limbs until I stood upright on what must have been a tarred road surface. My hands were cable-tied behind my back. I swung my head this way and that to find some discernment on the other end of my head sock, but it was disorientating.

I heard dogs barking, sprinklers *tsik-tsik-tsik-trrrring* and a lonely cicada calling for company. I could no longer smell the sea floating on the air. There was no salt, only building dust and dried grass. My senses, however, were not as sharp as they had been a couple of months ago.

I surmised that we had come up to the Northern Suburbs of Cape Town. The boot trip had lasted about two hours, which would be enough to cover that distance. I was thumb-sucking the duration, but it sounded fair. Besides, I couldn't check my wristwatch with my hands bound. Nor could I scratch the itch below my knee.

I was nudged forward. My heart was eager to follow my captors, but my feet were reluctant, like two blocks of cement dragging along a shallow riverbed. Looking down, I could make out my feet. Besides the itch, my legs were numb from the waist down. I willed them to cooperate. There still lay a long journey ahead.

Over a small curb, up a series of steps, over a carpeted section and onto a black plastic sheet, my feet went, one in front of the other, like hooves clopping into an abattoir. A white chair entered my narrow strip of vision. The firm hand resting on my shoulder applied pressure, urging me to sit.

Wrestling with the cable ties and not having any water, had worn me out. Rolling over every time the driver took a left, had sent me smacking into the edge of the boot's metal framework, then back again until a tyre iron wedged into my back. In contrast, the chair looked inviting to me. I welcomed the opportunity to rest.

Once seated, the grey head sock was plucked from my head as though a magician was unveiling a bunny to an audience. A blast of blinding light filled my periphery. I winced, blinked and allowed my eyes to adjust. My surroundings bled through my blindness and took shape in front of me, outer edges first, then the inner bits followed.

The room was completely empty, void of furniture or character that would indicate what type of room it was. There were white camping chairs placed in no discernible order across the cemented floor, though I noticed mine centred in the builder's plastic sheet. In one corner was a small wooden ladder and two large buckets of paint, on which were piled trays, rollers, brushes and a cartridge of elastic sealant.

Opposite me was the outline of a large wooden chair. The figure seated in the chair was veiled in shards of shadow. Though obscured by the light that pierced through the large windows, the calm, crisp voice told me who I was in company with.

“So, let’s have it then,” he said, a steady monotone that belied his true intentions.

I knew this man. I knew his intentions. I have studied him for weeks on end. That gave me a slight advantage – because he didn’t know me at all. All he knew about me was what I wanted him to know, and that was very little. Then again, I couldn’t say with any certainty exactly what he had been told about me, because I hadn’t been present at the time.

Over the last couple of months, I’ve found that the world was filled with people who needed only a glimpse of an idea to believe it, whether true or not. Manipulating them had been so easy. He’d believed every word I had fed him. He had to have believed it or else we wouldn’t be here, stuck in this room on a hot afternoon.

“My hands,” I complained. “Can you untie me?”

It’s funny how I could feel him smiling at me without seeing a smile on his face. I had complete faith that he would do whatever I asked of him, at least for the next couple of hours. But I had to push the boundaries early on. If I didn’t prepare my audience at the start, I’d be dead within the hour.

I had no doubt that they wanted to kill me at that moment. They would have just cause to feel that way soon enough. I was about to tear their worlds apart. Similarly, I had just cause to make their lives hell. Revenge was like a bad investment; no matter how much money you pumped into it, it never brought you any joy.

His eyes beamed at me for so long that I became uncomfortable. He shrugged and nodded at someone behind me. I couldn’t see the guy approaching, but by the slow, heavy sounds of his boots it sounded like a big man. I heard the flicking sound of a pocket knife, felt the cold blade slide into the tiny gap where my wrists joined and the cable ties snapping apart.

Freedom, sort of. I brought my hands around, first scratching the spot below my knee, then studied the purple rings around my wrists and massaged the bruises. My fingers had a bluish tinge to them. The cable ties had started cutting into my wrists, pressing through the soft skin at the joints. I remembered a time when my skin hadn’t been this fine.

“I need some water,” I said to the man behind me, then to my captor, “Please.”

Without shifting his gaze, he flicked a finger. Someone left the room in search of water.

There were scuffling sounds in one dark corner, followed by a soft groan. I had heard that display of annoyance before. I knew him well, too. Both these men, night and day to the common eye, had been dealt the same burden of being under my close observation. Burden because it had been my intention to be a burden to the utmost degree. Revenge could make one throw caution to the wind.

The man hiding in the corner stepped into view. His name was Shane Collins. He was short and muscular, with thin lips that always betrayed a sly smile. He was naturally short-tempered, and when he snapped, violence followed. Even now, I saw the effort it required of him not to attack me with his bare hands.

The man seated in the wooden chair was Denvor Daniels. Tall and well groomed, he looked like a salesman. He was twice as dangerous as Shane because he was methodical, and sociopathic, which contrasted Shane’s predictability. He applied patience to his retaliatory advances. Fortunately,

he was not as reckless as Shane and refrained from making waves. Shane enjoyed headlines while Denvor hid in the shadows. He was a puppet master, which had benefitted the pair when they had been in partnership years before.

Since then, both had become career criminals. While they had made peace with their illicit affairs, they had become mortal enemies over the years. Biological opposites, twins by trade, and permanently at war. They were bitter to the bone and fiercely territorial, but the forgotten friendship often stayed their fury.

They had no idea who I was. Where did I come from? Who did I work for? How did I manage to gather so much money in their territory without them knowing about it? And where was the money stashed? Those were the questions they had been fed.

“So, where is it?” Shane said tapping his foot loudly.

Not the opening question I had been expecting, though I realised that Shane was all about the bottom line.

I coughed, hinting that I couldn't possibly carry on without a sip of water.

The bottle of still water previously called for, appeared on the small table in front of me, beads already forming on the outside. I wondered whether someone down the ranks had run to the corner shop.

“Could I have sparkling?” I ventured, gauging how far I could push. Their combined reactions informed me that it was too soon. “This will do,” I said, sucking greedily at what could be the last water I'd ever drink. I finished half the bottle, drinking until tears welled up, then screwed the cap back on and leaned back.

Shane opened his hands in anticipation, mouth agape. He leaned forward until he was hovering over the table, then hissed, “Where is our money? And who are you working for?”

Still massaging my wrists, I scanned the room again. Twelve men scattered about, like fishermen without a vessel. The nature of business they were in suggested they were all armed with a weapon. I remembered all these men. I had studied them, too. I could have murdered every one of them. I could have killed them in their most private places, in front of their loved ones, while they were taking a piss. I had planned to pick them all off slowly, one by one, in gruesome ways, but unintended contemplation had steered me elsewhere. Time was a precious commodity.

“Okay, let me tell you where I got the money, then all this will make more sense.”

Both men wanted to separate me from my newly acquired fortune, especially since they believed I was muscling in on their joint territory. More importantly, they wanted to know if I was independent or working for their competition.

I had centre stage. I had this one opportunity to do things my way. *Guide my tongue. Let me say the right thing at the right time.*

CHAPTER 2

My father died when I was still young, leaving behind my mother to take care of me and my brother Allan. He was two years older than me, and two sizes bigger than me. My mother was a simple woman who believed in morals and hard work. She slaved day and night to get us through school. The day I graduated, my joy was overshadowed by a car accident that claimed the lives of both my mother's parents, my only surviving grandparents. Something broke inside of her that day. With no husband to turn to for comfort and two demanding boys to care for, my mother let herself go. She squeezed the best of herself into preparing us for the world.

After school I sought employment and, sadly, I found it. I began as a casual merchandiser at a big retail company in a mall, while my brother pursued the wonderful underpaid world of education. The retail industry swallowed me in as a youth and spat me out as an overworked manager a couple of years later. I was drained, but eager to fight back. After numerous aptitude tests, I qualified for a position as a junior financial adviser at a large firm in the city. Here I met my wife, Brenda.

Back then she was a secretary at the firm. The first day I arrived at the office Brenda was there to greet the newcomers. Her hair hung level with her shoulders, thick and springy, voluptuous curls. On that first day she led the newbies, a group of about six, to an empty office where she prepped us for the induction process. I was amazed at how efficient and orderly she was. While we watched hours of tutorials, I kept picturing this pretty girl at reception. During our lunch break, they brought in coffee and snacks. I was disheartened to see another woman pushing in the tea trolley. It was a childish disappointment, but I couldn't help it.

My infatuation grew with each passing minute. After our induction, we lined up at reception to sign out and receive entry cards. There she was, passing out smiles to the boys. My heart skipped when the other woman came around to assist Brenda. She motioned me forward with a come-hither finger and a grumpy expression. I signed the documents, but Brenda kept pulling my eyes to her side of the counter. As she busied herself, I studied her every move. I loved studying people. I still do. This was different, though. She had a mesmerising quality that drew me in and shut out the world.

Then came our inevitable introduction. Attempting to make eye contact before leaving, I walked into the glass door. I broke my nose and two fingers. The office manager claimed it as a record for their firm, me having to complete an Injured-on-Duty application the same day I start my new job.

I eventually asked her out to coffee. Then followed it up with supper at a fancy restaurant, fully funded by my first paycheque. We clicked. Her intricacies and my inadequacies complemented each other. For some reason, we were both careful and reluctant in the love department. We evaluated one another from a safe distance.

One day she invited me along for a morning hike at the base of Devil's Peak. It was days after the arrival of Spring. The air was crisp. The overbearing smell of fynbos pressed in on us from all sides. After the walk along the footpaths, we sat on the cold granite steps that led up to the monument of the Rhodes Memorial. She removed a thermal flask and two cups, then poured out the coffee she had prepared. We sat in silence and watched the sun claw its way free from a clump of trees in the distance. Her face glowed as the bronze rays spread across her cheeks. I was captivated by her. That was our sixth date. I leaned over the coffee cups and stared into her eyes. Our reluctance wavered and we closed the space between us with a kiss.

I returned from that morning hike a married man. At least, in my mind I did. I remembered sending Allan a text, saying that I had met my future wife. We had so much in common. We preferred

the woods over the sea, loved to hike together, made a mean paintball team, and we killed at 30 Seconds. She danced and I watched. I cycled and she watched. She was the pink gin to my craft beer.

I proposed a couple of months later and she said yes.

After we were married, we opened our own office. Word of mouth brought in plenty of business. I was honest and hard-working. Middle-class folk could relate to me on that level. It helped that my brother and his wife, Satí, brought in ample business from colleagues at their respective jobs. It turned out teachers were getting poor advice on their retirement planning, so I restructured their savings to work in their favour. I was a master at estate planning, especially at restructuring wills to expedite the winding up of estates after the testator had passed on. My motivation was the memory of how my mother had struggled after my father's passing.

Brenda was my helper in more ways than one. As the years went by, she became so much a part of me that we became one entity. Our relationship thrived on a mutual display of *simpatico*. We bought a little house not far from the business, yet far enough to be out of the humdrum of city life. We prepared ourselves for the dozens of children we were planning to have.

Alas, children never came. Due to an inexplicable display of biological indolence from both parties, we were unable to become pregnant. Parenthood eluded the ideal parents. The irony of it didn't escape me. The sum of our attempts to conceive had made our dream nightmarish by comparison. If children be the fruits of life, then the inability to have children be the rot of life. There was something to be said here about the sadness and disdain spawned by the barren womb. I have yet to find anything more distressing and drawn out in its haunting. Be it a curse or a result of cruel biological mathematics, I cannot say, but the realisation that the soil would remain fruitless no matter how powerful the seed, was as crippling a blow as there ever could be. And to further be informed that the seed was substandard was even more crippling. It could drive any being to tears and prayers, the only resolve that had merit in today's world. Subconsciously, we siloed ourselves from friends with children and drew closer into each other.

In keeping with the woe that followed me, our business collapsed without warning. I was forced to find placement at a small insurance firm, but a recessionary dip and a subsequent financial crunch caused people to cancel existing policies, which dried up my recurring commission.

I nearly drowned. Financial stress had a way of bringing about sleepless nights, of which there were many. So it came to be that I found myself down again, and so it was that the other part of me took it upon herself to find a job as a legal secretary to support the house. Little did I know that our lack of finances would soon be flung into an unquenchable excess of funds through no effort of my own.

One might wonder about the journey from pauper to millionaire. However rare and exceptional this transformational cocoon phase, I was evidence that it could occur at any moment. However, our transition was a somewhat vexing experience, and the consequence of obtaining such abundant wealth was one which I did not wish upon another living soul.

A familiar proverb suggested that a fool and his fortune soon parted ways. That always made me think of the case study about lotto winners, which we worked on during my induction week. Statistically lotto winners were most at risk to burn through their earnings or die before they could enjoy it. As a financial adviser I saw my fair share of squandered inheritance, blasted on earthly pleasures, assuring beneficiaries and heirs of mere months of joy, followed by years of rehabilitation to remedy the addiction to spending.

Thus my consternation that, by some great existential riddle of Jobian equivalence, circumstances sought me out to inflate my bank balance. And how fitting that the onset of my wealth would be kicked into motion by a tragedy.

It was a couple of months before my abduction. My wife was away on a business trip for most of that week. She seldom went away and when she did, I quickly grew tired of the quiet house. The empty bed, the depressing echo of my shoes bouncing back at me when I exited the bathroom, and our cat Moscow's sad meow when I forgot to feed it. It was amazing how she filled the home with warmth, but when she left the house was unnerved and it drew all life back into the plasterwork. The first night I loved having the bed to myself, to do my human starfish impersonation, but then the bed grew cold and, when the lights went out, I only had the weight of the ceiling to force me to sleep.

With no childless friends to socialise with and my mother living in another city, I found myself watching the second hand twitch its way across the stolid face of the wall clock. Allan and Satí lived nearby, which made it easy to stay in touch, though we seldom did. He called me up that Friday morning and suggested I join them for a movie. I suspect Brenda might have lobbied a charity call to Satí.

Sharing my fear of unnecessarily dirtying dishes, Allan insisted we go to a restaurant beforehand. While humming and hawing, phone in hand, considering how to decline a sympathy invitation, I glanced at the picture frame on my office desk. It contained a photo of Brenda leaning against the base of a Crape Myrtle tree in bloom, taken at a Christmas function the year before. The sight of our empty bed flashed in my mind, the sheets tousled and crinkled on my side, flat and lifeless on Brenda's, Moscow warming the feet of a ghost where my wife usually lays.

I agreed to join them.

Allan was a demanding figure: big head, large round chin, dangling arms and hands that could crush coconuts. He stooped when he walked as though his shoulders housed an unbearable burden. An inapproachable hulk of grumpiness with a gentle teddy bear hiding inside. His contentment was ambitious, admirable. It was no surprise that Allan found joy in the city's worst classrooms, a place where he could impart his peace and moral fibre to the broken young minds where pain lingered.

Allan was a teacher and Satí a youth councillor, both government employees. She was the daughter of Samir Parker, a poor Indian migrant, and Caroline, an aspiring English missionary. Her parents had travelled the world to establish community outreach projects. When Satí arrived, their lives became somewhat subdued. They raised their daughter in poverty, teaching her the value in sharing. When Satí finished school, she was a beautiful dark-haired woman with a horde of eligible suitors at her beck and call. Instead of auctioning off her independence and taking a man, Satí became involved with outreach projects in her neighbourhood, a sure-fire way to alienate herself from the rich young boys whose nightlife consisted of partying and drinking. She did a stint in Africa, where she met Allan, who was teaching kids at a village in Zambia at the time. Their romance was an intoxicating one. When two people share a passion, they became an unstoppable force, and so it was with Allan and Satí.

For the sake of relevance, I must add that a couple of years ago, Samir Parker, having lived a full life, leaned back in his chair one morning and left this world. Some months after Samir's stroke, Caroline suffered the same stroke on the way to a shopping mall. The similarity was eerie, but it was inspiring to see how well Satí handled the suddenness of the two deaths. At her mother's funeral, Satí highlighted that her parents had grown so close that even in death they could not be apart for too long. It was, in fact, her intense bond with Allan, that superseded the deaths of her parents. Little did the optimistic Satí know then that her immediate future would be plagued by emotional trials.

On the night, they picked me up in their red Toyota. With ample time at our disposal, we went to a small restaurant opposite the mall before heading to the movies. I knew Allan would offer to pay, but I preferred to pay my way even if it killed me. They waited in the car while I ran across the street to an automated teller machine to draw money. I had this habit of stuffing money into someone's pockets or ashtray without them knowing about it. I had quick fingers.

The machine beeped as the transaction was concluded and the notes peeled out of the cash dispenser slot. Waiting for the receipt, I heard a loud clapping sound. Though loud, it was surprisingly muted. It was followed by a smacking sound next to my head. I stared at the ATM's glass partitioning, studying the tiny hole that hadn't been there seconds before. The spider's web of cracks that spiralled outward marred my confused reflection. Then another loud clap rippled through the peaceful night.

My diaphragm flexed into a strained convex dome and my legs yielded to a crouch. My breath took off as my lungs were forced into confinement. Filled with adrenaline, my heartbeat clucked in my ears like the idle of a muscle car. A haunting scream was loosed, drifting on the air until another gunshot rang out, cutting through my stupefaction.

Money clasped in one hand, I scampered across the pavement toward the safety of an old VW Beetle. From there I could observe the commotion in the parking lot from a safe distance. It felt like an action movie, and I was the cameraman.

I could see the restaurant to my left, the parking area in front of it and the extended parking section off to the right. It was in this area, well-lit by streetlights, where men were crouched behind two cars. Near the narrow stretch in front of the restaurant, another small group of men were concealed behind a blue BMW. The two groups discharged their weapons without the slightest concern where bullets landed, firing rounds haphazardly as if they were shooting with water pistols. People were running, dropping to the pavement, covering their heads, sliding over hoods of cars, diving behind any object of concealment.

Hiding on the outskirts, I looked on in disbelief as a bullet cracked through the restaurant's front window. A mass of cracks took shape, then the entire window collapsed in a shower of shiny stars. A waitress clasped her bloodied arm and went down screaming. A brave patron tackled another waitress to the ground. They disappeared out of sight on the other end of the salad bar. A car window burst inward. A tyre let out a long sigh from where its rubber body had been pierced.

Another wayward slug smacked into the tar next to my VW shield. A homeless guy sharing my shelter grabbed my shirt and pulled me back behind the car. At the sound of approaching sirens, the parking area fell silent. A total of nineteen shots had been fired. I remember it was an uneven number.

As the two groups made their getaway, I ventured a quick peek. I saw two faces that night. One was that of Shane jumping into the back of a blue BMW. The other was that of Denvor Daniels walking boldly to his car. The cars sped off, spewing out gravel and leaving an air of battle smoke in their wake.

The sirens grew louder, then died down as police vans arrived on the scene. The blue flashes of the emergency response lights had a mesmerising quality about it, as though all those within its presence were instantly rendered motionless. It bounced off the shards of glass like blue crickets and got caught in the smoke that hung in the air, coating reality with an impenetrable fog, preventing tangibility from merging with the senses. Walking across the battlefield, smelling the acrid stench of gunfire, feeling the crunch of glass underfoot, hearing a baby scream in the background, I was in momentary absentia, limbo personified.

A policeman, having holstered his weapon, put a hand on my chest and asked if I was hurt. I shook my head and pushed his hand away.

“Officer,” I whispered. “They shot a waitress in the diner.”

I hadn’t considered how close Allan and Satí had been to the gunmen. I couldn’t think straight. Then I heard her voice, softly at first, like a murmur but rising in alarm as I approached.

“No,” she was saying. “No, no, no.”

The policeman kept pulling at me, as if I owed him money.

“Please, no!” I heard again, louder than before, this time recognizing the voice as that of Satí. Why didn’t she call out for help?

The policeman stepped in front of me, shook his head solemnly, but I pushed past him.

“No!” The immediate agony in her voice, even louder than before, tore into my soul. It drove me to tears before I even reached the Toyota.

Satí sat awkwardly hunched over inside the car, whimpering. The driver’s side window was shattered. The windscreen was covered with blood and what I assumed was bits of brain matter. His head lay in Satí’s lap. She cradled it gingerly as though Allan was taking a nap.

I wished I could unsee that part of the incident. It was so graphic, so unpleasantly real. I was so overcome with shock that I reached in and shook Allan’s leg. His jeans were still warm to the touch. He was there, but he was not. I made a fist, took hold of his pants, gave my brother one more tug. He did not recoil. The action offered Satí no comfort. When I pulled back my arm, a sliver of glass cut open my forearm. Though deep, I couldn’t remember feeling a thing. My brother’s death took precedence.

“Help!” I screamed. “We need help!”

The policeman leaned over, peeked inside the Toyota, and reeled back with a grim expression on his face. He called for a medic, though we both knew nothing would wake Allan from his slumber.

CHAPTER 3

The trauma of such an incident could derail anyone’s life, in part because people perceived things differently, which allowed for varied post-tragedy responses. To some, death was a matter of cause and effect. For others it came as a severe emotional assault. Even with a group of heartless monsters in our midst, everyone was capable of sympathising with those who were inexplicably flung into the throes of pain and sorrow. There was little need to detail the sadness which followed for Satí. Once an inviolable personality, she had been rendered frail by consequence.

Satí and Brenda had nothing in common, yet they were the closest of friends. Brenda was akin to Thomas Hardy’s description of Bathsheba. *“She was of the stuff of which great men’s mothers are made. She was indispensable to high generation, hated at tea parties, feared in shops, and loved at crises.”* Sadly, Brenda was nowhere to be seen. Satí was stuck with me.

While detectives took statements for their investigation, I distanced myself from the misery for the sake of Satí. I tried to keep an objective view even as matters escalated after the shootout. Allan's red sedan became evidence, so we had to be taken to hospital by ambulance. Satí was treated for shock. I received stitches. The doctor gave her a tranquilliser strong enough to despatch an elephant to dreamland. Around one o' clock the following morning Satí was released into my care. They stuffed a brown bag filled with medication into my hands and sent us on our way. By means of a stretcher, the ambulance driver and his assistant carried Satí to our spare room and left the house as soon as opportunity presented itself. Then there was silence. The kind of silence that carried weight and brought discord to one's thoughts. Brenda, aware of what had happened, was booked on the first flight home later that morning. Until then, it was just an unconscious Satí and me in an empty house. The house made no eerie cracks. The wind did not howl outside or beat against the windows. Moscow found solace in our study, curled up in a ball under the desk, something he'd never done before.

For whatever remained of the night, I couldn't sleep. My brain worked like an emotional calculator when confronted with shock. The whole night it kept picking at what had happened, as though it was trying to do the math but couldn't. The harder I tried to decipher events, the more complex the math of it became. I was good with numbers, but the means to rework misery, though familiar to me, somehow eluded me.

Over the last two years, gang shootouts had become commonplace in our neighbourhood. It had escalated to a level of acceptance. I read about harrowing things in the newspapers, though it had never been this close to home before. It was the type of irony that made me repeat tired clichés, like *I never thought it would happen to us*. Yet there we were, in the middle of a modern-day gangland turf war, which had claimed the life of my brother.

Brenda called me before boarding her plane. The flight lasted two hours. I counted down the minutes until her arrival. I made breakfast but couldn't eat. When it was time to collect my wife, I slipped out of the house, leaving the smell of burned bacon and stale coffee hanging in the kitchen. I hadn't woken Satí. It seemed wiser to let her be.

I returned a short while later with my wife at my side. Satí was sitting on the edge of the bed when we arrived, Moscow purring loudly at her side, gently brushing against her legs. When Satí saw Brenda, she burst into tears. Arms wide, my wife flew into the room. The door, succumbing to the shift in air molecules in her wake, pulled shut of its own accord.

I stood in the empty corridor for a moment, contemplating the shadows that crept across the carpeting. The morning sun had found our house. It was attempting to penetrate the melancholy with little success. It had been mere hours since reality had ripped through our lives, though it seemed like days.

I was relieved that Brenda was on the other side of that door. I could be intensely analytical at times. I greeted everyone the same way, even helped elderly people cross busy intersections. Though in danger of being a nice guy, I was not the consoling kind. I never possessed that instinct which formed part of sympathy and reassurance. I did life insurance. I ran the numbers, did the math, planned the budget, highlighted flaws, considered and prepared possibilities, then sold solutions. I had to be cold and emotionless to be effective, because my clients only called when someone was dead or dying. Satí needed Brenda, but Allan, in death, now needed me.

When someone passed away, they became a legal entity on a piece of paper. The paper was divided into two, pluses and minuses. An executor was appointed to calculate the value of the individual's estate by listing assets and liabilities, then to expedite pay-outs of life policies or savings. As Allan's financial advisor, and appointed executor through my firm, I was intimately aware of his finances. I

had revised his entire portfolio the year before. His policies had been structured in such a manner that I formed a part of it.

A funeral benefit to one policy paid out R 200,000 within twenty-four hours of his death. I was the beneficiary of this amount. It was to cover the funeral and unforeseen costs, like plane tickets for our mother and Satí, should either of them be away at the time. As they were scheduled to do outreach missions in Congo and Zambia later that year, Satí was not named as a beneficiary in his estate. Following an incident in Nigeria where a woman was held hostage until the proceeds of her husband's life policy paid her ransom, I had to restructure his estate so that Satí would never be viewed as collateral through spousal inheritance should they be kidnapped.

All the assets in Allan's estate, about R3 million in policy benefits, would be transferred into a trust. The main members of the trust would be me, Brenda and an accountant chosen by my firm's legal department. The sole purpose of the trust was to fund a suitable lifestyle for Satí for at least ten years. The trust would only be terminated in two instances. Should Satí remarry, the full value of the trust would pay out to her, and the trust would be deregistered. However, in the unlikely death of Satí, the value of the trust would pay out to us before termination. In fact, I had structured her estate in the exact same way. Satí had suggested this arrangement, primarily because they had decided never to have children and we were their closest family. As an impartial advisor and neutral overseer of their financial affairs, I had taken direction from them, as well as the non-profit organisation which would fund their trip. Now I was stuck in the middle of something I hadn't been able to predict. The task of family stalwart fell on me! His will also stipulated that I had to execute funeral arrangements according to his wishes. Sadly, there was no one more capable to tend to the funeral. I was not equipped for this.

As much as I dreaded the funeral, there was only one thing I dreaded more. The worst part of this ordeal still lay before me, rising up from the depths of my loathing like Jacob's ladder. I still had to make that terrible phone call. How do you tell a mother that her first-born son had been slaughtered?

CHAPTER 4

Shane interrupted the confused silence with a strange, short cackle. My idea had been to pause for effect, but I had drawn it out too long. It had caused a lull. I had to check my timing.

I searched Shane's face for signs of remorse but found pleasure instead, as though the thought of having killed someone close to me was giving him a sick kind of joy. There was a hint of uncertainty in his demeanour, which seemed to be restraining him. It was difficult not to wish him ill.

Sitting in a room filled with murderers and drug dealers, I was at peace. I was recounting a terrible event, yet I was calm. I was staring at the two people who had been the chief instigators behind my hellish nightmare, but I wished them no harm. Well, not anymore, and not in the way one might naturally want to correct a wrong. Whether because of my erratic reasoning over the last couple of months, or the fact that I had nothing left to lose, my contempt had systematically been replaced by indifference.

"If I knew you would get all that money, I'd have killed him twice." He burst out laughing. Some men in the room, spurred on by his madness, contributed loyal giggles. "I'd kill your whole

family for that. Am I right?" he said, winking at Denvor across the room, hoping for some form of validation, but their relationship had clearly soured over the years.

Denvor gave him a flash of annoyance, at which Shane appeared to holster his arrogance. Denvor's control had its advantages – and a rather long list of disadvantages.

At that moment, Shane's words had the subtlety of a mace tearing through a church choir. I was supposed to jump at him and rip out his larynx with my bare hands, but I had become so cold that there was no intention of confronting him.

"I remember that night," said Denvor. He reached for his weapon which lay on the table and slowly spun it around with his index finger, trailing the barrel in a slow arc across the surface. It made a soft grating sound that was hypnotic.

"Yea, so do I," Shane said coolly, pulling absentmindedly at his jacket zip until it was open. "You were pushing the boundaries out north when we agreed you would stay in Kuils River."

"I told you it wasn't me. It was the crew from Rondebosch," replied Denvor.

"Sure, sure, blame the Rondebosch crew for everything. Forgiven and forgotten, *tjomma*."

"I'm not your *tjomma*," Denvor said, rising from his chair. "That ship has sailed. And you don't tell me where I get to do my business."

Shane's sneer rolled from one side of his face to the other, as though he had trumped Denvor in a word duel. "Chillax, *bra*! Put your dummy back. For all we know, this *oke* is rolling with Rondebosch." His fired off another suggestive glare at Denvor. "Maybe his working for you?"

"Stop your shit, Shane. If he was working for me, I'd have killed him long ago. What's the point of all this, if he works for me?"

"I hear you, *tjomma*." Shane refocused his doubts on me. He kicked limply at my chair while scratching his ear. "Hey, who you working for?"

Denvor came to my rescue. "You don't sound very sad," he said. "About your brother, I mean."

An image of Allan in his hiking gear flashed inside my mind, hat pulled askew, pushing a path through the greenery. I could recall that day so clearly, our hike around the Silvermine nature reserve in Tokai, the intoxicating aroma of fynbos. It was the day he confided in me about his intentions to ask Satí to marry him. The memory caused my cheeks to bunch up. The skin around my eyes pulled into what felt like crow's feet wrinkles. I knew what that smile on my face looked like. Brenda often told me that a smile was not meant to look depressing. It was my emotional mileage on display, drawn out of me by a clever criminal. This glimmer of sincerity appeared to put Denvor at ease.

"You can't change the past," I replied flatly.

I was dehydrated. Lately, my entire system seemed to depend on water to keep going. Without liquids, I almost began to desiccate. My joints stiffened when inactive and the viscosity of my saliva dropped to a sticky consistency that caused my tongue to suck to the roof of my mouth. I took another long sip of water and rolled my tongue around the inside of my cheeks to lubricate it. My head was buzzing again. For a second, I couldn't remember where I had left off. My inability to remember what happened moments before was slowly getting out of control. Distant memories were instantly accessible, but the last week was a grey area that required effort to unpack.

Shane dropped his act and leaned forward until I could smell the fruity mess of his underarm deodorant waft down from the loosened buttons of his shirt. Watermelon and pineapple, with a hint of coconut. I gagged but covered the repulsion with a sideways cough. He jabbed a finger at me, both eyebrows scrunched up.

“That shit happened months ago. If the money is in a trust, how’s that going to help me?” He cringed, turned to Denvor, and added, “I mean, us. Slip of the tongue.” He turned back to me, a playfulness turning over on itself in his murky eyes. “How do we get that money?”

I was about to answer when Denvor spoke up.

“I’m not concerned about the trust, Mr. Gray.” Denvor eased into his chair again. “It’s unfortunate about your brother. That’s the nature of our business. But I’m more concerned about the amount. Three million is south of the amount we were told about. And it still doesn’t tell me who you are or who you represent.”

“I’m getting to that,” I began, adding, “And the name is Gray, just Gray, not Mister.”

CHAPTER 5

While Brenda tended to a broken Satí, I stalked into my home office in a sombre state. I should have called my mother with the news while we were at the hospital. I simply couldn’t bring myself to do it. There was no good time to make this type of call, but it was my mother. It was as though I needed time to wrap my head around things. I was about to deliver the harshest blow a mother could receive.

My mother was watching a cooking show when I called her. I recognised the tune of the show in the background and caught one or two culinary terms as we spoke. She said she was sitting in front of the television, drinking her first cup of coffee for the morning. Sheba, her half-blind Jack Russell, lay curled up in its basket beside her.

She was happy to hear from me. I could tell. She was chatty, elated. I was looking for an opportunity in the conversation, planning how to break the news to her. She told me about a movie she had watched the night before. Then she stopped short. There was a sudden cold silence.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I have some bad news.” What a terrible thing to do on a Saturday morning, I thought. I was a terrible son.

“What? What happened?” I could hear her breath, beating weakly against the cellular phone.

“It’s Allan.”

“No,” she whispered, to no avail. The horror had been cast in stone. It could not be undone. I wish I could cut out those words and piece together something different, but it was too late. I forged ahead.

“There was a shooting at a restaurant. He was in the car when it happened, protecting Satí. Everything happened so fast.”

“My boy, my boy,” she whimpered.

“I’m so sorry, Mum. I couldn’t...”

I wish I could say there were tears welling in my eyes, but I’d be lying. My throat burned and my bottom lip trembled. I was more touched by the sound of my mother’s agony than my brother’s death, but I was still stuck with this inability to digest the fullness of it all.

“My boy,” she said again, this time with remarked effort.

Then I heard a loud cracking sound as the phone fell to the ground.

I heard the presenter of the cooking show list ingredients in the background, and Sheba’s soft whimpering.

By the time I was able to get an ambulance crew to her, she was gone. The presiding doctor at the time explained that her heart obviously couldn’t take the shock. I was told she had died gracefully, falling back into her favourite chair in a seated position, head slumped forward. The ambulance crew said Sheba was resting on her lap like a ewe lamb.

After Allan’s death, I had been reluctant to call my mother. Now I understood why. Deep down I knew this would happen. I had anticipated that she would shut down when the news found her ears. When her parents died, she became near catatonic. And when my father passed, she just caved in. Her hair went grey within a month. She suffered ongoing heart palpitations ever since. The death of either of her sons would push her over the edge. A wave of emotions had been set in motion long ago, raging in the emptiness of her being, muted only by the possible babble of grandchildren, which would never come. Her turmoil had fallen silent. And my lack of surprise was a consequence of having conditioned myself for the worst outcome.

More and more the week was turning into a Greek tragedy. Without any decent support structure, I realised that our world had been turned upside down. We were alone, having no one to associate with or to lament to. My mother and brother were gone. Brenda’s parents had died a couple years ago. She had no siblings or living relatives. Satí had no one to turn to for emotional support because she had been an only child, with no living grandparents. Even poor Sheba had no one to look after her.

Later that day I drove out to my mother’s house in George to collect Sheba while Brenda stayed with Satí. It was a five-hour drive, but, with my thoughts in disarray, it felt like five days. It was strange to be in my mother’s house without her there. More accurately, it was strange to know that she would not be coming back. She was gone.

I slept in my mother’s house that Saturday night and drove back the Sunday. I was obligated to arrange two funerals, simultaneously. I was the last surviving member of my immediate family. For the remainder of the weekend, and the week that followed, I was in a state of confusion. I became a distant machine, not a single clear thought breaching the surface of the shallow pond which made up my consciousness. Was it all a dream? I pondered about the averages for occurrences such as this. I was not looking to break records, but I was curious.

My wife was amazing during this zombie phase where I worked through the stages of grief. She embraced Sheba as our own, while trying to console Satí and run the house. She gauged my moods as though she was walking around inside my head. It helped that she was a psychology major.

As gingerly as she dealt with me, Brenda was substantially more compassionate with Satí. When the poor soul found out about my mother's passing, she relapsed, so overcome by sorrow that we had to call upon the paper bag pharmacy to tranquillise her. I had considered not telling Satí at all, but as we were planning a joint funeral. I foresaw a very loud and public collapse when she finally saw the two coffins being lowered into the ground.

I signed a stack of paperwork, in duplicate, one pile for Allan, the second for my mother. By law I was required to keep the paperwork for five years. As luck would have it, I had tended to my mother's financial matters as well. I was the only one in the family with an eye for finances. As their intermediary, I was obligated to execute their wills post-haste. My brother had left a small fortune in a trust to provide for Satí. My mother had left us some sentimental items, like her small jewellery collection, and her two bedroomed townhouse in George. Allan and I would share ownership of the house, but her will stipulated that in the event of death, the surviving sibling would enjoy full ownership.

The thought of relocating Satí to my mother's house, was an encouraging one. Brenda said it was a bit heartless. For the sake of simplicity, we decided to sell the house immediately. That way we could transfer ownership of the title deed at the point of winding up the estate. It was just a house. Her entire life summed up in brick, cement and a jewellery box. What would we gain by hanging on to these things?

The funeral was held on a Saturday morning. It was a ghastly affair. My brother's money had paid out in the nick of time. It funded both funerals, with ample left. There were some friends scattered about the pews, some neighbours I've never seen before and a group of people from my mom's old bridge club. The funeral parlour had sent eulogies to local newspapers and designed depressing service leaflets. On the day the pastor gave a sombre sermon, though I was unable to concentrate on the message. I realised my thoughts were a mess when I mounted the small podium. I was not a wordsmith, nor a prolific orator. My incoherence was my ode to the departed. At least I was clear and audible. When Satí decided to share her grief, it was difficult to comprehend what was going on. Between the snot and the tears and the constant wailing, she mumbled through a bastardised version of what sounded like a fable, then recited the lyrics of an old Toni Childs song. She was an absolute wreck and it pained me to see her that way, writhing about on the apron of the church's stage as though she had caught on fire and was trying to snuff it out. Brenda and I attempted to coax her away from the podium, one on either side whispering words of encouragement into her ears. She kept calling for Allan, that God took him away. We took turns holding her hand. This had to look insensitive to other mourners, but she was doing herself more harm by breaking down in public. Her grief needed solitude and time, but she was not granting herself either. We offered her a support system but could not offer her the one thing she needed, which was to have Allan returned to her. Nothing less would suffice. I had been dealt double the blow, yet I was seemingly unfazed.

After the service we greeted some people, then made a hasty exit out the back. I had a woman's arm hooked through on either side, forming a linked chain that made up a morbid trio. We looked like the Three Mourners of Dijon outside the tomb of Philip the Bold, as captured in alabaster by Claus Sluter. We were a pathetic, beautiful sight and all who saw us, was instantly blasted with a burst of sympathy.

Nearing our car, eager to return home, a slender man stepped out from behind a tree in the church yard. He approached cautiously.

"Hi there!" he said.

He had a sincere smile, friendly eyes, and an endearing manner.

We stopped and turned, none of us acknowledging him. We waited for him to make the first move.

“My name is Malcolm Zedek.” We shook hands. “You probably don’t remember me.”

I frowned and made a vacuous gesture to nudge him along. A slight drizzle had followed the service and I thought it unwise to linger about in the cold.

“I was your father’s legal aid. It’s OK, you were just a boy.”

“Sorry...” I shook my head.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. I tried calling but the numbers on file are all disconnected.”

“I upgraded a while back.” I might have sounded annoyed.

“To avoid a track-and-trace, I contacted the mortuary and got the service date. Thought it was better to do this in person.”

“To do what?” Instinctively, I held out my arms, as though shielding Brenda and Satí from an attacker. This display of territorial masculinity was new to me. I had never been so prepared to fight for what was mine, but these two women were all I had left.

“You needn’t worry,” he said and shuffled backward. “It’s nothing untoward. It’s a tiny matter of incalculable significance. Perhaps we could meet Monday morning, around ten?”

“Mr. Zedek, your timing is...” I trailed off, studying the frown on my wife’s face. She filled me with so much strength and conviction. The sudden humidity had caused her hair to frizz. Tiny drops clung to her fringe like dew to a spider’s web. “Is it a pressing matter?”

“Very, but it will take mere minutes of your time. Promise.”

From experience, I knew that pertinent legal and financial matters seldom took minutes to sort through. Against my will, I acquiesced. He palmed me his card, address on the back. I was unsure how to adjourn the encounter.

“You have my sincerest sympathy. Until Monday.” He offered a consoling nod to Brenda and Satí, then disappeared amongst the trees.

I longed to take a leave of absence from work but was unable to. Work matters and personal matters became entwined. Handling both estates resorted in me juggling both roles while fielding Brenda’s concern for Satí. I pored over our mother and Allan’s paperwork all weekend to expedite the claims process. First thing Monday I was outside the Bellville office of Malcolm Zedek.

A light drizzle cast a haze over the world. It caused the sporadic lights of the morning traffic to flare up with unwanted urgency, filling motorists with irregular panic. The specks of condensation floated down on the fresh steam that rose from the tarred roads, like liquid snowflakes. It was chaos on the roads: honking, screaming, screeching tyres, emergency response sirens echoing in the distance. Everything pertaining to routine seemed disjointed, out of place, wrought with underlying friction, and bent on maintaining a sense of gloom. It was the world as I knew it, but turned upside down, as though it had become irritable, impatient, and purposely mean.

Zedek greeted me when I stepped off the elevator. His office was on the second floor, at the end of a long, carpeted corridor. My reservations about the meeting wilted away as he led me into his

office. Though I was completely spent at this stage, my burden became lighter with every step. I was overcome by indifference. It was a profound experience. It was clear that Zedek was a sage legal advisor who was masterful at working around delicate issues.

We were alone. In this line of work, there was always a witness present. However, he was utterly at ease and that put me at ease.

His office windows overlooked a large park, a portion of a school yard to one side and a clump of trees stretching into the distance, with Brackenfell looming at the outer edges where the trees ended. The rain and the clouds overhead gave the scene a certain credence. Nature and youth; new beginnings and all that. I was not prone to sentiment, but as of late, my views on life had taken the road less travelled.

Zedek circled the small imbuia desk and politely pointed out the opposite chair.

“Coffee or tea?”

“Neither,” I declined.

“Good, because my secretary is on an errand and my coffee is terrible. Thank you for coming.”

“I didn’t really have a choice, did I?”

He was taken aback, but not offended. He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Sorry, Mr. Zedek. I don’t mean to be brusque. This last week feels like a year. I would like to get on with things, then try to scrape my life together.”

“I understand. I will be brief.” Zedek folded his hands, with long, tapered fingers intertwined. “When your father started working, he created an investment portfolio. He kept it active his whole life and fuelled it with ten per cent of his earnings. He carefully adjusted the amount whenever he received increases, bonuses or changed jobs. Whether by fluke or divine insight, his investment options were nothing shy of brilliance. Mostly offshore, iron ore companies, mining giants, and so on. Seemingly safe investments, though not without a bit of risk. His portfolio became a sizable one, and the investments grew exponentially.”

I put up a hand to stop him. “Whoa, wait just a minute, will you.” The frowns creasing my forehead physically hurt. “I don’t understand. What investments?”

“Your father’s personal investments.”

“My father never kept investments.”

“I assure you, he did.”

My head indicated the negative of its own accord. “That’s not possible. How come we never heard of this? I am...” I stopped myself short, shut my eyes in annoyance. “Was. I *was* my mother’s financial advisor. I never found any investments when I pulled my father’s profile.”

“Yes, about that...” Zedek shuffled papers around, then extended a copy of an old South African Identification document. He shifted his spectacles, gave the document a hard stare, then levelled his eyes at me, smiling. “The inception date was way before he met your mother, which is why your father used his old ID number. It’s still the same person, but it was never required to update records. You might say, he slipped through the cracks. It does happen.” He cleared his throat and

extracted more documents from a yellow manila folder, scrutinising them mid-air. Outside, a large truck rumbled by, the top sections of two shipping containers sailing past the bottom of the window. “Shortly before his death he changed the beneficiaries of the portfolio. He was adamant that the entire portfolio be encashed when your mother died and be payable to you and your brother. When the coroner submitted your mother’s death certificate, our database automatically pulled the file and we followed the instructions. It’s all on the Internet these days.”

“I don’t...” I smiled, not sure how to digest all of it. Zedek leaned back in alarm. “I don’t understand this.”

“Your father’s will is a legally binding document. We were obligated to execute your father’s wishes. You can’t appeal the finality of an individual’s demands.”

“I know how a will works, Mr. Zedek. I don’t understand how he kept this from all of us.”

Zedek unfolded and refolded his hands, then added, almost secretively, “Your mother knew.”

“What?” Zedek offered me a vacant stare. “She struggled financially for years after he passed away.”

“He wanted to take out a life policy to leave an inheritance for her, but your mother sat in that chair and insisted that he rather increase the premiums of the investment. It seemed to me that your mother was the thrifty one.”

I leaned forward, allowing the information to find purchase. This last revelation was a difficult one. The wound of losing my mother, much like my brother, was still tender. I was intrigued, though. She had led a modest life, often calling on us for financial support.

At this point, overcome by all manner of thoughts and emotions, a singular thought formed inside of me. Before I could restrain the thought, it poured over my lips.

“How much? What was his portfolio valued at?”

“After taxes and fees, it should be close to five million, give or take. I must just add that your father’s will made no mention of your sister-in-law, and your brother passed away before your mother, so you are the only beneficiary on file.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mumbled.

I sighed and shook my head, overwhelmed by it all. In one weekend, I lost my family and became a millionaire. My world was spinning. When I closed my eyes, the black depths of my mind folded over, as though I was being drawn towards a black hole. Gravity disappeared and I was left in a weightless vacuum with nothing but the sound of my own breath rasping in my ears. I was nauseous and my head was throbbing. I thought a vein was about to pop behind my eyes. When I opened my eyes, Zedek stood next to my chair holding out a glass of water in one hand.

“You are taking this well,” he said softly.

“This is madness,” I whispered. “What must I do with that money?”

“Your father had only one request: that you spend it.”

“What does that mean?”

Zedek said nothing.

For the next thirty minutes I signed documents, then left in a daze. I saw tiny white spots everywhere, which really freaked me out. When I got to the car, I was burning to call Brenda with the news, but my fingers were so jittery that I couldn't find her in my contact list. I decided to wait. I found it reassuring to sit around a table with my wife and to discuss things. Five minutes of face time consolidated our different perspectives on a matter. I knew, now more than ever before, we had to make decisions together.

We often played the what-if-I-won-the-lotto game. It seemed like a harmless game. The what-if game had just been given a violent shove towards reality – and I had no idea what to do. Brenda and I had to consider all the consequences carefully.

CHAPTER 6

That night, my wife and I had an uncomfortable discussion about my father's small treasure, not to mention the proceeds from my mother's and my brother's estates.

We ate a well-prepared chicken lasagne I had bought on the way back. Satí excused herself after two bites. As she left the room, a heaviness left the room with her.

We finished pecking at our food and moved to the living room, where the fresh evening air poured in through the open side door. Outside, the sun had downed. The first stars speckled the blanket of night. The chirping of crickets and the croaking of frogs began to echo across our backyard, adding a pleasant hum to an otherwise depressing conversation.

After I had told her about the type of money we could expect from these three sources, we sat looking at each other for the longest time, neither able to comment, confounded by how our lives had been altered. What would we do with all that money? We were not obligated to do something with it but forgetting about it wouldn't make it less there. Would we leave it in a trust? Reinvest? Give it away? Or spend it haphazardly?

Brenda played with her hair, a finger absently tugging at a loose strand as though it was a source of inspiration. Her eyes were distant. Her lip was curled slightly to one side. I had become so accustomed to reading Brenda's every mood. At times she was an open book only to me. She spoke with me without having to utter a single word. Much like a wick led a flame through a candle's wax, she would guide me through her mind without opening her lips. But that evening, as we sat studying each other, our body language was an incoherent jumble of twitches and shrugs. We were unfamiliar to each other. We were strangers. Nothing had prepared us for this influx of wealth. I have worked with finances long enough to know that in the wake of abundance, followed misery. I imagined us both on a rickety wooden footbridge suspended over a great chasm, hungry wolves guarding both exit points, their growls taunting us.

We found a tiny kernel of comfort in simply letting things be, to live as though nothing had changed. I put my arm around her, pulled her close, until I could smell her life close to my chest, and kissed her forehead, aware that everything had changed.

"Let us not lose sight of what's important," she said. It sounded more like a question.

"You and me, babe," I agreed. "Nothing else matters."

With our lives alternating between elation and agony, we were caught in a dangerous trap, which made us blissfully unaware of the imminent danger in our midst. On one side we were dealing with the emotional consequences of loss. On the other we were confronted by an instant monetary gain, which offered the ill-timed high of knowing that we would probably never have to work again. What made the situation a metaphorical trap was the very person who would trigger the mechanism, causing the jagged jaws to slam shut on our lives. I have spent hours contemplating how I could have prevented the horror that was about to befall us.

Brenda had work matters to tend to. As a legal secretary, she had certain obligations that could not be offloaded. I had paperwork to sort through, mostly resulting from the weekend's tragedies. I lost myself in work, not in an attempt to run away. This was my way of coping, allowing dust to settle and life to marinate. I was a numbers guy – and numbers calmed me.

During this time of busying ourselves, Satí was facing an absolute maelstrom of emotions swirling around in her veins. She had so much pain and sadness that she was like a flower of destruction on the cusp of blooming. Considering the aftermath, her motives were not only questionable, they were also resolute. God alone knew what was happening inside of her. I have no doubt that she was in tatters, yet so determined that she was a scary type of whole.

The day that our little snow globe received the defining shake, started like any other. Brenda and I prepared for work. We sat down for breakfast, Satí joining as another member of our family. We had accepted her presence in our house. She was family. Most of the time she was in her room reading or just staring at the walls. At times she would burst out crying when something stirred a memory of Allan. I would vacate the room while Brenda did what came naturally to her.

That morning, Satí seemed better than normal. She had a faint smile on her face, which brought out her more prominent features. Her Indian ancestry brought a flair and a grace to her demeanour, which had been absent in her mourning. She proposed a movie night. We were a bit surprised but saw it as a step towards recovery. Later I would retrace her movements and find that she had been as methodical as ever. I spent days gathering information and eventually pieced it all together in the following way.

Satí went about her day with a fresh purpose that would have been admirable had it not been fuelled by grief. After we left, she finished her breakfast, washed dishes, took a long shower, then dressed comfortably in a long summer dress with orange flowers. She locked up, left a note for us on the kitchen island, and went to the garage. That would have been the first time she had been to the car since Allan had been shot. We had planned to sell it but hadn't got around to it yet. I suspect she had lost control over her bladder shortly after getting into the car, because evidence suggests that she deactivated the house alarm, went back inside and showered again, leaving her summer dress in the bathtub, where we found it later that evening, drenched in urine. She evidently redressed, in jeans this time, and put a couple of newspapers on the driver's seat to prevent the urine from seeping through. She activated the house alarm once more and off she went.

According to the insurance company's vehicle tracking reports, she stopped at an ATM, where the surveillance cameras showed her withdrawing a large sum of money, then placing the notes in an envelope she probably took from my study. Her routine was varied and slow. Wherever she parked, she remained for a while longer than required. I'd like to think she was replaying the events that unfolded Friday night, but that would be wild speculation. Whatever she was doing to fuel her pain, it created little grey spots on her journey that the car tracker and her credit card couldn't explain.

As she drove about, she went from suburbs to slums. She had spent most of her time in dangerous neighbourhoods, helping drug addicts and street kids find their place in the world. She had

tasked herself with helping the troubled and the fatherless, and her roads always led to dark corners, but this time her visit was different.

I later retraced the route as recorded by the car tracking device, simply because I had difficulty digesting what had happened. It took me through deserted streets, slums where broken bottles were strewn across pavements. At one point, she parked near the entrance to a block of flats. The building looked dilapidated to me. Flaking paint, broken windows, weeds sprouting from cracks in the pavements, faded hopscotch blocks, police sirens a couple streets over. From what I knew about Satí, this cruel place, the battlefield between compassion and hate, was her office where she fought daily to win the minds and souls of South African youth. Satí, the front-line warrior.

Youth councillors imparted wisdom, nurtured with love, instilled hope, and inspired with joy. It was a thankless, fruitless occupation, one without a lucrative retirement plan. But the good far outweighed the bad. Allan once told me that educating impressionable minds was intoxicating; impacting and altering the perception of another human being, like the corruption of young Dorian Gray, only the inverse of that. The drug of altering a young mind in a positive way was akin to leaving a legacy, which is why, with Satí's life and her spirit in bits, it was apparent that no one could offer guidance to the guide.

The municipal camera systems, a new crime-detering initiative, clearly showed Satí entering the building that morning. In the footage, a group of wayward teens watched her from the corner, not surprised by her presence there. She was out of shot for a couple of minutes, then returned to her car, where she sat motionless. A thin teenage boy with a brown paper bag partially concealed under his shirt, approached the car. He had a shiny face, big inquisitive eyes and a tiny mouth. The police identified the boy as Tyron, one of the children Satí ministered to.

In the footage, Tyron stood next to the car for a while, unaware that he was being recorded. His movements suggested that he was reluctant to hand the paper bag, but she clearly had plans and the bag formed part of it. At one stage, Satí reached out and snatched the bag from the boy.

A detective, along with an appointed social worker, interrogated Tyron for hours on end. I read the reports and it was vague. Tyron went on for a long time about his mother puffing on a crack pipe and how hard it was to live there. The drinking, the noise, the fighting, the drugs, and so on. After the detective had tired the boy out, Tyron explained what had happened. Satí had come to his apartment and handed him the money. He instructed her to wait in the car. He told the two how he ran up the stairs and exited onto the rooftop. From there he ran the length of the roof until he got to a wooden ladder, which acted as a bridge from one roof to the other. He scampered across to the block of flats adjacent to his. He claimed he went down two floors and exited into a communal area, where another boy of about nine waited for him. Tyron remembered how the boy's head had been sheared into a Mohawk hairstyle, bleached white. The boy called for someone called Malíque. A large man appeared on the balcony, his big arms covered in tattoos, from shoulder to wrist. Tyron enacted how Malíque narrowed his mean eyes and then how the man eased up once he opened the envelope and fingered through the notes. Tyron tossed the envelope to the boy. Malíque then nodded at another boy on the opposite balcony. Tyron said he only saw two murky eyes and an outstretched arm clasping the paper bag. The bag was released, then Tyron caught it with both hands. He made his way back across the roof and took the bag to Satí. The police raided the block of flats the following day. I was told the courtyard looked exactly as Tyron had described it, but Malíque had disappeared off the face of the earth. Of course, the other tenants had never heard of him. Cell phone reports of the communication between Satí and Tyron, revealed how she had pestered the boy. I recalled telling Brenda how it bothered me that Satí was always on her phone, even during supertime.

From Tyron's apartment, the car tracker showed that Satí drove back to town at a sedate pace, adhering to the speed limit. She went to a coffee shop some distance from our house and had lunch. According to the waiter, she ordered a second cup of coffee and gave a handsome tip, paying by card. Back in the car, Satí drove to where it had all gone astray. She parked the car in the same spot it had been parked that Friday night. Since the shootout, the restaurant had refurbished their salad bar and installed security cameras. While insightful, it would not prevent misery from occurring twice in one setting.

At first, the police were reluctant to show me the footage, but I threatened them with legal action until they relented. While disturbing to watch, the finality of it all afforded me a strange type of closure.

The cameras were situated over the entrance and had a clear view of Satí in the driver's seat. In the recording, she sat and watched a young couple enter the eatery. The two lovers were holding hands, stealing coy looks at each other, unaware of the world around them. Her eyes scanned over the patrons in the diner, then the children in the outside play area. I know there is a large tree in the field next to the restaurant. Having been there at that time of day, I could almost hear the comforting sound of the birds chirping as they played in the branches.

For long after I replayed the footage in my mind to figure out what she must have been thinking about. She sat there for a long time, staring out at the people in the parking area. I firmly believe Satí was looking for something to hinder her plans, a chink in the armour, the tear in the fabric. Alas, she saw only happiness. No matter what she saw that day, it would have been insufficient.

She searched her handbag and removed her purse. Even on the small image I could tell her hands were trembling as she struggled to find the small picture of Allan. She pushed her bag aside and held the photo with both hands outstretched over the steering wheel.

After a while she removed the snub-nosed revolver from the paper bag. There was no evidence that she had used a weapon before that day. It was not a thing of science, though. The footage showed her inspecting the revolving cylinder, bullets visible in every hole. She slipped the safety catch from off to on, cocked the hammer back, then, in keeping with the ancient Indian custom of suttee, she looked down at the photo of Allan, pressed the barrel of the handgun into her mouth and pulled the trigger.

And so ended the life of Satí, abrupt, undignified. It was a tragedy comparable to any tale of woe ever recorded, minus the poison, modernised with a handgun. So brutal. I instantly regretted having insisted on watching it. Hard as I tried, I could not unsee it.

I replayed all my interactions with Satí after our lives had been thrown together. I searched for an inception point, a time when she had decided her own fate. However, I couldn't venture back to contribute to her decision-making. There was nothing that could have prevented the outcome. Unlike the Biblical tale of the widow of Nain who had lost her son, I could not raise Allan from the dead, so she decided to join him in death.

CHAPTER 7

I looked around the room where I was being held. Held was not the correct word. I was there willingly. Well, not entirely of my own free will, but I had planned the encounter with my captors. Then again, was it a plan if it had been arranged when you were technically absent?

The room seemed prepped for torture or interrogative purposes. It was larger than I had first imagined. Maybe because the only furniture there was a table and three garden chairs. There were white strips where cracks had been filled up, curling along the walls like a pair of writhing snakes sailing across the plaster.

The house was nestled in the rounding of a cul-de-sac. Viewed from outside the house was a light brown block with dark brown trim, double-storied, double garage, covered entranceway, and a tall chimney extending above the pitched roof, slightly off-centre. It blended with the other houses in Highbury, which had become the suburban hub of Kuils River. With its matching paving and uniform chest-high corrugated fencing, the house appeared to adhere to an unwritten guideline that the whole street had to maintain. The three black SUVs in the driveway, with tinted windows and shiny spinner rims, as well as the four tattooed henchmen on the front porch, cast a stain on the notion of normalcy. If that didn't do the trick, the sight of me being hauled from the boot of a black sedan, hands tied and grey sock covering my head, would have given the street something to talk about.

The house looked incomplete and semi-furnished, partly because it was trapped in an occupational limbo. There were no plants, fancy decorations, or picture frames on the walls. It was void of memories because it had recently changed owners. A house, not yet a home. I remembered studying the house from the outside when I was still bent on killing Denvor. I sat in my car with a set of binoculars, looking for a way in, but he had only purchased it months before on auction. His drug money had aided him with the transition from slums to suburbs. He was fitting a security system and cameras to this house, while his family stayed at their other house. It was a funny thing, this gang business. Yet, as with all walks of life, that which one treasured most, one protected.

The turf war between Shane and Denvor had dealt them both serious financial blows and it had sparked interest from competitors in central Cape Town and further afield, as well as the police. Though both drug bosses were living in style, they couldn't retire at will. They needed this life to survive. With these two I have found that money was constantly tied up in something or running away from them. When the two had been partners, they had been an unstoppable force that kept challengers at bay. However, an underlying tension kept pulling them apart. As an amateur sleuth, I was able to uncover the cause of their split. Shane's brother, Macky, a menace to all who knew him, had confronted Denvor numerous times and made subsequent advances on his wife, Tamara. Denvor had few weaknesses, but his family and his pride were the two that haunted him endlessly. Macky had stirred the pot once too often. Following a near fatal run-in with Denvor, Shane suggested they part ways. And so they had, to their own disdain.

There were twelve men in the room, most of whom I had crossed paths with during the last couple months. There was no prevalent nationality present, just a bunch of violent, fatherless, grey-faced boys in young men's bodies. They all formed part of one body – they were the gang. Even as the two bosses sat opposite each other, the men in the room were jumbled about, loyal only when told to be so. They stood around in small groups along the walls, friends-turned-enemies, now uncertain companions during this interrogation, their interests momentarily aligned.

I sat staring at the table for a while. I could feel that awkward smile on my face. Thinking about my father's secret millions always brought that desperate horror upon my features. The smile presently faded away as a burst of memories blew through the empty corridors of my mind. I saw my father sitting at a picnic table with me on his lap, spreading coins out over the coarse wooden surface. He turned the coins over with his long fingers, counting out the change to buy me a toasted sandwich. I

saw my brother's broken head on Satí's lap. I saw my mother slumped over in her chair, head lolling sideways in an eternal state of slumber. These memory dumps came and went, and often left me semi-catatonic for a couple of minutes. I had no control over them anymore. When they arrived, I obliged and let them play all the way through.

Denvor shifted uneasily in the shadows, scratched at something on the table with one nail.

"Malique?" he said loudly.

At the outermost part of the circle of men, stood the formidable figure of Malique. He shrugged sheepishly and pouted his lips.

"Explain," Denvor demanded in a reserved manner.

"The lady wanted a gun, Denvor. I sold her the gun. I don't ask what they want it for."

Malique's voice betrayed his nervousness. He stood erect, hands clasped behind his back, like a soldier addressing a superior.

Denvor nodded, lost in thought. He began pushing and pulling the tip of his index finger along the length of his nose, the crooked bridge like a nexus point of a fun activity. He closed his eyes for a couple of seconds and sighed.

"That's quite a story," he said finally.

"Probably all lies," Shane interjected. "There's no money, is there?" He looked genuinely amused. "Come on, be honest, you're having a piss? This is all a game, right?"

I giggled, more by accident than intent, another side effect of the memory dumps. "That's exactly what the investigator said."

"Investigator?" Shane jumped up as though I'd thrown my empty water bottle at him. "What investigator? Police?"

Shane was naturally quick to anger. He had been bred that way. An abusive father, a drug addict for a mother, and a vindictive brother, had left him with few alternatives. He lived by one rule: eat or be eaten. In his world there was no grey area, no chance to blink. He never waited for opportunity to present itself. He simply latched on when the move suited his lunacy, and he didn't let go until he got what he wanted. He was cunning, manipulative, violent and just shy of being stupid. He would die young, and I suspected he was aware of it. Strange as it seemed, he feared only one thing, and that was going to jail. He randomly inspected his runners for wires and distanced himself from operations to limit his involvement. Those who lived without care, often had one solitary care that dominated their nightmares. To Shane the smell of jail food and the steel of prison bars were the reminders that gave weight to his sinful life.

He pushed his chair back, sat up straight and glanced out the windows. "Do the coppers know you're here?"

I snorted. "Police? I wish!"

"Cops?" Shane gave Denvor a quick flash of distress and distrust. "You hear that? The bra's been dealing with coppers. Did anyone check this bra for a wire?"

I'd anticipated his paranoia. In fact, I'd been waiting for it to show face.

“The cops were useless. They came around after my mother died. Detectives, two of them. They asked questions. I told them what I saw. They took notes. Then they left. Satí also gave them clear descriptions of you two, but the investigation stalled. All promises, no arrests.”

Shane smiled, savouring the idea that police were inadequate.

“If the cops did nothing then what investigator are you talking about?” Denvor cut in.

“The claims investigator,” I said matter-of-factly. “He took an unhealthy interest in my affairs.”

CHAPTER 8

As Satí set herself free from her prison of memories, she imprisoned us with an additional revenue stream. Her life insurance, much like my brother’s life insurance, had me listed as the beneficiary in the event of Allan’s death. In fact, there had been additional investments Satí had forgotten about. These had grown substantially over the last five years and had a protector benefit that would surrender a staggering capital amount in the event of death. The whole matter had become incredibly complex and distressing. As a numbers guy, even I had trouble keeping up with it all.

Then there was Satí’s funeral. Undoubtedly the most forgettable event I ever had the misfortune of attending, I was still unable to forget it. She had taken her life the Tuesday, so we arranged the funeral for the Saturday morning, which would be precisely one week after laying my mother and Allen to rest. Because of the unique nature and extent of the tragedy, Brenda was released from work obligations. In planning her funeral, we realised there was no one to invite. Satí’s life had revolved around Allan, so we invited the same people we had invited to Allan’s funeral. Those who had attended the first funeral, simply couldn’t bear another one. They were either too shocked and dismayed to RSVP, or they were hoping to avoid it altogether. We called some of them as the day drew nearer, but was met with unanswered rings, endless sobs or a barrage of apologies. Consequently, no one pitched on the day. Not even fellow teachers who had been dear friends to Allan and Satí. At one stage I suggested hiring a funeral party since money wasn’t a problem, but Brenda insisted that it would sour the already sombre occasion. I just wanted it over.

That Saturday was a blisteringly hot day. So hot that I could feel perspiration accumulating around my collar, my cuffs and drenching my grey socks. When a hint of a breeze snuck through the graveyard, bouncing along the tombstones like a wandering soul, I pulled my collar away to scoop air into my body. To one side of the gravesite stood a tall, lonely river bushwillow tree. Its pale grey branches hung as though in salute, not a single leaf aflutter, casting a low shadow that seemed to peek into the hole where the coffin was destined to be lowered into. There we stood: a tired-looking weekend pastor with hollow features and deep-set eyes, Brenda, and myself. We had decided to forego the traditional church service and rather do a dedication by gravesite. I was anxious and fidgety throughout the pastor’s sermon. It felt as though a giant hand was closing around my chest and my arms, squeezing me. Loosening my tie didn’t alleviate the pressure. I wanted to scream at the tree and run through the graveyard with my hands in the air. Earlier that week a headache had started up somewhere behind my eyes. I was a migraine sufferer, so headaches and tension pains were not new to me. However, this had been something else. That pain had arrived as Satí departed – and it never really went away after the funeral.

In the coming weeks, money began pouring in from all sources. The first monies to arrive were funeral benefits or final expenses. While it was cruel to think of financial matters in this way, Satí's death actually expedited the winding up of Allan's estate, as well as her own. As with Allan's insurance, he had been listed as her spousal beneficiary, and in the event of his death I was the next of kin. The death of Satí resulted in the deregistering of the trust I had created for Allan's estate, prior to the estate even being wound up. With neither Satí nor Allan, there was no need to establish a trust, which meant the lump-sum cover amounts of both policies would pay out directly to me. This process was alarmingly straightforward. The proceeds from my father's secret investment portfolio were similarly uncomplicated. His investment assets were encashed, taxed within the funds, and paid over to me. My mother's house was sold while in the estate. As there were no suspensive conditions provided for by the master of the court, the estate agent who had sold her house was keeping the deeds office on standby until the estate had been properly wound up. Once the estate had been concluded, the title deed would be transferred from my mother, to me, and immediately to the new owners. The purchase amount would pay out directly to me.

Three of my closest family members had passed away and I received millions as compensation for my loss. It was a nightmare. Brenda and I had gone from secretly anxious to being cold and despondent at regular intervals. I was standing at the edge of a precipice. The long drop into darkness seemed inviting. If it hadn't been for Brenda, I would have done something terrible. She was my anchor, my sanity. Throughout the whole debacle, I hadn't shed a tear. At times I wondered whether I was incapable of experiencing emotions. These fears were dispelled every time I rested my head on Brenda's lap or held her in my arms.

Shortly after the funeral, Brenda gave notice at her firm. There was no need for her to continue working. I knew her bosses would never find another Brenda, but neither would I, and I needed her to keep me grounded. With death all around us, I found renewed appreciation for her. If there was a singular positive consequence that spawned forth from Satí's demise, it was the way in which we decided to push everything aside and to draw even closer to each other.

The detectives dropped by, the same two as before, in part to pay their respects, but also to investigate our roles in her suicide, and in greater part to find out what we intended to do with the car since it now formed part of two separate investigations. What use had we of the vehicle? We could buy imported sports cars without breaking a sweat.

A week or two after Satí's funeral, the investigator first came into our lives. He arrived the same way Winter did, with an unexpected chill that crawled up my spine. There was no way to be brief about this man.

In the finance industry, there was a strange occurrence when claims paid out. Since the dawn of the digital age, information became accessible to all who had need of it. Everything was recorded. Masses of people were employed to analyse whatever the supercomputers and systems flagged as worthy of suspicion. When a person received multiple inheritance settlements it could be flagged, following which an independent investigation would ensue. This exercise was usually conducted by an insurance or claims investigator, an internal or private finance detective who pursued a particular financial institution's interest. Since my scenario had affected policies and investments across multiple institutions, it had probably caused a large magnifying glass to be cast over my life and my finances.

The investigator tasked with finding the flaw in my presumably nefarious plans, was a man named Bertie September.

I first met him in my yard one morning like one discovered an abandoned puppy on the sidewalk. I was on my way out to finalise documentation when I came upon this strange man, standing

inside the property, studying our lawn. He was an obscure little man, with broad shoulders and an awkward paunch. He wore a dull brown suit and carried an old leather satchel, which he clasped behind his back as he leaned over to inspect our grass and our flowers.

“Such pretty marigolds,” he said with a slight stutter.

I was strangely bemused by his demeanour, but once his beady eyes met mine, I felt a brief shiver travel up my leg. My ever-present headache intensified and those little white spots resprinkled my periphery.

“It’s grass,” I said, sensing his eyes on my frowning features.

“I mean there, by your bedroom window,” he said as he waddled his way up the narrow path towards me.

“How do you know that’s our bedroom?” I asked.

He smiled.

“Is it not your bedroom?” His soft half-stutter annoyed me tremendously.

I looked around the yard to see if there were anyone else to direct my question to. “I’m sorry, but who the hell are you?” I asked. “And what are doing on my property?”

“You have a rent-to-own agreement in place with the landlord, but...” he stopped to push his glasses back with one finger, then continued, “... but it’s not really your property yet, is it?”

“Our agreement substitutes a basic rental agreement, which entitles me the right to privacy and admission. Now who *are* you?”

He smiled as though he had conceded a point in a game of squash.

“My name is Bertie September,” he said and extended a shaky hand.

I shook hands, and added, “September? It’s almost your month.” He didn’t find it funny.

“Ah, indeed.” He pushed his spectacles back again and refocused his beady eyes. “I wonder if you could spare me a minute?”

“I was on my way out.”

“I won’t be long. It’s regarding some policies and investments which have come under scrutiny. I’m the appointed claims investigator.”

I looked at my watch and sighed. “I can give you the length of a cup of tea?”

“That is just fine,” he said and purposely forced a smile.

He walked about the living room while I made tea. I kept a wary eye on him from the kitchen. When Bertie saw Sheba lying in her bed near the side door, he seemed visibly repulsed. He kept a hand over his nose as though he would contract something. I took some painkillers for my headache, then carried in tea and biscuits on a tray. Brenda was out, so I tried my best at being hospitable. It backfired.

“Tea,” I said to the cup as I pushed the tray closer to the stranger, “Meet Bertie.”

He smiled pleasantly, but the cup of tea trembled as it slid across the surface of the small table. Bertie added half a spoon of sugar, a drop of milk, then did the strangest thing. He dipped a finger into the cup and carefully licked it off as though he was devouring a delicacy.

“Lovely,” he said, wiped his finger with a napkin and never touched the cup again.

He removed a file from his satchel and paged through it with intentional slowness. What followed was an uncomfortable bit of dialogue. I was asked about my family and their policies, which suggested that I was suspected of committing insurance fraud. He admitted to having interviewed police about Satí’s suicide, but still questioned me in a manner befitting an interrogation. His questions were repetitive, with only subtle changes, as though he was trying to catch me in a lie. As he pressed on, my headache became unbearable. He left after about thirty minutes, after my annoyance transformed into a sarcastic grin.

That was not the last I would see of Bertie September.

CHAPTER 9

Brenda allowed me a lot of space to tend to legal and financial matters, in part because she knew there was a lot more at play than just the mountain of paperwork on my desk. Every piece of paper filed or signed or documented, was an uncomfortable memory or grey area dealt with. I was facing my grief the only way I knew how, by working through the numbers that lay in front of me.

One Monday evening, sitting in my home office, I reached a point where the end was in sight. Cold air had snuck into the room while I was poring over the documentation and curled around my ankles like a frigid snake. I slowly pushed back my roller chair, the wheels crackling over the tiles. I heard joints crack as I stretched out my legs and arms. I leaned into the chair, yawned, and studied the desk.

On either side of my glowing laptop screen were two stacks of papers and files. Collectively, they were the four pillars of numbers and words that made up the remains of Allan, my mother, my father, and Satí. In compiled paper, the quietus of each was more final than the sight of a coffin descending into a hole in the earth. I turned my laptop screen down and switched off the light as I left the room.

There was an eerie silence in the house, drifting through the corners and around the bends as though it was lost. I found Brenda asleep on the couch, her head sunken into a couch pillow, hair flattened on one side, and her lips pulled askew so that they revealed a couple of her teeth. Her cheek was flushed with sleep and, as I watched, her eye twitched thrice, in quick succession. I removed a fleece blanket from below the coffee table and unrolled it over her body.

I sat down on the mohair rug and stretched my stockinged feet out until the tips of my toes touched the bottom of the coffee table. I rested my back against the couch and folded my arms. I was close enough to hear Brenda’s breathing in my ears, close enough to take in the distinctive smell of her body mingling with the soft scent of her perfume. Her warmth radiated over my back and my head.

My mind drifted and a deluge of emotions poured through me. I did not shiver or whimper or sniff or heave or moan; nor did I compress my chest as one would when the physical act of crying had

its way. Tears simply rolled down my cheeks with no effort on my part. It was not a display of stoicism. It was just raw emotions.

Somewhere in the night we found our way to the bedroom, where she lay in my arms until the first bits of sun appeared on the curtains, bleeding outward as the morning settled over our house.

A visible elation unfolded inside Brenda's being when I revealed that the documentation had been done. She put her arms around me and pushed her lips into the base of my neck.

"I'm so glad," she whispered. "It's finally over."

We had coffee together, then showered and got dressed. I had to go to the company office to submit the documents and to tend to other business. The world kept turning. My misfortune was not enough to send it spiralling off its axis. My clients, though few, still had matters that needed my attention. I'd neglected them plenty. Though I had communicated the circumstances of my absence, I couldn't delay their queries indefinitely. I never had to explain my desire to return to work, the absurd need to keep my mind occupied. My wife understood.

A representative from the funeral home had called us the week before. The city morgue had forwarded Satí's personal belongings to them and they were eager to offload the goods to us. Brenda, having freed herself from her work faster than anticipated, offered to run errands. She would drop off a final document at the offices of Zedek & Co., then head to the funeral home to collect the effects they kept for us.

At my office, I was showered with sympathies while others avoided me in my misery, afraid they would catch it themselves. I moved about the corridors like a shadow; there one moment, gone the next. I wanted to move on with life. The best way to do that, was to focus on work.

Brenda left Zedek's office in our grey Audi sedan. According to the car tracking device and witnesses, she kept to the speed limit on the road back from Bellville to the morgue in Durbanville, where she collected Satí's wedding ring, bracelet, pocket pen and purse, all items that had been on her corpse.

Brenda returned to Belville via Old Oak Boulevard. She drew up to a red light at the intersection of Old Oak and Old Paarl. Dash cam footage from the car behind Brenda showed that she was still slowing down when a blue Golf with tinted windows blared passed, nearly pushing her off the road. The Golf cut in front of her and mounted a curb, its backside bouncing and screeching across the island separating her lane from oncoming traffic. The vehicle raced along the narrow island, scraping another car in the process, cut down the pole upholding the horizontally mounted traffic light with a plonking sound, then swerved back around a little green Daihatsu halted at the light and, finally, shot forward and ploughed into the traffic that zipped through the intersection. It first struck an SUV coming from the right, was flung outward by the force, then struck a BMW which came from the left. What followed was a chain of accidents, about three cars a side smacking into others until the crash of metal died down and the flow of cars bottlenecked, making way for screams and a lonely car horn blaring to one side.

The blue Golf, the instigating force behind the mess of mangled metal, came to a standstill on the curb of the island on the other side of the intersection, its front grille facing the intersection from the opposite side it had entered. Traffic cameras overlooking the intersection showed three or four brave souls exiting their vehicles and surveying the scene. They went car to car to see if anyone needed help. Brenda, being one of them, approached the green Daihatsu which had been nicked by the Golf.

Brenda stepped down from the centre island and peered into the car. Wendy Makeba sat motionless in her car, eyes transfixed on the chaos in front of her car, both hands clasping the steering wheel. Her little toddler was screaming in the backseat. She later confided in me that the memory of being frozen and unable to tend to her child, was surreal to her. Wendy explained to me how Brenda reached into her car, touched her face and tilted her head, forcing her to make eye contact. She told her not to worry, to take care of her little one. Reality slowly unfolded in front of Wendy's eyes. She reached into the backseat, unbuckled little Themba from his baby chair and took him into her arms. She nodded absently at Brenda. From her vantage point, Wendy watched as Brenda entered the ring of mayhem where car parts and accident debris filled the intersection stadium.

Brenda went over to the SUV, sidestepping a twisted bumper that lay in front of Wendy's Daihatsu. The SUV had succumbed to the impact. Its nose had crumpled in on the driver's side where it had struck the Golf. Witnesses said the engine hissed, like a horse ridden to collapse. Brenda leaned in to help the driver regain consciousness. She pulled at the door, but it had been folded inward by the impact. She went around and opened the passenger door. She kept at it until the man came to, his eyes rolling from side to side. Wendy described the driver as a burly man with long hair, blood pouring from his nose.

While Brenda was inside the SUV, more people crept from their vehicles and began milling about the scene. The BMW, the Golf's next victim, had skidded across the road, leaving a black semi-circle of tyre residue in its wake. Its front had been ripped open and curled over to one side. The driver, a young man with silky blonde hair, visible on the edge of the traffic cam footage, didn't appear to have a scratch on him. His face was ashen and his eyes gaunt.

Brenda left the driver of the SUV and made her way across the intersection. She skipped over to the BMW. The owner seemed unresponsive at first, but later nodded absently that he was fine.

Behind Brenda, the driver's side door of the blue Golf shuddered and parted. Trying to shush her boy, Wendy could make out a figure exiting the wrecked car. At the time, she had no cognisance of resentment towards the Golf. Like everyone present, she knew the car had caused the accident. However, she hadn't been afforded the luxury of reworking the information. For no reason other than curiosity, she looked at the man spilling out of the car.

He crawled across the pavement, then struggled to his feet. He stood next to the Golf for a long time, gathering himself, hunched over, hand outstretched to steady himself. One shirt sleeve had been torn open, with blood flowing from his shoulder, down his arm and dripping from the barrel of the gun in his hand. As the sound of sirens drew nearer, the man instantly became alert. He shook his head, tried to walk, but stumbled and tipped over to one side, slamming against the side of his car. He steadied himself, lifted his weapon and took aim at Wendy's car on the opposite side of the intersection. A surge of adrenaline blew into her veins. She gasped and shifted her boy to one side. She tugged frantically at the door lever, but the car was locked. The gunman, swaying from side to side, shifted the gun's barrel from her Daihatsu to the SUV, then back again, searching for a target.

A police van rushed past her Daihatsu, blue lights throbbing, and entered the intersection recklessly fast, unaware that it was an accident scene. A gunshot rang out, ripping through the squeal of police sirens. The van screeched and pulled sideways to avoid smashing into the SUV. It swerved uncontrollably, skidded across the intersection, then smashed sideways into the BMW, pinning Brenda between the two vehicles. The footage that was leaked onto Facebook, showed that the van collided with the BMW with such force, that it bumped its owner sideways, blonde hair flopping as he sailed through the air and tumbled comically down the hill.

Wendy was frozen once more, eyes locked with those of Brenda, the two women staring at one another in disbelief, trapped in unity for a tragic moment that Wendy would carry with her for the rest of her life. I tried to imagine what pain Brenda was in. Looking at the traffic camera footage, not to mention the brutal facts supplied by the responding medics, I was able to deduce that she had been saved the agony of her injuries. The first paramedic who treated her, a short man with orange hair, said they often encountered patients with stress-induced analgesia, which rendered them momentarily incapable of feeling pain. According to him, Brenda was lucid, not delirious, nor panicky, yet she had no pain.

The paramedic and EMT responders arrived on the scene, poured out of their vehicles with perfected grace, and went about their business with professional urgency. A thin man in a police uniform sat in the rear opening of the police van, an EMT dressing a lesion to one hand. I would later hear from this officer that he had been on the passenger side of the van where my wife had been pinned. He told me that her face had been as white as bone and her hair matted back with perspiration that when she spoke, it was with a noticeable sluggishness. He never told me what she said, though. Whatever it was, it had touched him deeply.

By the time Wendy extracted her from the safety of her car, the driver of the SUV was seated in the back of one ambulance and the owner of the BMW had been placed onto a stretcher. She made her way across the intersection with Themba in her arms. The intoxicating and disorienting smell of oil on hot tar caused her to gag, but she had to see. She pushed her way through the small crowd around the BMW. There she saw Brenda on the ground. They had managed to shimmy the BMW aside, thus enabling two EMTs to remove Brenda from where she had been wedged between the two vehicles. Using spider straps, they had secured her to a backboard stretcher before lifting her over the hood of the van. Wendy explained that her pelvic bone, hips and legs had been flattened and that there was a lot of blood.

The emergency team moved about, but to no avail. When Brenda noticed Wendy looking down at her, she smiled and then her eyes clouded over. Her smile faded and pulled into a hollowed expression.

I wanted her to have endured pain, for the sake of fuelling a rage that was unaccustomed to me. I wanted agony and distress and pain to feed my hatred, but Brenda had decided against it. Even in death, she had deflated my hurt and liberated me from the additional anguish of compunction. That didn't stop me searching for the culprit, though.

The lead detective later informed me that they had received a tip-off from a pub owner in Rondebosch that morning, when the driver of the blue Golf was spotted collecting drugs. A surveillance unit tracked the car from Rondebosch up to Durbanville, where they saw the driver dropping loads with dealers. Police immediately blocked off the main road, hoping to funnel the suspect into a trap. By some fluke, the driver was alerted and sprung the trap early. The police van was the only vehicle able to turn back and give chase. Following the accident, the traffic cameras showed the driver of the Golf hobbling towards the industrial area, where he disappeared among the factory buildings.

The car's boot contained about two kilograms of cocaine, portioned for distribution to drug runners. The owner details were no good because the car had been stolen in Namibia two years before. The police had nothing to go on. However, in my search for him I found something interesting. I came upon a tyre fitment centre on the outskirts of the industrial area with a set of cameras overlooking the Old Oak Boulevard intersection, which was the only point of entry from the residential area. With cash on site, their insurance provider agreed to drop their premium if they installed cameras as a deterrent.

I sat with the manager and studied the recording for the better part of a day. The footage clearly showed a man limping into Bellville Industrial shortly after the accident.

When I showed the footage to the lead investigator, he pointed out an obscured, yet unmistakably unique tattoo of a dragon's head on the man's right hand. He said the footage would be inadmissible in court, but that he was dead sure the owner of that tattoo was a man named...

CHAPTER 10

"Harold Spickerman," I said to my awaiting audience.

There was a crisp silence. My blood burned like ice in my veins. It was the longest five seconds I had experienced in all my life. It was so silent in the room that I heard a car backfire two blocks away.

"Also known as Harry Spicks," I said, then turned to face my wife's murderer.

Harry Spicks looked down at me with mean, unyielding eyes. His chest heaved and his large hands were balled into fists. He had a trimmed beard, pronounced cheek bones and a short, thick neck. Even in this afternoon heat, he wore a red beanie low over his brow. I could tell that he hadn't anticipated this revelation. He also had no idea how he had affected my life. He did not know me, nor Brenda. His chief concern was the consequence of the questions that was about to be posed to him. I imagined he was already preparing answers in his mind. I expected him to shoot me before dropping his name, but he hadn't. A part of me would have been relieved. It would make no difference if my tale of woe was cut short by a bullet. This was just a formality, a delicious ideal for my benefit.

"This is such bullshit," he screamed, then, "Why are you all looking at me?"

Shane carried a sombre look on his face and his forehead was creased. His eyes studied me intensely, peering into me as though he was looking for my soul. He was ruminating over the last part of my story, processing the probability of it.

"When was this? February?" He placed the question in front of me as though that was his play.

"Boss," Harry pleaded.

I nodded.

"You not buying this, are you?"

Shane's gaze shifted from me to Harry. His eyes became cold and brutal. A vicious animal swirled around inside his body, only flesh constricting its true form.

"You told me it was a taxi that crashed into you," Shane said.

"This guy... He's lying." He waved a hand at me, but it was clear my words had found purchase.

The men to either side of Harry took a quick step away from him, so slight that it almost went unnoticed. Harry sensed the act of abandonment and became instantly desperate. His eyes became panicked, flicking about the room as though looking for an exit.

“So,” Shane said as his fingers curled around the gun in front of him. “You’ve been selling Rondebosch smack this side?”

“Shane,” he said softly. He tried a personal plea, but even I could tell his fate had been sealed.

Shane rose from his chair, almost involuntarily, his lips twisted in anger. “You lied to me,” he hissed and raised his weapon. “And you are running with another crew.”

Denvor also got up. “Not here,” he cautioned. “This is a residential area.”

“Then you shouldn’t have brought your shit home with you,” Shane fired back. His anger did not subside.

Denvor signalled two of his men to intercede and to remove Harry before shots were fired. As the men took hold of Harry, he pulled free and charged at me. He put one large arm around my neck and pulled back until my breath became trapped somewhere in my throat, not coming and not going. I didn’t fight it. I was looking forward to the release of death, the black curtain. I closed my eyes and let my body go limp. All resistance fled from me.

My chair was hoisted up, then came down harshly. I heard groans, a string of swear words and then the grip around my throat slackened. Oxygen poured in as his arm disappeared and the struggle behind me hushed.

“Who are you?” Harry screamed as they pulled him out the door, his voice echoing down the corridor. “Who you working for?”

Shane beckoned someone with a nod. Zahier Moodley, the man who did most of Shane’s dirty work, readied himself to follow.

“Between the eyes,” he commanded Zahier. “You hear me? Right between the eyes. Make sure they never find him.” Then as an afterthought, “First check the bra for wires.”

Zahier nodded and left the room. His footfalls followed the scuffling sound of kicking feet. Swear words turned into desperate pleas. Harry’s final scream was cut short by a loud, crunching thud that rippled through the house. It was a sickening sound.

Prior to the day, I had implanted a mental picture of Brenda by meditating on her face, her body, her smile. I had kept it there, in the forefront of my mind, should remorse attempt to hinder my plans. I was concerned that the Harry Spicks matter would derail me, but I had no remorse. I was fully aware of what would happen to Harry, yet I was indifferent. This vexed me because over the last couple of months my emotional state had become multifaceted, seldom remaining a certain way for very long. Harry was a cruel monster who prowled the streets in search of lives to devour, but he was still a semblance of life. I wondered whether my plans were solely reserved for the innocents of this drama.

“You have some nerve, man,” Shane said, directing what remained of his confused anger at me. He was scratching his head with the barrel of his gun, which seemed like a curious thing to do.

“I’m telling you where the money came from.”

“Telling it,” Shane repeated in a mocking tone. “You’re not telling us shit, bra. You only come and upset my business. You think pointing out Spicks wins you some graces? That shit just makes me want to cut your nuts off.”

He fell silent and his eyes became distant. There lingered a strange madness within him, an undecided insanity that came and went at will. Lately, I had seen something similar stare back at me in the mirror, though not quite as wild.

“Have you ever cut someone’s nuts off? It’s not easy getting through that skin. The elasticity... It clings to the blade.” His eyes went from distant to present as his sanity returned. He sighed, almost exhausted. “Get to the point, bra. Who are you working for?”

I pulled my collar back into place. The thin skin around my neck burned and my throat was dry. My eyes were tearing because of it. My head was aching again, hiding behind my eyes.

“I need more water,” I ventured.

Shane looked at Denvor and laughed hysterically.

“You believe this guy? More water. You are a funny guy, Mr. Gray.”

“It’s just Gray.”

He feigned an apology and put his gun over his heart as though it formed part of his anatomy.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Mr. Just Gray, please tell us another story, Mr. Just Gray.” He waved his hands about the room. “Please do tell us more.”

“Well,” I said, much to his surprise. “After my wife died, I began plotting how to kill all of you.”

This comment removed any evidence of a smile from his features. He stood in the middle of the room, frozen stiff. Swallowed up in thought, he tapped the barrel of the gun against his leg, the tempo of which was congruous to my heart palpitations, blood pulsing so furiously that I felt the rhythmical tickle at the base of my neck.

“Enough,” Denvor said. “It’s turning into a farce.

“Nah, bra, wait,” interjected Shane in his notably accentuated slang. “I want to hear this. Someone, go get me some popcorn.”

“At your own peril, Shane.”

He spun around and glared at Denvor. “My peril? Maybe the bra has something to say about your crew?”

“My people are loyal.” It came as a decisive blow from Denvor. “I don’t need him to point out my weaknesses.”

“Is that how it is, tjomma?”

“I told you, I’m not your bloody tjomma. This is not a team effort. You said he was the guy moving drugs under our nose. So far, it sounds more like he has beef with you.”

Shane sighed, crossed the room and returned to his seat. He extended his hand and gently placed the gun on the table without looking up. He stared blankly at the weapon, a playful smile weighing down his pointed chin. I wasn't sure if he was mocking me or seriously engaged. Regardless, there was a lull, and Denvor's annoyance suggested that I was running out of time.

CHAPTER 11

I wish I could remember more about Brenda's funeral. Fellow workers from my office were there, along with people I didn't know. They might have come for the free food and drinks provided by the catering company. After the burial, strangers roamed through my house, my privacy flayed open and everyone taking a hard peek at what the innards of normalcy looked like.

The presiding pastor said I was zombie-like in my attendance. He was correct. I navigated my way through proceedings in absentia. It was all so surreal that my cognitive reasoning imploded, or, more accurately, caved in. With every emotional blow, sorrow etched its way further into my being, as though it was seeking that little flame that flickered in the deepest crevices of my soul. When Brenda departed, a toxic puff of wind twirled through the cracks and expunged that flame. My core fragmented and left me a broken man.

Brenda had played an integral part in overseeing the previous funerals. This realisation dealt me a double blow because it led me down the treacherous path where I blamed myself for her death. An error on my part, perhaps, but it didn't stop the idea from sprouting. I fed and nurtured this internal accusation until it destroyed my mind.

Time rolled out in front of me like the endlessness of space. I saw stars and constellations one minute, a distant dark vacuum the next. Existences, those of people entering my sphere of agony, seemed to bang into sight, but because I was in a constant state of flux, they were instantly sucked into a black hole, leaving me with no recollection that they had entered my world. I ended up hurting a lot of people who were sincerely reaching out to me. But my soul was in mourning, which forfeited all accountability.

It was days later when I was finally coaxed out of the house with a phone call.

Detective Xhosa's desk was cluttered with case files, photos, a weapon cleaning kit, loose bits of stationery and our two Styrofoam cups positioned on opposite sides of the desk, his empty and mine full.

"I apologise for the coffee. This is all we can offer," he said.

I waved the apology aside. Looking at the stale coffee in front of me, I was confused about how it had arrived there. "You asked me to come in, Detective," I said in a low tone. "What is this about?"

Xhosa was standing behind his desk and I was seated in the chair. A part of him looked agitated at the crudeness of my question. Another part of him smelled of pity. There was a subtle wisdom in his demeanour, like that of someone who had experienced a great deal in life and seldom reflected on his losses.

I hadn't slept in three days. I didn't care what he thought of me.

"I understand," he said finally, easing himself into the chair.

When I moved, the wooden chair moved underneath me, emitting creaks and cracks. It didn't feel safe to sit in it.

"This must be a difficult time for you."

I nodded, curling my lip.

"Yours is a strange and terrible case. I've never seen things so intertwined before. I'm sorry that life has dealt you this bitter blow of coincidence."

"Coincidence?" I asked.

"Indeed. Profound coincidence."

He finished the remnants of coffee in his cup and repositioned things to make space in front of him. He plonked a file down and opened it to reveal a picture of a lifeless Brenda with both eyes shut.

Xhosa quickly turned the picture over. "Sorry, you were not meant to see that."

"I already saw her like that at the morgue. I had to identify her body."

He stared at me as though he was hoping to instil common sense into me. "Sir," he said softly. "You were not meant to see that again. Once is enough."

The other police officers and detectives I had met with during this part of my life, had a less than amicable quality about them. They seemed indifferent, numbed by the reality of their vocation and, consequently, inept at conducting themselves professionally.

Xhosa's gentle manner was slightly out of place in the bustle of the Bellville police station. He had a warmth in him, which, bizarre as it was at the time, filled me with a sense of hope. This was short-lived, of course. Xhosa was about to ruin my day.

"The coincidence I refer to lies at the root of your present situation. Coincidence ties the death of your brother, to that of your sister-in-law, as well as that of your wife. While your sister-in-law is classified as a suicide and your wife's death is ruled as an accidental death, there is something at the core of it that must be explained to you."

He told me about the link between the shootout wherein Allan had died and the weapon Satí had bought. A forensic analysis was able to match the bullet that had killed Allan with the bullet that had killed Satí, which meant they had been killed with the same weapon. After a brief interrogation with the boy who had sold Satí the gun, he offered up the name of Malique Dandala. However, Malique was tipped off and fled before they could arrest him. Xhosa explained that Malique was affiliated with Denvor Daniels's entourage. He added that the Golf which had caused Brenda's death, had been linked to Shane Collins's drug operation. This was before I had been moved to investigate the anonymity of the man behind the Golf's steering wheel. Xhosa said that Daniels and Collins had both been identified at the restaurant shootout. Eyewitnesses changed their statements when the matter progressed, and, as the murder weapon had been recovered, there was no way to implicate either in Allan's murder.

Once done, he hung his head and offered me a sympathetic smile, which looked like a gentle grimace.

“Our hands are tied in ways that are unfamiliar to us.” He waited for a reply. When it didn’t come, he added, “I can’t even make life difficult for them. Both men have ace legal teams running interference, which keeps police at bay.” Again, he waited, and again he added, “But we are watching them closely. They will make a mistake.”

“So,” I said, “Nothing?”

His grimace intensified.

“My brother, my sister-in-law, my mother and my wife. All gone. And I get no justice? No right for wrong?” I didn’t raise my voice. I suspect my coolness terrified Xhosa.

“I am sorry, sir. We...” He stopped himself, rethought his approach. “I will find a way to get justice.”

“Clearly, you are unable to do so. You just admitted it.”

“Sir...”

I stood up. As I pushed the chair back, the white desk fan tilted over and clattered over Xhosa’s desk, pushing files aside and knocking his empty cup off the table. He got up and set the fan upright.

“Detective Xhosa, it is better to sort this out myself. I have loads of time. *I* will find a way to get justice.”

Xhosa held out his hands, looking around as he made the shushing sound.

“Don’t say those things here.” He motioned me to sit down again. “Please, you mustn’t say that. If anyone hears, it can be used against you. The world has become a series of court cases and the good guys seldom win.”

“What am I to do?” I whispered in renewed agitation.

“I understand. I really do. But you can’t take them on yourself. They will kill you and carry on.”

“Goodbye, Detective Xhosa.”

I strolled through the department in a trance. The long corridor leading to reception had a mesmerising quality to it, beckoning me on towards a tiny square at the end of a dimly lit tunnel while secretly reluctant to expel me from its hold. I signed out at reception and went outside.

The exterior of the building was a red face brick façade with shady lighting and a faded blue SAPD light hidden at the far end. It was almost eight o’ clock. The din of daytime pedestrians and the rumble of delivery trucks had passed the torch over to the repetitive hum of Bellville nightlife. The evening air was invigorating and fresh, with a hint of fynbos that wafted down from the Tygerberg Nature Reserve. It carried on the air like pleasant memories. It could be because I had been hermitted in my house, depressing my cat and my mother’s dog that I readily recalled the air.

I was on my way out the gate when I heard it: *Pssst!*

I turned and saw someone’s reflection shifting within the shadows. There came another *psssst* sound. A cigarette coal lit up. The orange glow bounced back from Detective Xhosa’s cheeks. He was leaning against a wall, out of sight, ensconced in shadow.

Putting apprehension aside, I joined him, more out of curiosity than anything else. I said nothing and kept my hands in my pockets.

“It’s been almost two years now,” he said in a hushed tone. He sucked on his cigarette and expelled the smoke into the shadows. “She was going to get married that weekend. We were doing a rehearsal dinner. It was where the turf war was at its fiercest. Between the same two men. She was in a coma for two months, then her body just stopped fighting.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” I said. There was nothing else I could say.

“She was an innocent.” He took another draw, then shot the remains of the cigarette into the darkness. “Do you see? The innocents are the ones unjustly affected by this.”

My unresponsiveness must have expressed my uncertainty about the point he was trying to make. I was not looking for confusion, yet it often found me. On top of that, I’ve had an insane headache for weeks. It wouldn’t yield to painkillers. The pain had intensified until it made my eyes sensitive to light.

“I know of someone,” he whispered and stepped into the sombre glow of the streetlights. “Call this guy. Tell him about your innocents.” He handed me a piece of paper with a name and a number written on it. “He can help you.”

I took the note and stared at it.

“Why didn’t *you* call him?”

Detective Xhosa became reflective.

“I did,” he said. “But I couldn’t go through with it. I had only one cut, one innocent to put to rest. You have many cuts. Call him.”

A set of headlights swooped over us as a police van pulled into the drive. I shielded my eyes from the glare as the vehicle rattled past. When I turned back, Detective Xhosa was gone.

I lingered for a moment, pocketed the note and left. I stopped at an all-night pharmacy for stronger pain meds. I’ve tried paracetamol, aspirin, ibuprofen, and diclofenac to deaden the pain. It was time to try opioids and barbiturates.

The next morning, the doorbell woke me from a disturbing dream. I envisioned slugs crawling along my fingers, leaving slimy trails in their wake. Then I saw them crawling over Brenda’s dead face, one slug pulling an eyelid back as it crept over her closed eyes. It repulsed me to think of Brenda in that way. I blamed the person on the other end of the doorbell for this image.

When I opened the door, Bertie September turned around, smiled wanly and pushed his glasses back.

I slammed the door shut before he could say anything.

“Good morning,” he said loudly on the other end of the door.

“Piss off!”

“We need to talk. Sir, these claims are highly unusual.”

I left him on the porch and returned to bed.

A couple of days later, I pulled myself together long enough to attempt laundry. I came upon Detective Xhosa's note in my denim pockets. For a further two days, the note lay on the surface of the coffee table where Brenda and I had once made love. When my self-loathing reached a peak and my headache sufficiently fuelled my anger, I picked up the note and called the number. I arranged a meeting at a coffee shop the following morning. I was familiar enough with the layout to know it had nooks where a sensitive conversation could be conducted without worrying about curious ears or prying eyes.

I was 15 minutes early. I sat in the car interrogating myself. I had no idea what fruit the meeting would hold. It was not the type of engagement where lack of possible outcomes made the encounter any more promising. The way I had obtained the note, suggested the illicitness of the meeting. I was about to get my hands dirty – and I didn't care. My mental reasoning was in a state of flux. There were no longer clear black or white perspectives, just this large grey battlefield where my thoughts gathered to deliberate, hold caucuses and cast votes, while I stood divided in the black or the white, gawping through the fence as decisions were made in my absence.

The coffee shop was a quaint spot situated between Bellville and Durbanville. The wooden tables and menu designs complimented their use of earthy tones. There were some customers about, with a short queue of suited office workers and spandex-clad moms at the counter. Baristas passed barbs at each other, which blended with the beats from Brazilian lounge fusion music.

I ordered a flat white and found a tight spot in the back of the premises. With a window overhead, the late morning sun leapt in through the window and bounced over the corner, dropping a ball of shadow on the table. We would be trapped in a grey haze for the length of the meeting, with a dividing barrier of light slowly pulling towards me over the adjoining tables, like the sparkling crackle of a lit fuse drawing towards a stick of dynamite.

I was still adjusting to the farting sounds of red leather chair, when a short unsuspecting man joined my table as though he was returning from the bathroom.

"Crazy traffic this morning," he said. He studied something on the table menu and made a grumbling sound. He looked questioningly at me. "Well, that's new. Who would eat that?" When the waiter arrived with my coffee, he said, "I'll have the same. Thanks."

As the waiter left, I looked around, naturally suspicious, then leaned closer to my unfamiliar guest.

"Gavin?" I whispered. "Are you Gavin?"

"The one and only," he said loud enough for everyone to hear.

He could tell I was dubious. He sat back and gave me an uncomfortable, dead stare.

"Would people remember someone who acted strange? Or someone who was normal?"

"Oh, right..." I sat up and leaned into my chair with fake aplomb, at ease for onlookers, yet secretly uneasy in Gavin's presence. "Noted."

"That's better," he said.

A plump waitress with bad acne offloaded his coffee and spun it around until the spoon rattled against the ceramic saucer.

“Mmmm, gorgeous,” he said as she waddled off. I wasn’t sure if he was talking about the coffee or the waitress.

When she was out of earshot, he asked me where I got his number, though I had told him over the phone. Either he had forgotten, or he was making sure my source hadn’t changed since the day before. I told him again.

“The fact that I get most of my business from police officers, should tell you a lot.”

“A lot about what?”

“About our country. About our police services.”

I nodded thoughtfully and wondered if he had a military background.

His eyes were all over the show, as if he was watching the metal ball in a pinball machine ricochet off flippers and bumpers. He was a short man with broad shoulders. He wore a khaki jacket with an upended collar and a small cap, which obscured his features. His short stubby fingers were busy when they were in sight, arguing among themselves or fiddling with sugar packets.

“Alright, so what do you need?” he asked.

I told him my tale of woe, adding the information from Detective Xhosa, stressing his inability to ensure the course of justice.

“Justice?” Gavin scoffed. “What a strange word. Almost the same as truth.”

“You don’t believe in justice?”

“Mister, I’m not an instrument of justice.”

“What do you do then?”

“I’m an instrument of wrath.”

“Does that mean you right wrongs?”

“Ah...” His menacing smile suspended between his bunched-up cheeks. “But what seems right to you, might be wrong to the receiver of your wrath.”

I waited for a young couple to pass our table, smiling involuntarily.

“So, you would just as easily right me if I was the other person’s wrong?” He didn’t answer, so I rephrased the question. “Do you do work for any of the men I mentioned?”

“I’m meeting with you first, which makes you my client.” He pushed his empty cup to one side.

“Detective Xhosa said you could help me in my quest for justice.”

I thought that remark would annoy Gavin, but it didn’t. His eyes flicked, fingers fumbled, face tightened. His smile became criminal, revealing his teeth in a similar way a Dobermann once bared its teeth at me. He made sure no one could hear him.

“You want these men to disappear, yes?”

I nodded.

“Will that right the wrong?” he asked as though he was addressing a naughty child.

I nodded.

“Great,” he said. “Justice will cost you fifty thousand per head. That’s a hundred k for both. Cash up front.” He slid a small SIM card across the table. “I’ll call you on this number tomorrow and arrange a drop.”

“Fifty thousand up front,” I said, almost surprised to hear myself negotiate the terms with a hitman. “Fifty upon completion.”

Gavin stared at me for a long time, his eyes narrowing slowly until he glared at me through slits. He smiled suddenly and got up.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he whispered and left as the sun crept over the edge of the table.

I expelled a troubled sigh and dropped down on my elbows, hoping that it would stop my world from turning. It didn’t. I pondered about what I’d done. I had set in motion a contract to have two men murdered. And I was unfazed by it. I was more concerned with my headache. My head throbbed. There was a thumping sound in my ears the one moment and an incessant pinging sound the next.

When I returned to the car, I pinched the bridge of my nose until my eyes began to water. I put the seat back and tried resting my eyes, but nothing helped. I called my doctor and made an appointment for the following day. I needed stronger medication, but I couldn’t get it without a prescription. I have exhausted all over-the-counter options.

From the coffee shop, I drove around town and stopped at different ATMs. I withdrew most of the required funds from my personal account and the rest from Brenda’s savings account which was still active. I had spousal signing authority, so I emptied her account with the intention of closing it at a later stage.

I went home, put the fifty thousand Rand in a large envelope and hid it under my office desk. After that I took a handful of painkillers and flipped through channels until my eyelids became like lead-filled curtains. Eventually everything went black. There, lost in the dark memories where my make-believe past and my forever-after future converged, I bowed down to the will of my nightmares, tormented until daylight called me back to the land of the living.

CHAPTER 12

The empty sockets of an anatomical model studied me from the edge of the desk. Its smooth skull was slanted, askew from the rest of its skeletal structure, feet dangling at awkward angles. It was pivoted in such a way that it peered down at me with an air of judgement, its jaws agape and its hands partially extended, as though it was giving pursuit.

As the clouds played around outside, obscure shadows inflated and deflated against the soft cream-coloured vertical blinds. At times, the room grew dark enough for the fluorescent bulbs to have

its desired effect. When the clouds filtered away, the room became blindingly white, which felt like piercing shards of glass pressing into my eyeballs.

It took me a while to remember where I was or how I had got there. This incessant headache was causing my memories to play hide-and-seek. For most of that morning, I had forgotten about the hitman I had under my employ. When it hit me, I first panicked, until the headache returned. Then I became stolid once more. I didn't trust myself. My reasoning seemed off. Which brought me back to this room.

Doctor Immelman stopped writing for a few seconds. He raised his bushy brows and closed his eyes, evidently vexed by my headaches. He found the word he was searching for and continued writing. The sound of his pen scraping across the texture of the paper was deafening in the tense silence.

He was about sixty, balding, pudgy-faced and short. In the ten years I'd known him, I found him to be precise, efficient and painfully direct. Brenda had thought the world of him, which was enough for me.

"Righty oh," he said in a peculiar, high-pitched voice. "You've tried a lot of different drugs here. And it's been, what, about eight weeks."

I looked at him through narrowed eyelids and shook my head. "I honestly can't remember. I think it's been long enough to be concerned."

"Dear boy," he said softly and leaned forward on his elbows. "You should have been concerned in that first week. The sound in your ears is very alarming."

"I know, but it's been a crazy time. There wasn't really..."

"I understand. I really do. And it's OK." He closed the file and sat back. "So, I can give you something that would take the pain away post-haste, but it might just come back again. Or we can investigate and find out what's going on."

"I can't deal with this pain anymore. Can you remove the pain while we investigate?"

"I certainly can. I'm sure it's nothing, but let's not rule anything out. Normally I wouldn't be too drastic, but you've had it rough. The body doesn't respond well to the type of stress you've endured." He gave me a sympathetic nod, pursed his lips, then pulled his notepad closer and began writing. "I suggest we do a scan first. This will help us narrow it down. Your medical aid should cover it. Does your plan have any exclusions?"

"I haven't a clue. If I must pay, I'll pay."

"I'm also prescribing something with a bit more oomph. Be sure to take it after you are safely at home." He slid a prescription note across his desk and offered me a playful smile. "And don't operate heavy machinery after taking those."

He also gave me a reference letter with his illegible scribbles on and sent me to the radiologist two floors up. I went up by lift to make a booking. They had an opening, so I walked straight into a blue hospital gown. I sat waiting for a while, feeling dejected and on display, then I was ushered into the room where scans were conducted. A young, attractive nurse with long eyelashes and symmetrical hips asked some questions and I answered. She steered me back until the patient table pressed against my backside. When I turned, a ripple of reality washed over me. The massive tube-shaped dome of the magnet housing loomed in front of me.

Soon enough the scan was done. It was still early, so I headed home and took my meds. I began unpacking Brenda's clothes, a task I loathed. I'd purposely delayed it, but every time I opened her cupboards, a dagger of remorse pierced through my spirit and pinned me to the couch in a distressing state, TV remote glued to one hand. The big clean-out had to be done, for my own sanity. I was hoping that once Brenda was out of sight, she would be out of mind. It's not that I wanted to forget her. I just couldn't cope anymore. My life was falling apart faster than I could put it back together. I had no purpose, no fight.

The bed was stacked with her shirts, dresses, sandals, boots, slip-ons, running shoes, scarves, cardigans, panties, bras, socks, belts, handbags, make-up, and her wedding dress, which she had kept as a memento in case we adopted a daughter. I put her jewellery into a small box. There weren't many, but, since I had bought most of it, every piece had a sentimental connection.

I was busy putting everything into black bags when Brenda's phone began to vibrate, rattling across the counter of her dressing table. I stared at the phone in alarm. It took me a while to remember that I had put the hitman's SIM card into Brenda's old phone. The reflection of my face in the dressing table's mirror, gave me chills. I almost didn't recognize myself with a beard. Facial hair never really suited me, but a neglected beard on my cheeks looked woeful. My eyes looked unfamiliar to me, almost creepy. As internal changes were taking effect, external changes were starting to show.

I answered the phone but didn't utter a greeting into the receiver. There was a silence, then Gavin's menacing voice reached through the phone and crept into my ears.

"Thirty minutes. Same place. Bring the package."

The phone went dead.

I finished bagging Brenda's clothes, using the cold act of doing so to motivate my intentions. Every garment had blood on it. She had been an innocent. Her blood was scattered over every memory of her. As my eyes harden in the reflection of the mirror, I realised that an unknown part of me wanted blood for blood, even if it came at the hands of a hitman whom I completely distrusted.

Money in hand, I left the house. I arrived five minutes late and found Gavin sitting with his back to the wall, which was the seat I had chosen for our previous meeting. The tables had turned. When I sat down, it was as though I was sitting down with the devil. Gavin's demeanour was different. He was colder somehow. His face carried a wrinkled forehead, furrowed brows and tight lips. His eyes were no longer playful. I wondered whether he had a split personality that orchestrated the dirty part of his job.

"You're late," he hissed.

"Five minutes," I said. "Is that a problem?"

"Don't ever come late again or I'll kill you."

An ice wave swooped over my entire being. The area around our table became blisteringly hot and wintry cold at the same time. Time froze. The suddenness and nonchalance of his threat left me without words or thoughts. My lips were pressed together so tightly that it began to hurt at the edges where it closed my teeth. Somewhere inside my mind I was at war with myself, but when something rattled me, the two parts became one and clarity returned.

"Did you bring it?"

I blinked a couple of times, as though I was flipping through pages of a book to catch up to the story. I pushed the envelope across the table.

“It’s all there,” I muttered, my mouth suddenly dry.

“Of course, it is.” A grim smile spread across his face as he pocketed the package. “You are too clever to renegotiate.” He was about to leave, but I stopped him.

“I have a request, please.”

“You have exhausted your requests.”

“This is different.” He eased back and waited. “I want to see,” I said, more surprised by the words dripping from my lips than Gavin. I had no control over my thoughts. “I *need* to see it.”

He leaned into the seat and studied me carefully, putting my soul under scrutiny. “I never took you for the type. I thought I had you pegged, but there is something off in you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Does death excite you?”

The idea of death repulsed me. “Not at all. But this is personal. I need to see you do it.”

“I’ll sleep on it,” he said after a while.

Gavin slid out from the booth and rose to his feet. As he looked down at me, a long shadow pulled across his features. His deep-set eyes looked like the empty sockets of the anatomical skeleton in Doctor Immelman’s office.

“You have no idea what you just got yourself into, do you?”

I didn’t know how to reply, so I shrugged. Gavin left.

I didn’t think it wise to linger, so I went to my office to clear out my desk and to meet a colleague. After Brenda’s death, I had resigned. My clients understood. I handed them over to a financial adviser I trusted, a thin man called Bob Sampson. I even signed a document that empowered him to tend to my own matters. I couldn’t look at all that money heading my way. We examined the totality of my portfolio. While some payments were still in transit, it was just an estimate but a fairly accurate one.

Bob whistled softly as he studied the laptop screen. He had two potted plants in his office. A fern that was fighting to stay alive and a miniature aloe with spikes around each succulent leaf blade.

“That can’t be correct,” he whispered and rechecked his figures. Satisfied that it was correct, he looked at me over his spectacles. “You are looking at about forty million.”

The amount didn’t register at first. The words reached me, but the notion of money held no value to me. It was the most peculiar thing. I had R40 million to spend, but the thought of spending it eluded me. I didn’t want it if I couldn’t enjoy it with Brenda. The sum of it all seemed like bribe money, stained with loss.

“Forty...” I mumbled, lost in a trance.

I studied the little aloe and its sharp thorns. The muted daylight that poured in through the office window caused the aloe to become translucent. I could make out the cells and their gel inside the plant's leaf. I found it bizarre how threatening those thorns looked the one instant, and then how fragile the tiny thing looked a moment later. For the first time in my life, sitting there in Bob's office, numbers had no meaning to me.

"Forty," Bob repeated, his bony cheeks betraying his frown. He studied the Eiffel Tower-shaped wall clock, hinting that he had another client scheduled. "What are your plans with it?"

"I have no idea."

"You know what we advise clients who feel the way you do now. Put it in a safe investment until you know what to do."

In my troubling state, I decided to do the exact opposite. "I want you to invest it in the most volatile investment you can find."

"What?" He was flabbergasted. His dark brown skin had almost turned white in mere seconds. He removed his glasses and rubbed his temples. "Listen, you need to be clever about this. If you do this right, you never have to work again. Just..." He stopped himself short, re-evaluated his words, "Just think about it."

"I'm of sound mind, Bob. Please allocate the funds as I instructed."

His shoulders sagged. It was my money. I was the client. He was the adviser.

"Sure thing," he said. "As you wish."

I signed the required documents then got up to leave.

"There was an annoying claims investigator who came to see me," I said.

"What for?"

I shrugged. "He made it clear he was suspicious."

"Suspicious of what?"

I gave another shrug, but added, "His name was Bertie."

"Let me check into it. I wouldn't worry." Bob jotted down the name. "They also have a job to do. And your situation is rather unique."

On my way home, Doctor Immelman's assistant called and asked if I was able to come in to discuss the results of my scans. I was close to Brackenfell, so I went to his office. It was late afternoon when I stopped outside the building. An ambulance raced by as I got out, then pulled up to the hospital entranceway across the road. A nurse and an EMT went about offloading a patient on a stretcher, then wheeled the patient into the ER entrance.

The clouds that threatened to blot out the sun earlier, had succeeded in doing so. Teams of dark puffs spread across the expanse of the skyline, now seemingly without end. They had amassed so gradually that I hadn't noticed the cold air taking hold of my arms. As I rubbed my arms, I realised I hadn't eaten all day. More alarming was the fact that I wasn't hungry.

“Same-day service,” I joked as Doctor Immelman entered the room. “You give the government a run for their money.”

He didn’t smile. His face looked grave and tense.

“We were lucky they had a gap when you arrived,” he said as he spread the scans and CD across his desk. He held one of the images up to the fluorescent lights and slowly shook his head.

“And?”

“Righty oh,” he said finally. He jumbled the scans together, then intertwined his thick fingers. He looked intently at me. “The radiologist and I discussed the scans. They show an area that is a bit of a concern. It looks like a black spot near the frontal cortex. I’m not a neurologist, but, as luck would have it, my brother is. So, as a precaution, I sent the images to him for an expert opinion.”

I waited, but he just sat there rubbing his fingers together, his deep blue eyes wavering.

“What?”

“It doesn’t look good. The MRI shows what might be a tumour inside your brain.”

I repaid his curtness with a little giggle, but his glare expressed the seriousness of the report.

“You are not serious? This must be a joke. I don’t understand...” The doctor gave me a moment to digest the information. “Are you saying I have cancer?”

“Nothing’s set in stone yet, but we need to get clarity on these scans right away.”

“This can’t be right. It just can’t. I mean...”

The sensation of sweat spreading across my forehead made me panicky. It tickled and crawled across my scalp as my concerns hastened the onset of perspiration.

“I know. I took the liberty of explaining your situation to my brother. What you have been through... He has agreed to see you right away.”

“Doctor, I don’t understand what’s happening.”

A sudden spell of nausea hit me in my gut. My head spun furiously. It was as though the office was turning over on itself. The more I tried to get air into my lungs the more inadequate it seemed. I rested my head in my hands and pulled in a deep breath. When I closed my eyes, my stomach heaved. I focused on a tiny cut in the blue industrial carpeting. From that point on things became involuntary.

Experiencing a bout of claustrophobia, I jumped to my feet. I went for the door to escape the confinement. I never made it, though. The door handle approached, fast, coming right at me. Then there was a bright flash, which coincided with the sensation of being shook violently. A bank of black clouds pressed in on me from all angles and sucked me into an abyss.

CHAPTER 13

When I came to, I was in a hospital bed. I could tell it was a hospital before I even opened my eyes. The coarse linen pulled across my skin as I wrestled my arms free from its grip.

My eyelids were heavy. My mouth was dry, my jaws were tired, and my tongue was sensitive where I had bitten into it. There was a grating sound in my ears when I blinked my eyes. I could smell I hadn't brushed my teeth in a while. When I wrinkled my forehead, a sharp pain shot through my entire face. Though physically exhausted, I felt wired, as though I had imbibed way too much coffee. I raised one hand, but my fingers shook so violently that I had to relent. As memories refreshed themselves, I realised I must have passed out in the doctor's office and hit my head on the door's handle.

"Ah, good," a voice said beside me. "You are awake."

A man in his early fifties was making notes on a clipboard. His hair was a wavy brown-grey mash-up. He had a comforting smile and a set of eyes that felt familiar, almost calming.

"I'm Dr Immelman." He smiled. "The other Immelman. You can call me Andre." I saw no resemblance.

I scanned the room. Stark whites and neutral blues. There was a blank television screen mounted to the ceiling above my bed, a chair holding my clothes in a see-through bag, a door leading off to a toilet and a privacy curtain pulled halfway across one side of my bed. The aircon hummed pleasantly in the background.

"Where am I?"

"The hospital across from my brother's practice," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit..." My thoughts collapsed. "Woozy, but not really woozy. Like I've been exercising too long." I tried to sit up, but I was exhausted. "What happened?"

"You had a nervous breakdown," Allan said with a tense smile. "Your system shut down long enough to reboot itself."

"Why?"

Andre Immelman drew up the chair, put the bag of clothes a bedside drawer, and sat down. He closed the pages on the clipboard and lay it down near my feet.

"Severe emotional distress. I suspect you were not sleeping well, either. And bingeing on pain meds. Your body needed rest. Your nerves needed to recalibrate. You've been asleep for two days."

"Two days? That can't be. I was just in the doctor's office."

"I know it is a bit disorienting. We kept you on intravenous feeding and, based on the MRI my brother requested, allowed you to sleep. While you were out, we acquired approval from your medical aid and conducted further scans."

I felt the bump on my forehead. It wasn't as swollen as I'd thought. The bruise tingled as my fingers sailed over the skin. I cringed and coughed dryly, attempting to clear my throat.

Andre handed me a glass half-filled with water and helped me to sit up.

"Two days?" I asked again.

“Yup, you slept through it all. We didn’t even sedate you.”

I finished the water, cleared my throat and handed the glass back. Andre Immelman waited for me to catch up. He sat cross-legged, one hand propped under his chin and the others long fingers playing with a pen.

“Scans? What scans?” I asked.

“All of them.”

“And?”

“We were able to surmise that you have advanced glioblastoma.”

“Glio... What?”

“Brain cancer,” Andre said softly. “You have advanced brain cancer.”

I swallowed a mouthful of clay as my throat tightened up.

“How advanced?”

“Very advanced. Stage 4.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the tumour you have inside your head is not only aggressive, but it has metastasised to other parts of your brain, which makes it inoperable.” He uncrossed his legs and sat forward, elbows on his knees, fingers intertwined in a similar manner as his brother. “And fatal.”

“Fatal?”

Andre nodded. His lips were pursed.

“How long do I have?”

“It’s almost impossible to say. It could be weeks. It could be months.”

A defensive attitude flared up inside of me. My breathing became laboured.

“Not years?”

Without removing his eyes, Andre shook his head no.

The rest of the conversation was a blur.

Having eaten my hospital lunch, I checked out of the hospital later that afternoon. I signed the necessary documents at reception and left. As the sliding doors in the entranceway parted, something happened inside of me. It was as though my own personal map was being unfurled on a large table, revealing my most intimate places and my most private thoughts. I was the jungle and the adventurer at the same time. I was seeing unexplored valleys and peaks within myself that I had never imagined were there, etched into the fabric of my soul map. This stimulus for introspection had been roused by the doctor’s bad news, but I couldn’t come to terms with my own looming mortality in a hospital bed. I believe, more than anything, I desired to return home. Though the house reminded me of Brenda, it was still my only refuge. It was the one place where I could enjoy unquestionable solitude, which was

exactly what I needed after the day's revelations. I had arranged to meet with Doctor Andre Immelman about my diagnosis and the way forward, if, indeed, there were to be a way forward.

My car was in the parking lot where I had left it two days before. I could tell by the shine on the car that someone had washed my car after the previous day's rains. A nurse had informed me about the sudden arrival of hail and lightning, and how they had made bets to see if the thunderclaps would summon me from my slumber. She said I had cost her R30. I apologised.

It was a sunny day, but there was evidence of the deluge. The pavement's darkened tar, clumps of debris caking the sewer grates, and the smell of steam.

I gave the parking attendant a R100 for washing my car. His joy was unequalled, much like my dismay. As I made my way to my car, I wondered about his life and what the total sum of his joy would be. Was he married? Did he have children? His lack suddenly seemed idyllic when compared to my abundance. I got into my car and headed home.

The comforting warmth of my house had been replaced by a dank smell. At first, I thought it was the banana peels I had left in the trash. Maggots were crawling out of the dustbin in hordes, like an army of motivated soldiers driven to overthrow their opponent. Though tiny, they made a sickening crunch as I stepped over them to get to the broom closet. However, as I reached the broom closet, I discovered the true origin of the stench.

Moscow and Sheba were sprawled out over the kitchen floor, their tummies swollen in death. It appeared that, overtaken by intense hunger, Sheba had pawed open the kitchen sink cabinet and rummaged through the ingredients on the lazy Susan. There the duo must have found Moscow's secret catnip treats. Motivated by their discovery, they continued ransacking the cabinet and devoured most of the rat poison and snail bait, which must have smelled like tasty snacks. The irony was that the dry foods and edible long-life products were stored opposite the sink base cabinet. Sheba's old nose had led her to the wrong storage space.

The local veterinary doctor later told me that the rate of consumption and amounts ingested would have resulted in a near-instantaneous death for both. The fact that the animals didn't suffer long did little to curb my suffering. Sheba had been the last remembrance of my mother, while Moscow had been Brenda's muted echo. While I was receiving the diagnosis of my terminal illness, both my treasured memories had been dealt a fatal blow. Why I hadn't left a window open or at least put Sheba's bed on the back porch, was beyond my understanding.

Death had made itself welcome in my life and it was refusing to leave. It was ever-present in every corner of my life. Wherever I went and whatever I did, death followed and pushed the glimmer of life further out of my reach.

Later I inspected the hole I had dug. I couldn't remember digging the hole, yet there it was. It was a pathetic looking mess of a hole. One metre deep, ragged along the sides and terribly dark. My arms, legs and part of my shirt was dusted with dark earth. Sweat was dripping from my brows. My breathing was erratic, partly because I was on the verge of having another panic attack. I had this urge to cry but nothing came of it. I only managed this dry heaving sound accompanied by a soft little moan. It was as though my body had no will to lament, yet I was open to embrace the direness of my situation.

I had chosen a spot in the bedding where Brenda had planted an ice cream bush a couple of years ago. The shrub's green, cream and pink leaves were so pleasant to look at. Brenda had loved this plant more than anything. I hadn't been able to appreciate its beauty quite as I did at that moment. As I laboured for breath, I stood mesmerised by its obscurity. Though neutral and cold, the bush was alight

with a natural kind of glow that bounced off its leaves and hung in the midday heat like a swarm of gnats.

“Oh my...” a familiar voice said behind me.

Bertie September’s curious eyes looked hungrily at me from the other side of the garden gate. Because he was short, I imagined he had to stand on tiptoe to see over the gate. And what a sight it must have been.

Me wielding the flat blade of a spade, knee-deep in a shallow grave, a disgruntled expression hanging on my face. The towel-covered parcel next to me would have been enough for anyone to be instinctively wary. The investigator thought it appropriate to slip the galvanised hatch back and enter my backyard. He stepped across the lawn until he was close enough for me to whack him over the head with the spade. I didn’t, but the thought of doing it was at the forefront of my mind.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “What do we have here? Destroying evidence, are we?”

I clambered out of the hole with great effort and positioned myself on the opposite side of the hole, adjusting my grip on the spade.

“You have entered my property without my permission, Mr. September. I am within my rights to defend myself against an intruder.”

Bertie seemed unfazed by my remark. His beady eyes hopped over the scene.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” he squeaked in a pitched voice. “Murder in self-defence. I wouldn’t fit into that hole.”

“What are you doing here? What do you want from me?”

He licked his lips in a manner that seemed to be goading me. I suspect he longed for me to do something that would prove his initial assessment of me. I couldn’t fathom what about my situation had convinced him that there was something clandestine at work. At that point, I just couldn’t care. I was coming to terms with the fact that I was a dying man. Bertie’s view of me held no sway over my future.

“I want to catch you. I want to know how you did it. And why you did it.”

I pulled the towel back to reveal the two deceased pets. Bertie jumped back in surprise; his excitement was momentarily replaced by repulsion. He shielded himself and held a hand to his mouth, as though he was about to vomit. Then, as I saw his dark mind turning things over, his shock subsided. A sick joy unfolded in his eyes. He bit his bottom lip and wiped his sweaty palms against his pants.

“Yes!” he shouted. “Of course. Pet insurance. You slick bastard.”

Indeed, both animals had been insured. It would pay out R10 000 each if they passed away. Around the time that Moscow came into our lives, my company was trialling a new insurance product that catered for pet owners. Since we didn’t have kids, the insurance seemed like a good idea. After my mother passed away, we added Sheba to the policy.

“They died while I was in hospital.”

“Of course,” he hissed. He studied me with absolute uncertainty, looking for lies.

I got down to my knees and gingerly picked up, Sheba. Her head fell to one side, eyes shut and mouth open. I leaned over and lowered her body into the grave. Her body thumped as it struck the bottom of the grave. Then I slid my hands underneath Moscow's legs and carefully raised him up. Inside my mind, I pictured Moscow as a kitten, crawling around Brenda's arms, playing with her fingers, biting the drooping curls of her hair. I remembered Moscow's warm body between us on the bed, his deep purr. Brenda's happiness had been like a drug to me. Moscow had been the instrument to feed that happiness. Laying him to rest only reminded me about the burden of having lost my partner.

I reluctantly let go of Moscow. The cat landed on top of Sheba's body and curled over, its neck twisted back as though it was judging me from the bottom of the grave.

At that point, my heart caved in. Tears flowed down my cheeks. I had never experienced anything similar before.

Bertie September was so alarmed by my sorrow that he ran out the backyard and slammed the gate shut. I heard his little Honda blare to life and speed off.

I don't know how long this bout of sadness lasted, but it felt like an eternity. I was exhausted. I had nothing more to offer the grave. My hands were tender when it gripped the handle of the spade. Thirty minutes of swinging a gardening tool had caused blisters to form inside both palms. I filled the hole as the sun drowned in the field behind my house.

Afterwards I collapsed on the couch, smearing dark earth everywhere. I clutched the blanket that had last been over Brenda, soiling it with my dirty hands. I left the side door open to hear the crickets and the frogs as I drifted into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Brenda's phone woke me late the next morning. Gavin sounded amused by the exhaustion evident in my gruff voice. He hinted at a late night of debauchery, then gave me an address and a time. He reminded me not to be late. Before I could reply, he hung up.

I was starving. I was weak from not having eaten the day before. There was not enough time or ingredients to prepare something at home. I had to meet Gavin in three hours at a factory building, so I decided to catch a breakfast on the way.

Brenda's full-length mirror had been smashed. Large slivers had remained in the frame, with some shards scattered on the floor. I couldn't remember breaking it, but the cuts on my hand and the bruises on my knuckles convicted me of the act. My reflection bouncing back and forth off the bits of metal amalgam as I shifted around. I was a shocking sight. My hands and feet were earth-darkened, my clothes grimy and my eyes sunken. It looked as though I'd clawed my way out of a grave, determined to avenge my own death.

In the shower I scrubbed at the dried dirt under and around my nails to remove any trace of my stint as a gravedigger. I was mesmerised by the soap foam twirling around the shower trap grid, then was released when it gurgled down the drain. It was a cathartic experience, so visceral that it required intense appreciation. After a quick shave, I was ready for the day.

I had a three-cheese omelette and two cappuccinos at a small coffee shop, then set off to meet Gavin. It was a Sunday morning. The roads were deserted. Traffic wasn't bottlenecking as it would on a weekday morning. At one stage I passed a church. The sound of people singing hymns were oddly comforting – yet distressing. I was not there to do God's work. I was there for malice, to exact revenge. The fact that I was paying someone to do it on my behalf, notwithstanding. I guess a part of me rebelled against the idea of letting a hitman do my dirty work, but my mind and my soul was divided.

I made it to the old glass factory ahead of schedule to avoid another verbal lambasting from my hitman. I took the route around the back of the property as instructed. I pulled up to the large gate I was told to look out for. The red and black obscenity spray-painted across the metal sheeting was impossible to miss. It was rusted through around the outer extremes, where early morning dew had caused the iron oxide residue to leave orange tear tracks as though the gate was crying rust.

I was about to get out of my car when the gate rippled and shuddered. A small opening appeared, with Gavin's careful eyes peering out at me from beyond. The gate glided inward, leaving a narrow space for me to drive through. Once through, my rear-view mirror revealed Gavin closing the gate with lock and chain.

My little Toyota bumbled across the yard, hitting every possible pothole in sight. Gavin pointed out a secluded spot at the edge of the property. My car disappeared into the overgrown shrubbery and wild grass.

When I climbed out, Gavin was on top of me. He took hold of my one arm, swirled it around and had me pinned to the Toyota's bonnet before I could catch my breath. Within seconds he searched my pockets and my body. Not finding a listening device or a weapon, he let go my arm.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

I flung around and glared at him. He wore a brown beanie, khaki jacket, cargo pants, brown boots and tight-fitting gloves. His chest heaved and his face was bunched up in annoyance.

“You told me to meet you here.”

“I didn't think you were dumb enough to come.”

“What do you mean?”

He shook his head, an eerie smile creeping across his face.

“You are crazy.” He turned and walked across the yard, hunched over. “Come with me.”

I followed.

The yard adjacent to the factory was vacant. It was cluttered with all manner of building debris and a large stack of rotten wood pallets.

“Where'd you park your car?” I asked as we pushed through the weeds.

He stopped and looked at me for a long time. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Just wondering how you got here.”

“That's not important. What's important is that I'm here. Now shut up and stay behind me.”

We reached a dividing fence that had been broken down in places. Gavin moved towards an opening and pushed through. I dipped my head low, stepped over the broken edge of the fence and pushed through after him.

The old glass factory building rose into the skies in front of us. I had read about the factory in the local newspapers. The business had undergone liquidation and were never able to reopen. One of my clients had been employed there, so I had a keen interest. Journalists reported extensively on the legal battle that ensued among board members, as well as former employees.

The building had been an eyesore ever since. The roof had fallen in at one section. Most of the windows had been smashed by kids who lobbed stones at it for fun. Ironically, the factory still had its corrugated sheeting and copper piping. Not only was it never plundered by metal thieves, but there were no reports of homeless occupants squatting in the building. In South Africa, this was almost unheard of.

Before entering the factory, Gavin stepped up to me until his nose touched mine. His eyes were fierce. The terrible monster inside of him was evaluating me carefully.

“From now on, you keep quiet.”

Caution should have interjected long before this point, but it hadn't. I realised I was about to get in way over my head. After this I would be no better than those who had wronged me, but I couldn't stop myself. I wanted justice for Brenda, my mother, Allan, and Satí, even if it came at the cost of losing my soul – or my mind. I was already a dead man. In my mind, dragging drug dealers and murderers down with me seemed justified. Besides, everything had been set in motion. I had reached the point of no return. *Alea iacta est.*

We scurried through the floor space, sidestepping abandoned machinery and equipment, then dashed up a dirty staircase. We exited onto an open wooden platform overlooking the shop floor. The wooden beams creaked as we made our way across to the office at the end of the platform. Clouds of dust spiralled in our wake, first curling around our ankles, then taking flight as we swooped through the section where administrative staff and management had been isolated. It was dark and creepy, with desks and office equipment only partially visible in the shadows.

Gavin's stealth capabilities were far more advanced than my own. He often glanced sideways at me when I bumped into something or stirred up dirt, a glint of annoyance in his eyes.

We were huddled inside the manager's office when he finally broke his self-imposed silence.

“You stay here when they come,” he whispered.

I shook my head, not sure if I was permitted to talk. He sighed and beckoned me to speak with his one hand.

“They, who?”

“The *they* you paid me to kill.”

“Oh, right.” I thought about it, then asked, “How sure are you they will come here?”

“You don't know much, do you? This is a dump house. A place where they store drugs.”

My eyes grew wide in surprise. Detective Xhosa had mentioned how reluctant police were to take on Collins or Daniels. It dawned on me that if the location was used for illegal activity, then

everyone would know about it, and therefore avoid it, which explained why the building was still intact.

“A drug dump? How could you possibly know that?”

“Keep your voice down, will you,” he shushed me, then continued, “This is one of Collins’s spots. They stash their shit here. Runners distribute it to dealers from here, who in turn sells it to junkies along Voortrekker Road, from Parow, through Bellville, and into Kuils River, where they clash with Denvor’s crew.”

“How the hell do you know all of this?” I asked.

“How do you *not* know? You live in the middle of a war zone. That’s what the shootout was about. The night your brother was shot, their war reached an impasse.” He removed a pistol and a cylindrical metal tube, which he screwed onto the front of the pistol with a slow methodical twist of his wrist. “Of course, you would know about this if you weren’t living in your own little bubble.”

“I resent that.”

“Tell it to someone who gives a shit.” He racked the slide to chamber a round. “They are making a collection here today. Shane distrusts his own crew, so he is present during collections. He only brings one or two bums along, so it should be easy enough.”

“What about Denvor Daniels?” I asked.

“First Collins, then Daniels. You paid for one head. After this you pay for the second head.”

I was about to ask how he had obtained all these specifics when Gavin held up his hand. Outside cars pulled up, doors opened and closed, then voices and footsteps approached.

“Put your game face on, Sparky,” he whispered and winked at me. He handed me a grey balaclava. I obliged. His eyes grew cold once more. “Keep your mouth shut. Don’t move a muscle. You just observe. You feel me?” I nodded earnestly. “If you do anything, I’ll cut off your face and dump your body in Zeekoevlei.”

With that horrible image lodged in my mind, Gavin pulled a black balaclava over his head and left. He flitted out of sight, blending into the shadows and moving along the walls like a shapeshifter. At one stage I saw shadows move near the bottom of the staircase. I assumed he had moved along the factory floor to a predetermined spot.

CHAPTER 15

A large roller-shutter door, probably the factory’s main entrance whilst in operation, grinded open as it moved on its track. A sharp blade of sunlight pierced the darkness and fell across the dusty floor. It expanded as the door opening widened. Dust particles sparkled through the sunlight as though they were scurrying for cover. When the door stopped in its track, three men entered the building.

Shane Collins strolled in first with his unmistakable swagger. He swayed his arms and tilted his head as he moved, the same way he had after the restaurant shootout. When he whistled, it crept

along the walls and echoed across the empty, deserted shop floor. It was an eerie, menacing sound that enraged me, but it also sent shivers through me. This confusion between anger and fear stayed me from doing something silly.

I later identified Collin's accomplices as Zahier Moodley and Willie Stols, his most trusted guards. They walked up to a platform that had been hidden in the dark. Each man took a rope and tugged at it. A wooden section, no larger than a church's door, slid across the surface of the floor, revealing a pit underneath it. Zahier, the more agile of the three, clambered down a ladder which led into the pit. Before long a parcel was held out for Stols to collect, then take to the car.

"This shithole won't work for much longer," Shane said in thought. "The owner is losing the court battle. We must find another spot."

Zahier looked up at Shane and pulled back his sports cap.

"What must we do, boss?" His voice was sharp. His words were clear and crisp.

Shane kicked at something on the floor. It rolled out of sight and ricocheted off one of the machines, emitting a clanging sound that was repeated on itself a couple of times. I was sure I saw Gavin's boots retreating and pulling further into the darkness near the edge where the item had struck a machine.

"Let's empty it. This place is getting too small anyway. I want to put up a dump under Denvor's nose, in the heart of Kuils River. Who wants Bellville when Kuils River is up for grabs?" He snorted and spat out a mouthful of mucus. "Come on, finish up. I don't do double pay on Sundays."

Zahier nodded enthusiastically as Stols returned to collect another parcel. Zahier tossed out another seven parcels, climbed up the ladder and helped Stols load them into a van outside.

When Shane was alone on the shop floor, he lit a cigarette, puffed at it, then expelled a long snake of smoke. He circled the pit, stared into its depths, then headed towards where I had last seen the tips of Gavin's boots. I sensed the moment of my revenge was fast approaching.

I leaned closer to the edge of the platform to get a better view. My breathing became more urgent as a sense of excitement took hold of me. A film of perspiration spread across my head and a wave of nausea hit me. In fear of suffering another nervous breakdown, I tried looking away, but my head would not move. My eyes were frozen in their sockets. Even with the balaclava on my neck was icy cold. For a split second, I wanted to call out to Shane to warn him, or to Gavin to stop him from taking the shot. It was the strangest experience. I held sway over Shane's life. That power was intoxicating.

In the shadows, I saw the glint of Gavin's eyes as his target approached. Knowing where to look, I made out what looked like the tip of the silencer. It was aimed at Shane's head. Gavin was poised, ready to strike. In that moment I was convinced that Gavin had military experience. I was further convinced that he would kill afterwards.

A delivery truck's door squeaked open, then the two men began laughing outside. The commotion spurred Gavin to action. He drifted out of the shadows like smoke spilling from a chimney flue. He walked up to Shane, his weapon centimetres away from the man's head. Then I heard a rattling sound behind me.

I turned towards the sound, in time to see a dove burst into flight, leaping from the shadows as though chased from where it had been perched. Its wings cluttered as it flapped its way across the empty space of the shop floor.

Shane ducked down and looked up at the bird. Gavin, in turn, took his eyes off Shane, examined the bird as it circled above them, then glared up at where I had been told to hide, then took a cautious step backward. In doing so, Gavin stepped on the item Shane had sent spinning across the floor moments before. He lost his balance and stumbled backward. He flipped his upper body around to stop the fall but disappeared behind the machine where he had been hiding. As the bird swooped through the open doorway and escaped into daylight, I heard a soft puff of air, followed by the snapping sound of a pane of glass cracking in the distance. It coincided with the sound of the delivery truck's doors slamming shut, so it roused no suspicion. I did, however, make out a tiny yellow flash in the dark, no brighter than the glow of Shane's cigarette.

Zahier and Stols returned for the remaining parcels, surprised to find Shane crouched low.

"Boss, it's just a bird," Stols said in his deep voice.

"I know," Shane said loudly, then added, "This place gives me the creeps. Let's go."

They left the pit open, shut the roller door, got into their cars and sped off. Silence roamed.

My joints were frozen stiff and my excitement from earlier had evaporated. I was exhausted by the tension of the scene. My two cappuccinos I'd had that morning, didn't help. I sat there in the dark for fifteen minutes, half-expecting Gavin to leap from the shadows and send a bullet spiralling through the tumour in my brain. Besides the cracking of the roof's corrugated metal sheets shifting in the heat, there was no movement and no sound.

I crept out of my hiding spot. A part of me hoped to see Gavin standing by the pit, another part hoped never to see him again. My curiosity, on the other hand, propelled me forward, over the wooden platform, down the staircase and across the deserted factory floor. I stopped at the edge of the pit and looked down into the darkened abyss. I was overcome with vertigo when my mind revisited the gravesites I had stood beside the last couple of months.

I moved back to force myself free from the lure of the pit. In doing so, I stepped on the brass doorknob which had caused Gavin to fall. It rolled under my foot, then shot across the floor once more as I tipped over and collapsed to the floor. I fell flat on my back. The air leapt from my lungs and left me coughing on a cloud of dust. I slowly rolled over and rose to my knees.

In the dark, two mean eyes glared at me, judging me. My consternation subsided when I realised there was no life left in them. My recent bout with misery must have hardened my heart because I was unfazed by the site of a corpse spreadeagled across the machinery.

I got up and went to Gavin's body. He lay on his chest, one arm twisted around and pinned under his neck in an obscure way. I surmised that he had shot himself in the neck as he hit the ground and that the bullet must have exited out his left ear. Inspecting the body to confirm my guesswork would bear no fruit. I took hold of his jacket, jerked his body free and dragged him towards the pit, leaving a dark bloody trail in the dust. It smelled as though he had defecated himself. It took surprisingly long to roll him into the pit. His body dropped to the bottom with a loud thud that nearly liberated my omelette breakfast. I considered pulling the wooden platform back into place, but it wasn't a one-man job.

I picked up Gavin's silenced weapon and contemplated the consequences of being caught with it in my possession. Every eventuality ended with one certainty: I was already a dead man. I was living on borrowed time and had no one to share it with.

Mid-consternation, the roller door shuddered back on its track. Zahier's long face appeared in the opening. I stood motionless beside the pit, my head covered, gun in hand.

"Gavin?" he whispered as he entered the building. "Where you at, bro?"

He had hollow cheeks, a sharp nose, and comforting hazel eyes. He squinted until his keen eyes adjusted to the dark, then discerned me in the shadows. He straightened up and approached me.

"Why didn't you take the shot, man? I could've handled Stols on my own?"

I said nothing.

Zahier went into the pit as lithely as before, a vapour in motion, his feet floating over the steps of the short ladder. He made a triumphant sound, then a parcel wrapped in newspaper flew out of the hole and tumbled towards me. It was the size of a 5-Kilogram bag of sugar.

"If I wasn't so reasonable, I'd say that cost you your cut," he called from the darkness.

Another parcel landed near my feet. I shuffled back.

A soft grating sound rose up from the pit, then a slapping sound, followed by a groan as Zahier fell over Gavin's body.

"Who the hell is this?" his voice called. "Gavin?!"

I turned and ran with all my might, as silently as I could, giving heed to caution. I flew past the staff toilets, out the rear where Gavin and I had entered, then shot across the yard. The Toyota didn't falter. She roared to life and spewed out bits of earth as I guided her towards the gate. The car struck the pile of rotten pallets and blew it asunder. I charged through the gate, no longer concerned about my car. The lock and chain gave way easily enough, but the crunch of metal sheeting and the scrape of it against both doors echoed in the confines of the car. The tyres screeched once they found tar. The car's backside pulled outward as I oversteered, sent sideways with centrifugal force, but I was able to regain control. I raced down the road, passing the church again on my way out. I saw no churchgoers or witnesses who could identify me or my car.

I was frantic. My mind was spinning. My vision was blurry at the edges, with those annoying white spots everywhere. My hands gripped the steering wheel so hard that I felt my nails dig into my palms. I jumbled up the gears and the Toyota flared up in disagreement. Only then did I slow down to the speed limit. As I approached the traffic light, I pulled the balaclava from my head. I left the Industrial area the same way I had arrived and slipped into the back roads of Bellville suburbia. There I parked the car in a quiet side road and went home on foot, with the idea that I would report the car stolen later that afternoon.

CHAPTER 16

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Shane interrupted. He looked to Denvor, then to his men, then to me, his face contorted with confusion.

“What?!” he said after a moment. “What is this?”

He raised his gun at me, but I saw no indication that he would pull the trigger. His expression was priceless. He was being tormented by questions. He shifted his aim across the room, focusing his sights on Willie Stols and Zahier Moodley, who stood glaring at each other. “You,” he said to Stols, then to Zahier, “And you.” He took a step towards them. “What is this?”

Stols paid no attention to Shane. “You think you can take me?” he snarled at Zahier.

Denvor’s chair scraped against the cemented floors when he got to his feet. Shane swung around and pointed his weapon at Denvor. “You, too,” he screamed, then to the whole room, “All of you! What is this?”

Denvor raised his hands to show that he was not the threat. When Shane refocused on Zahier, Denvor glanced at Blaine Dumeko. The look that passed between them was the sum of the confusion I had sown. Dumeko shifted his bulging shoulders in confusion, though his round lips betrayed the hint of a smile.

With the effect of uncertainty in full swing, Stols and Zahier went at each other like two dogs. Stols wrapped his large hands around Zahier’s throat and began to throttle him. He hoisted Zahier up effortlessly and pinned him to the wall until his eyes filled with panic. Stols was twice as strong as Zahier, but Zahier was twice as cunning. As we looked on, Zahier’s hands fumbled about in his pockets, then the blade of a pocketknife announced its presence by flashing in the light. Zahier made four quick jabs under Stols’ left arm, the full length of the blade sinking into flesh with each blow.

A sullen silence fell over the room as Stols relented his grip and collapsed to the floor next to my chair. He groaned softly and kicked at the black plastic as life slipped away from him. An obscene gurgling sound escaped Stols’ throat, then his eyes glazed over and his features tensed up. It was not the same as seeing Gavin’s vacant eyes stare at me. I hadn’t seen someone die up close before, so it was a bit jarring to witness.

Zahier dropped to his knees, coughed and sucked in air. Both eyes watered as he coaxed oxygen back into his body.

The atmosphere in the room became electric. Everyone looked at Stols’ body with a type of reverence that I didn’t understand. They were frozen in awe. All the men in the room had been a party to murder in some way, yet they were ensnared by wonderment when death finally arrived. For the briefest moment, I pitied them. Death was among them, and they were unprepared.

Shane was first to recover from the haze of uncertainty. He moved so quickly that no one could restrain him. He stepped over Stols’ body and helped Zahier to his feet. Shane put an arm around Zahier’s neck and forced him into an embrace. He pressed the barrel against Zahier’s chest and pulled the trigger.

The report was surprisingly quiet, but still loud enough to ripple across the faces of the men in the room. The bullet travelled through Zahier’s chest cavity, blasted through the back of his sport’s jacket and smacked into the plaster of the wall. Zahier went limp in Shane’s embrace. Shane stepped aside and let Zahier’s body drop over that of Stols.

“Are you mental?!” Denvor screamed at him. “This is my house.”

Shane scrutinised Denvor from the distant realms of his insanity, his body trembling. I noticed how he was tapping the barrel of the gun against his pants and wondered how close he was to shooting Denvor. Their little ‘war’ had been mostly for show, and with the threat of opposition pushing into their territory, there were hopes of reconciliation. However, after Harry’s and Zahier’s betrayal, Shane looked to be backing into his corner.

“Oh, shut up, will you? I didn’t choose the location.”

“Police can trace gunshots,” Denvor continued.

“There’s a reason why you don’t shit where you eat, Denvor. You never learn, bra.” He pointed at the heap of bodies. “You do this in a factory or a basement.”

“I can’t do that now because the coppers have me under eye.”

“You worry too much, bra. The shot spotters detect unmuzzled gunshots. This was no louder than the renovations you’re doing on your little spank pad.”

“It’s still a risk,” Denvor said, having regained his composure.

“Risk?” He stepped over the expanding pool of blood. “And where would we be without risk? We built an empire on risk.”

“There is no more we, Shane. I run an enterprise, not a circus like you.”

“False confidence like that can get your knees capped.”

“And your workforce is down by three. You’re outnumbered here. You try shit like that again and I’ll put you in a grave where my dog takes his morning dump.”

“Don’t goad me, bra. I can get another fifty guys here in ten minutes.”

“You know me well enough to know I don’t make empty threats. We called a truce to find out who is making a move on both our businesses. Don’t make me regret it.”

Shane stopped tapping the gun against his leg, recalculating the way forward. The playful smile returned to his face.

“Truce. Indeed. Then let’s get back to it.” He came around to face me. He pressed the gun to my scalp, more to annoy Denvor than to scare me. It was the very spot where Dr Immelman had pressed his finger to indicate the location of the tumour. “Who *are* you, Mr. Gray?” he asked.

“I told you my name is Gray, not Mr. Gray.”

“I’ll call you whatever I want.” He leaned over until his eyes floated opposite mine. “I’m not sure what you are playing at, but you won’t make it out of this room, bra.” He came even closer, until his lips almost touched my one ear, then whispered, “You are already a ghost.”

“You took me from my home against my will, remember? You abducted me.”

Shane moved back to his table, saying, “Because my contacts pinned you as the oke from Rondebosch. They said you were bribing the dealers in Parow. But that’s not true, is it?” When I didn’t answer, Shane offered Denvor a pleading look. “The bra is a nobody. A sack of troubles.”

“You are not thinking straight, Shane. There’s something else going on here. He knows too much about our dealings to be a nobody. I want to know who he is.”

Shane scoffed at Denvor, then asked, “What type of name is Gray, anyway?”

“Gray is a unit used to measure energies associated with radiation, like gamma or nuclear particles,” I said. “One Gray is the absorption of one joule of energy per kilogram of matter.”

“Right.” Shane looked as though his lollipop had fallen in the sand. He turned to Denvor. “Does that answer your question?”

Denvor stood motionless in front of the windows. Having watched him for months, I knew this was the quiet before the storm, when he was at his most dangerous. I sensed that Shane knew it, too, which is why he retreated to his corner.

“You lost us, gamma boy,” Shane said.

“It’s what they pumped through my body every week. It’s the invisible rays that pulverised my body while doctors quibbled about how to buy me more time.”

I experienced a wave of relief. Before that moment, I had never spoken about my illness or the treatment thereof. I had no one to share my pain and suffering with. I faced the ordeal of cancer alone.

“Time for what?” Denvor asked.

I didn’t answer. We looked at each other for a long time.

“Time to arrange this encounter?” he persisted.

Again, I didn’t answer. I could see the mechanisms working behind Denvor’s eyes. He was deciding whether to let me finish, or whether to put me down.

“Alright, Gray,” he said finally. “Get on with it.”

The room was silent, listening intently to what the corpse sitting in the chair had to say. It was as though the ghost of doom had passed through the room.

CHAPTER 17

“As I mentioned, the tumour is inoperable because it’s present in both the left and right cerebral hemispheres.” Andre Immelman spoke in a neutral tone. “It’s even spread to the spinal cord. I’m afraid there’s no good news when glioblastoma is that advanced. Specialised treatment could only prolong your life, but not by much.”

His office was a place of comfort. The iced-coffee paint on the walls added a calming quality to the room. There were two floor planters topped with white pebbles, one containing a small Delicious Monster and the other a bright green bamboo palm. I sat on the brown couch where other patients had sat before me – and will be seated long after I had passed away.

“What type of treatment?”

“There aren’t many options,” he said.

He sat opposite me, but it felt as though he was sitting next to me, holding my hand. He had a notepad open on his lap. One hand was curled over his chin as though he was in deep thought. I found reassurance in his company. He was helping me to digest my imminent death.

“The golden standard is to do chemo and radiation therapy as a concurrent treatment. Doing both at the same time will be very invasive to your system, but it has some benefits when facing an advanced or aggressive cancer.” He handed me a leaflet about curcumin IV drip therapy. “We can look at a variety of intravenous drips that has been quite effective in slowing down tumour growth. Studies show that turmeric can decrease the malignant characteristics of GBM. There are also some cannabinoid treatments, which are still in trials, but the results of CBD look promising. These are only suggestions. Ideally, you must choose a treatment you are comfortable with.”

“How bad will this get?”

“That all depends,” Andre said. He shifted, grimaced and put the notepad aside. “Have you had any spells?”

“Spells?”

“Do you find yourself doing or saying things that you normally wouldn’t?”

I pictured my reflection in Brenda’s cracked mirror, my body covered in dark earth. “I’m not sure if this is what you mean, but my memory is not as crisp as before. It takes me a while to get to it.”

“Some encounter forgetfulness, others experience bouts of hysteria. It can go either way. These spells could become more frequent and often more intense, taking patients to a previously unexplored space. This can make them awkward, erratic even. I’ve seen it bring out the worst in someone.”

Somewhere in the hidden depths of my soul, something sinister fluttered. While this hinted at a lingering menace unbeknown to me, my only concern at that moment was the memory of Brenda. If it was my fate to wither away and to race into a grave, then I would grudgingly oblige, but I aspired to do so without soiling the memories of my late wife.

“Is there a way to curb these spells?”

“Constant sedation might aid, but it really comes down to the individual. Everyone reacts differently. Normally I’d suggest surrounding yourself with close family or friends. In your case, I’d advise getting a personal assistant or nurse to help you attain your daily goals. It’s also not a bad idea to scale down. You know, make your life less complicated, more manageable.”

He sat with me for two hours. We discussed all the procedures and possible outcomes. They sounded grim, though it offered me perspective. Emotions came and went at will, ranging from depression to stoicism. At one point I burst into tears, the next I laughed.

While Andre was incredibly easy to talk with, I refrained from sharing details about the onset of my woes. I did not name the wrongdoers who had complicated my life, nor did I lay bare my plans for revenge. That was a private marsh I had waded into by accident and there was no hope of extricating myself from it. I only had to remain alive long enough to exact my vengeance.

We both agreed that chemoradiotherapy was the most aggressive option available and that the desired result was to win a couple of months. The treatment was scheduled to start the following day. I was not looking forward to it.

When I returned home, I contacted Bob Sampson with the terrible, wonderful news of my diagnosis. I submitted the doctor's findings and informed him that my life insurance policy had a sizable lump sum Dreaded Disease benefit, which would pay out if I was diagnosed with a critical illness, like brain cancer. The Income Protector benefit added to the policy, enabled me to claim a salaried income for as long as the disease inhibited my ability to work. My fortune kept growing as my sorrows doubled.

Bob was unable to tell me anything about Bertie. He had logged calls to find out who had assigned an investigator to my file. He confirmed that half of the initial investment had paid out and that he would invest the full amount into a high-risk cryptocurrency asset investment, which was the most volatile investment he could think of. I gave him my approval. I didn't care about the money. I would never get to spend it. I could burn through the R50 million by buying cars and property, but that wasn't me. I was moderation personified. I never lived beyond my means. I risked little and kept to myself. The money was more aggravating than the execrable tumour expanding across the grey matter of my brain. I didn't want a single cent of it. I wanted my life back. I wanted Brenda back.

I played with the idea of letting Detective Xhosa know that his referral had met a gruesome end but decided against it. Instead, I continued my surveillance efforts. Xhosa had mentioned locations favoured by Collins and Daniels. My diary was empty, so I began staking out those addresses. I had no desire to explore the myth of inner peace or find the meaning of life. Between chemoradiotherapy appointments, I could devote whatever time and energy remained to understanding the operations of the two men who ruled the drug industry in the northern suburbs of Cape Town.

With money no longer a concern, I bought a blue Honda hatch to conduct my surveillance work. I had reported the Toyota stolen, and, sure enough, the police recovered it a week later. It served as a trade-in for the Honda. It felt liberating to do something as mundane as buying a car, a task that would have previously taken me ages to finalise. Life had been unconventional of late.

After my visit with the doctor, I went to a coffee shop that overlooked an intersection where Kuils River and Brackenfell merged. I was advised to reduce my food intake in preparation for the treatment, so I ordered a light lunch. I sat outside so I could keep my sunglasses on without arousing suspicion. I kept to myself, browsed through newspapers, studied the chemoradiotherapy leaflets and flicked through my social media feeds, while my eyes inspected the building on the opposite side of the road.

I sat in the exact spot where Detective Xhosa's daughter had been shot. Through old newspaper articles, I was able to deduce what had happened. Detective Xhosa had rented out the coffee shop for the evening to do a pre-wedding supper. After Lindiwe Xhosa arrived, a car with tinted windows raced by. Gunfire erupted, with the target being the building on the other side of the road. The returning gunfire, aimed at the moving car, riddled the front display of a refrigeration company next to the coffee shop, but one stray bullet ricocheted off a metal signboard and struck Lindiwe in the throat. After numerous operations, she died while in a coma two months later.

Lindiwe's picture in the local newspaper was of her at the university where she had been studying. In the picture she had an infectious smile, the type of smile that poured out of the eyes and made others smile. I couldn't help thinking that the world was worse off for having lost one of those beautiful faces and intoxicating smiles. I reasoned, as I sipped my coffee, that if we kept erasing those smiles, there would soon be little left to live for. The innocents, the ones who succumbed to the burden of crime, were the bearers of joy, compassion, innocence, and purity. They were supposed to be our fruits. They were in decline. They were the endangered few. The innocents were easy prey.

It was a fruitless day. I felt like an amateur. I had no clue how to find the people responsible for my loss. I had little to go on. The Kuils River building, as well as the abandoned Bellville factory, were the only places I could investigate with the hope of getting leads. However, there lingered a reluctance inside of me. Deep down, I first wanted to face my cancer treatment. There was little sense in delaying the inevitable. I wanted to buy time. Without time, my reconnaissance was pointless. I resolved to return the day after my first round of treatment, not knowing what awaited me.

CHAPTER 18

The preparation guide described chemotherapy as an invasive drug treatment that hindered a cancer cell's ability to divide, reproduce and grow in a body. Radiation therapy, on the other hand, seemed exciting on the page. A radiation therapist would aim an external beam at my head and zap the tumour inside my brain with no more than 60 Gray (Gy), which is the maximum amount of radiation used in the treatment of advanced brain cancer. The process sounded uncomplicated, almost self-explanatory. Chemo would stop the growth of the cancer and radiation would break it up. Andre Immelman cautioned me not to be hopeful about remission after the procedure. He said it would take a small miracle for a tumour that advanced to break up to a degree as to make it operable. Those miracles seldom happened.

The nurses shuffled about in the private clinic's waiting room with despair-fuelled lethargy. Their smiles were sincere, but their faces looked tired. Their eyes hid the grim reality of their occupation. They were angels bidden to a task that few had the nerve to execute.

Not even the décor or the soft classical music tickling my eardrums could extinguish the overwhelming presence of death that awaited patients at the cancer treatment facility. Within those walls, death took on a completely different guise, one that took me by surprise. Contrary to that of a black-clad grim reaper with a shiny sickle in hand, I encountered a Death that was clinically clean, ghostly white and as sanitary as sin. He welcomed me in the foyer and showed me around with an eerie grin on his hollow features. He stared down at me from the ceiling when the nurse administered my intravenous drip, which fed the chemotherapy drugs into my veins. He glowered over the shoulder of the young radiation therapist who fired off the beams at the beast growing inside my head. Then he bid me farewell as the clinic door slid shut behind me. And there he remained, counting off the days to my next visit.

I sat in the Honda with my arms extended, hands clasping the steering wheel, and my thoughts running wild. Something felt different in my body, but I couldn't put a finger on it. I was jittery, though I attributed that to white coat syndrome. While I thought I was being paranoid, my body kept tensing up. It felt as though my body was rebelling against the early onset of flu. The experience was so profound that I put my surveillance efforts on hold for the day and returned home. To appease the sudden lunchtime hunger pangs, I bought a hamburger midway. I devoured it on the couch and fell into a deep sleep while the TV, my only companion, prattled on in the background.

As deep as it was, my sleep was plagued by terrible dreams and visions that I am unable to recall. There must have been some harrowing stuff swirling around my imagination, because when I woke up the couch was soaked through with sweat. I shivered all over, but my body was hot and sticky. I had no recollection of time, but it was dark outside. I had a quick shower. It didn't help.

I crept into bed and tried to go to sleep, but my body had other plans. Then my stomach began to lurch furiously. It pushed up into my chest, which made me heave. I rolled out of bed and headed to the bathroom but was overcome by an intense dizzy spell. My hands searched wildly for support, something solid to hold on to, but found nothing. I stumbled sideways, lost control of my body in the process, and spewed out chunks of meat and bun across the floor.

The rest of the night or early morning hours was a furious battle between me and whoever, or whatever, had taken control of my body. It not only had full control over my bodily functions, but it randomly selected which functions to hijack and when to do so. An alien being had taken occupancy while I had been absent. It had unfurled in my body, tentacles curling down the length of each limb and up my spine. It could press my nerves, pinch my tendons and instruct my brain to empty my bladder or my bowels at the most inappropriate times. At around 11 AM the next morning, after undergoing hours of torture, I was spat out by this occupying force. I was an empty shell called Gray.

I quickly realised that I needed some items to accommodate this part of the treatment process. Cleaning up and getting dressed took ages, as did getting to the store in one piece. I was so exhausted from retching that I was unable to hold onto the steering wheel. About two blocks from the store, I slew into a parking bay demarcated exclusively for busses. The rap of a traffic officer's knuckles against my window, drew me from a confused slumber. His skin had a smooth chocolate colour and he smelled incredibly clean, like the pre-treatment scrub they used at the clinic. His teeth were perfectly aligned and brilliantly white.

I have no idea what I told him. I only remember his sympathetic grimace and how his hardened eyes softened. He asked if I needed medical assistance. I declined. Then he leaned into my window, put the Honda's hazards on and told me to close the window and lock the doors until I felt better. As the window rolled shut, I saw the man wave a bus on to a different parking space where occupants debussed, and other passengers embussed.

I eventually made it to the shops. At the chemist I found a round-faced assistant who had once been a locum nurse in a cancer ward. She accompanied me through the aisles, pointing out things that would be of use. The need for incontinence wear was a bitter obstacle for me to make peace with. She advised me to create a little chemo bag, which I systematically filled with things as the consequences of the treatment became known to me over the coming days. I later added emesis bags for when I had to throw up, sanitary wipes, adult nappies, lip balm, medication for nausea and pain, bottled water and a facecloth. She suggested I keep a change of clothing and other contingencies in the car, which I made a mental note of. She had a pleasant way about her, a reassuring calm that resonated from within. When I became faint, she offered me her arm and took my hand in hers, stroking it slowly. She led me along the bollard, through the till point and escorted me out to my car, where we parted ways.

I battled through the next two days as I tried to adjust to the unpleasantness of chemoradiation. It became a form of acceptance, which was the grey area where resistance and submission converged. Three days after I had been subjected to my first cancer treatment, a modicum of clarity reached through the haze. I recalled the wrongs I was compelled to right while I was still alive. An entirely different revenge reclaimed its hold on me and waged war with the lingering effects of my treatment.

I no longer had a burning desire to repay death for death. Something had changed, though I couldn't put my finger on it. I began doubting my approach to the exercise of revenge. The feeling of uncertainty came and went. I decided to give myself an ultimatum. I'd try one more time to locate either Denvor Daniels or Shane Collins. If my efforts held no fruit, I was not meant to pursue my transgressors.

Once more, I took up my position at the coffee shop in Kuils River. It was a Friday afternoon. The traffic trickled along the main road and people milled about. Toxic fumes from a nearby factory arrested the smell of my coffee and drove me to nausea. Pedestrians and fellow patrons appeared to harbour a longing for the weekend. I was simply trying to forget the last three days.

I ate and drank according to what my body cautioned me would be least likely to be expelled. A pie with chips, rooibos tea and loads of was all I could stomach. The hour drifted passed as the sun was slung across the sky. Later that afternoon, after another dizzy spell came and went, I began to make peace with the hand I'd been dealt.

I was about to call it a day, when two luxury sedans crept into my periphery. I saw a man alight to the curb near the entrance of the building. It was Denvor Daniels. He looked as I remembered him on the night Allan had been shot. He moved smoothly, almost elegantly, as though he was a celebrity hiding from paparazzi. There were three men and a scantily clad woman with him.

I made notes in a hard cover notebook. I took down car licence numbers, made descriptions of everyone and what role I imagined each person had in the life of Denvor Daniels. One of the men was none other than Blaine Dumeko, but I called him Daniels Man Number 2. The woman I later called Daniels Woman Number 2.

CHAPTER 19

“Woman number 2?” Shane winked at Denvor and said, “Nice.”

“Piss off,” Denvor fired back.

For the first time since I'd been placed in that chair, did I notice true resentment in Denvor's eyes. I suspect his disfavour was attributed to the fact that he had no idea how far my surveillance had taken me. I did sense a mild curiosity in him as though he was intrigued.

“Is *that* where you stash your weekend special, bra? On the edge of town? No wonder you don't want to share Kuils River with me.”

“You mind your business, Shane, and I'll mind mine.”

“Nah, bra, this just got interesting. We all have a *motjie* on the side, don't we?” He laughed and raised his voice. “Mrs Daniels number 2. I like that.” Shane turned to me. “What more do you have?”

“Shut up!” Denvor screamed. “My wife's upstairs.”

As the words took shape, his face tightened with regret and his lips pulled into a thin line that cut his words short.

“Oh, *motjie* number one doesn't know, does she?” Shane asked in mock surprise. He burst into laughter, genuine hilarity that chilled the marrow in my bones.

There were only two of the five men left who had accompanied Shane into the room that morning. The absence of Spicks, Stols and Moodley didn't derail Shane's alarming confidence one

bit. I had come to appreciate the fact that Shane had only one fear: prison. The direst confrontations held little sway over his decision-making. The five men with Denvor, on the other hand, were not as loyal as he imagined. Following the death of Shane's brother, Macky, both operations hit a frail patch.

I cast a quick look over the men in the room and felt a tinge of remorse for those who had died and those about to die. While relaying my cancer ordeal, the bodies of Zahier Moodley and Willie Stols had been removed from the room. They had rolled their bodies in plastic and pulled them down the corridor into a back room, where I have no doubt, Harry Spicks' body still waited to be transported to an unmarked grave.

I thought about Astrid Spickerman, Harry's aunty living in Grahamstown, who had no idea what her nephew was involved in. I thought about Carmen Moodley, who had cut herself off from her only son because of his drug dealing activities. I thought about Willie Stols' brother, Damian, a postal worker and family man in the Northern Cape. I thought long and hard about all of them because it felt as though a part of me knew them. The team of private investigators I had used to source all this information had all worked independently, one having no idea what the other was researching. I had made it my ambition not only to research the people in this room, but also the innocents in their lives, the ones undeserving of the consequences of their actions.

Brian White, Vuyo Jola, Errol Davids, Malique and Blaine Dumeko stared at Denvor with uncertain expressions plastered on their faces. They had the upper hand in numbers, yet I could question their alliance. Shane's self-assurance, on the other hand, was so intoxicating that Manny "Plankies" Bredenkamp and Dillon Moyana stood proudly on either side of the door that led to the corridor. Their feet planted, hands overlapping their crotches. Plankies and Moyana looked ready to kill without hesitation.

It was Dumeko who broke the silence when I shifted in my chair. I might have cleared my throat to spur them on.

"Boss, we must stop this now. This guy..." He trailed off, mumbled something in Xhosa, stared at me and shook his head. "There's something off about him. This whole thing... It doesn't feel right."

Denvor didn't reply. He gave Dumeko an unconvinced look.

"Now that your boss gets a jab, you want to put an end to it," Shane said. "Be brave, bra Dumi. Let's push on and hear what the bra has to say. Come on you, tell us more."

CHAPTER 20

That day at the coffee shop signalled the start of an extensive surveillance assignment that lasted more than three months.

I applied the same scrutiny to the illicit operations and personal lives of Shane Collins and Denvor Daniels, including the five men closest to them. I rotated from one to the other, only taking off when I went for treatments. I was consistent and methodical in my record keeping. Collins Man Number 3 (Zahier Moodley) became a ten-page folder detailing who exactly he was and how he fit into the bigger picture within Collins's organisation.

I met with Detective Xhosa in secret to know more about the feud between the two. I found that the R300, known as the Kuils River Freeway, was the dividing barrier between Collins's and Daniels's drug operation. Collins operated chiefly in Bellville, Durbanville and Parow. He encountered resistance from big operators when he pushed further south into Goodwood. Daniels owned Kraaifontein, Brackenfell and Kuilsriver. He also met resistance when he pushed further down into Delft or Blue Downs. Because the lines blurred in Kraaifontein and Durbanville, primarily around Langeberg and Goedemoed, skirmishes between dealers and users became commonplace. If a dealer wandered into opposition territory, they were executed gangland-style. Police were understaffed and faced logistical and regional obstacles, so they were unable to curb the increase in bodies being dumped on the outskirts of Blue Downs and Belhar. When police finally escalated the matter, it had got out of control. Collins and Daniels were taking serious retaliatory shots at each other across the R300. Assassination attempts and drive-by shootings happened more often.

The more notes I made, the more I realised that both operations only had a few players. Daniels had five trusted generals who did his bidding and waged war with opposition. The others were all hapless foot soldiers who followed orders. Collins's operation also relied on five men, of whom only two now remained.

I took pictures of everyone and followed them to their homes. I followed their wives to school and took down descriptions of their children. I immersed myself in their lives until I knew as much as I could without making myself known to them. I was also losing a lot of days to my cancer treatments. Every time I went for chemoradiation, I would lose the following two days. I had to employ the private investigators to further my efforts.

By this time, I had lost most of my hair. I began shedding a week or two after the first treatment, little tufts on the pillows or clogging the shower drain. My gums bled if I brushed my teeth too often and my sleeping patterns varied. My intestines were a mess after each procedure. I had little to no bladder control and suffered severe stomach cramps. My kidneys were put to task by the loads of prescribed medication. My eyes became gaunt discs and my cheeks hollowed out. My skin became so thin I could see the network of veins running beneath it.

I remember coming home from one treatment session to find Bertie September in my garden. He gave me that forced smile that looked more like a Dobermann baring its teeth. I was particularly vulnerable that day and had no energy left. My body was a bag of bones. Even my mind was exhausted. I couldn't deal with this guy. There was no space for him in my life. So, I invited him into my house.

"Since no one else believes my theories, I've taken it upon myself to follow you around a bit," he said as he repositioned himself on the couch. He did this about five times until he was perfectly centred on the couch, both hands crossed over his crotch. "I know what you've been up to."

"Do you now," I said, not forming it as the question it was meant to be.

"Indeed. Your visit to the glass factory in Bellville was especially interesting."

His voice was so annoying that it grated my innards. Every word drove a shard of glass into my reasoning. It was even worse than listening to a recording of my own voice.

"I'm going to need a tea for this," I said with an unambitious sigh. I went into the kitchen, moving slow because of the pain in my stomach and my brain. "You game?"

"Of course," Bertie replied in a neutral tone.

My mind crawled from its stagnation and considered the scenario I found myself in. I had no idea to what extent he had investigated me. Strange that while I was investigating the true culprits, this guy was investigating me. The irony did not escape me. It was clear I had made mistakes I hadn't been aware of. If someone like Bertie could discover what I had been up to, then so could Collins or Daniels.

I gave Bertie a sideways glance from where I stood waiting for the kettle to boil. He was cleaning out one ear with his pinkie finger, then smelled the wax on his fingertip. He frowned, pulled up his nose, and made a gagging sound. He removed a chequered handkerchief from his cream-coloured jacket and methodically polished his pinkie finger until he was satisfied.

"What else do you know?" I called from the kitchen.

"Everything," he said without looking up. "Your chemotherapy and your surveillance efforts."

Bertie was there on my couch, by himself, inside my house, and he was annoying me. My death was imminent. I had nothing left to lose. One might even say I was legally insane. Cruel and terrible things began to revolve around the deserted plains of my mind. Bertie didn't strike me as an innocent party to this anymore. He was no longer there as an insurance investigator. He had nefarious intent, which stirred my annoyance.

"I'm confused," I said as I put the tea down. "If you've been watching me, then you know I'm not engaged with insurance fraud."

"Indeed." He dipped his finger in the tea as before and pulled up his nose. "I think we both know this is no longer about insurance."

"Then what? What are you doing here?"

"I saw an opportunity. I'd be foolish not to take advantage of the situation."

I was engaging in chit-chat one moment and holding Gavin's silenced weapon the next. When I looked down and noticed the black metal of the gun, I was surprised. At some point I had gone to my bedroom and removed the weapon from my cupboard without even being aware of it.

"You have been a busy boy," Bertie said as I returned to the living room, teacup in one hand, gun in the other.

I put down the cup in front of him, then sat down on the couch opposite him with the weapon aimed at his chest. He seemed unfazed.

"What were you hoping to achieve by investigating Mr. Collins or Mr. Daniels?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I answered. "At first, I wanted to know why. Why they did what they did. And I wanted to see if they possessed the capacity to sympathise."

Bertie's eyes became distant as though he was attempting to understand my reasoning, then shook his head.

Outside I heard birds squabbling over something at the end of the property. I'd neglected my garden these last months. The flower beds were riddled with weeds and the overgrown grass had turned yellow due to lack of irrigation. The house was too big to maintain. I was too weak to maintain it. The previous week I had handed my notice to the landlord. He agreed to let me move without any costs. While I was hoping to move closer to the treatment centre in the southern suburbs, this house was also too familiar to me. Memories of Brenda haunted me. The anniversary of Brenda's death was fast

approaching, which added an emotional weight to every memory. I couldn't cope with it anymore. Whatever endurance I had after her death, had been stripped clear during my therapy sessions. I had to move.

"That seems silly," Bertie said after a while. "Surely there is another way to attain clarity?"

I lifted the weapon higher up until I could see his round face at the receiving end of the silencer tube attached to the barrel. I pictured the bullet flying out into the space between us, crossing the divide and smacking into his skull, but I couldn't pull the trigger. My finger was there, poised over the sharp crook of the lever, but I could not bring the mechanisms of it to the point of firing off a round. The more I laboured at the idea of shooting, the more a layer of perspiration came over me. I had been convinced that I harboured murder in my heart, yet I couldn't execute it.

"You wish to kill these men? Or do you wish to set them free?"

I relented and rested the weapon on the couch beside me.

"Listen, man, what do you want from me? Why are you following me? And why are you here?"

Bertie snapped into a different persona, as if he had stumbled onto a distant memory.

"Oh, of course. I almost forgot," he said and began rummaging through his leather satchel. "I want a million Rands transferred to this account." He slid a piece of paper across the coffee table and offered me an apologetic smile. "One million equals my silence. I know money is not a problem for you."

He closed his satchel and stood up. He turned and headed for the door, his pants' legs chafing loudly against one another. The sound of the door banging shut reverberated through my soul like a gunshot through an empty building.

A part of me wanted to kill Bertie. I felt and pictured things that would have been beyond me earlier that year. More than anything, I didn't want Bertie to hinder my investigation. I had little time left. Even with treatments, I only had months remaining. After every scan, the red X on my calendar was pushed ahead by a month. In my state of physical fragility and mental instability, I decided it would be better to pay Bertie and to continue with my plans. To shift around that sum of money without drawing suspicion, meant going to see my adviser again. I took Bertie's piece of paper with to action the payment.

Bob was a bit overwhelmed when he saw me. I was aware I looked like death incarnate without hair and my hollowed-out cheeks. He became overly sensitive. He got his secretary to serve us water and coffee. He asked if I was comfortable whether the light was too bright. I dismissed his efforts and said I looked worse than I felt, which was a lie. I was constantly battling nausea and incontinence. I wanted to conclude money matters and return home.

Bob told me that the crypto-asset investments had trebled in the last five months because of developments in South America and China. He said it was best to take it out while on a high, settle the tax due to the South African Revenue Services and to reinvest wisely. I told him to do as he thought best. My total investment portfolio totalled R157 million. At the mention of the amount my stomach muscles contracted – and my adult nappies were put to task. Bob noticed the smell but composed himself admirably.

I asked Bob about the insurance investigator, but he said there was no agent assigned to my files. He was adamant that I had nothing to worry about, because all the claims had paid out unattested

within a year of the first claim. He informed me that my unique scenario had been included as a case study for new agents. He said there was nothing left to investigate – unless I was planning something illegal. I told him I needed money to acquire accommodation closer to the treatment facilities. I loosened a couple of million Rands, left my financial adviser's office and drove straight home. The nappy had been insufficient and there was a chemical smell in my stool that repelled me. It was an uncomfortable drive home. The pants, my favourite pair of jeans Brenda had bought me, had to be thrown away.

I cleaned myself and went to bed, though it was still afternoon. I browsed for ground-level apartments within close proximity of the treatment centre. I contacted some real estate agents, found something I liked and arranged for payment to be done over the coming days.

I finally took Bertie's note out and studied it. I created the beneficiary and made the payment. I had to increase my daily limit telephonically to process a one million Rand payment. I paid Bertie for his silence, not knowing who he was or what the money would be used for.

CHAPTER 21

A couple of months later, I realised that my window of opportunity was narrowing. The battle between Collins and Daniels was burning white hot. There were newspaper headlines about incidents where people were gunned down in the streets. Foot soldiers, drug dealers and innocent people were all falling victim to this feud. What made matters worse, was the vigilante-style killing of Macky Collins, Shane's crazy half-brother. It happened during a two-day period where I had been exceptionally ill after my treatments. I had to forego my investigative efforts while recuperating, but the team of private investigators on my payroll had things covered. Apparently, Macky had been shot five times, then dumped in a maintenance pit at an abandoned glass factory. Police discovered the body a week later after one of my investigators called in an anonymous tip-off. They also found the body of another man called Gavin Snyders, who was rumoured to have ties with major operators from the southern suburbs.

When I was able to return to my research again, two of my investigators said they could no longer spend time on the Collins-Daniels investigation. Something terrible had scared them off. The other investigators followed suit soon after. Collins blamed Daniels for Macky's killing, and Daniels blamed the dealers from the southern suburbs, whom Macky had often aggravated with his adventures in Goodwood. The situation was getting out of control. I had to remind myself that I wanted to stop the slaughter of the innocents, which was the only casualty worthy of mention.

My illness was also advancing. For a while there, minor improvements had me entangled in a net of hope. When cancer retaliated, Andre told me that the red X is unlikely to be pushed back again. He surmised I had two months left, which didn't sit well with me. I explained that I was feeling much better and that the scans had to be wrong, to which Andre only said that things would get better before they got worse.

He was right, of course. While my strength was returning to me, my sanity was departing from me. I was seeing shadows where there was none. The white spots had gone grey. My behaviour was erratic. There were moments of hilarity juxtaposed by bouts of sadness that left me heaving in bed until I passed out. I found myself doing things I would never have done before, like the day I snapped out of a spell in a clothing store, only to find myself urinating against a towel display rack in the

homeware section. I remember the look of repulsion and shock on the fitting room attendant's face. Luckily, the manager on duty was aware of my condition. That, however, didn't make the memory any less humiliating when it returned to me. Try as I might, I could not remember how I had got to be in that store at that time. There were other times where I wandered about or came to after a spell. For instance, I would think about the smell of coffee, then the next thing I would sit with a cup of coffee in front of me, as though I was merging the instigating thought with the enacting thereof for my own convenience. During spells my aggression was directed at me, though when of sound mind my focus was still to avenge those who had wronged me. I had to remove all the mirrors from my house, because I kept shattering them in absentia. Things were heading towards a pinnacle, though the pinnacle itself was still a mystery to me. Time became inconsistent. The anniversary of Brenda's death had come and gone, though I couldn't recall when or if it had affected me.

My investigation reached a point where it had been taken as far as it could. I had accumulated so much information, but my mind was struggling to digest it all. Moments of poor reasoning were sporadic, usually followed by moments of exceptional clarity. I took advantage of these moments to assemble the plan I had in store for the two criminals in my sights.

It all came to a head one day as I sat at my desk and examined the extent of my work. Besides the office desk, which had belonged to my father, and a small filing cabinet, the room was void of furniture. In front of the desk, spread out neatly across the tiled surface of the floor, was all the information I had gathered over the last year. Files had been separated into groups, while the files in each group had been arranged according to thickness. The group relative to Shane Collins consisted of yellow files and the group relative to Daniels were red. Within these groups resided the full weight of my knowledge about Collins and Daniels, as well as the ten generals who did their dirty work.

Near the door, was a group of green files, which contained my research on all the foot soldiers, drug dealers, prostitutes, club owners and other tradesmen who had illicit dealings with either Collins or Daniels. I had compiled everything as actionable tip-offs that would hold great reward in the police's fight against drugs and gangsterism in the northern suburbs. I had made copies of the contents of the green files and had arranged for them to be delivered to Detective Xhosa following my death.

I gave myself one week to conclude my business.

I struggled to my feet and shuffled around the desk. I'd lost a lot of weight, but I still felt better than I had the month before. I made my way through the room, passing the groups of red, yellow and green files. I stopped near the door and stared at a smaller stack of files which had been isolated in an empty corner. The files were such a dark shade of blue, that the black names written on them were almost indiscernible. The topmost file read: JAYDEN.

In relocating to Camps Bay, I had to forego most of the mementos that reminded me of Brenda and the life we had shared. I had scaled down tremendously. The apartment I had bought was purposely small and it required little maintenance. It was on the first floor of an exclusive complex that overlooked the beach. It was the breadth of my happiness.

I left my office and went to the living room. It was a large open room that merged with an open-plan kitchenette. I kept the coffee table and large flat screen TV. I purchased new couches because, during one of my spells, I had tried to cut out the dirt stains from my old couches.

I had little to no use for kitchen items, so I gave everything away to the movers who had brought across my bed, refrigerator and coffee table. I now lived on ready-made TV dinners. They were especially prepared for cancer patients and supplied by a local company on a weekly basis. It was like eating lasagne with any possible trace of lasagne removed from the dish.

I stepped through the empty, white room. The silence was comforting. The sliding door pulled back with little effort. I stepped out into the cold sea breeze. The hair on my arms stood alert and my arms began to shiver. The salt of the sea rested inside my nostrils like a pleasant memory. From my balcony, I heard the early evening traffic whispering across the tarred roads. Further away, I made out the sounds of laughter and happiness sailing up from the beach. I closed my eyes and allowed my soul to take flight. Beyond the beach, I heard the shifting seas splash back on itself, the gentle push of the water rustling against the waves, causing the surf to froth and crackle in my ears.

The worth of my life had come under scrutiny after my arrival in Camps Bay. I'd been so preoccupied with planning my revenge that I had sabotaged myself with anger and hate. Those emotions had partially consumed one part of me. However, everything had changed the day I met Jayden. It had been around the time that I was moving from our house to my little bachelor pad overlooking the beach. The movers had just finished unpacking my furniture. I had to rush to the clinic not to miss my treatment. When I arrived, they ushered me into a room. I wore jeans and sneakers, with the clinic's green frock pulled over my T-shirt. I remember the intoxicating smell of alcohol-based hand sanitiser as though it was still in my nose. They sat me beside a young boy and hooked me up to an IV station.

Jayden was about ten years old. He had a puffy face, high cheek bones and friendly eyes. He kept his arms crossed high up over his chest to keep from pushing against the connector of the IV system. When he saw me, his face lit up and a smile spread across his cheeks.

At the time, in between a series of intense treatments, his joy was a massive burden for me. Patients receiving treatment at clinics often had little to no motivation to remain positive, while others were so focused on faking their personal happiness that it was agonising to watch them wither away with a desperate smile on their face. I found any attempt at happiness while receiving chemotherapy to put me in the position of being in denial.

I sensed no objection in Jayden's demeanour, though. He was jovial because he chose to be. He was not new to treatment, either. I had seen him there before that day. Though not terminal, he had been diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin's lymphoma. He had been fighting cancer far longer than I had.

"Hello, Mister," he said when the nurse left the room.

"Hey," I greeted, then pointed at the machines. "It's not nice to see a young man like yourself hooked up to one of those things."

Jayden inspected the drip as though he had never noticed it before. He played with his tongue across the tips of his large teeth for a while, then smiled again. He stared at me with his deep brown eyes. I had never experienced such an intense stare in all my life. It cut through me.

"Do you think someone else will take my place?"

My attempt at a smile might have been the saddest thing the poor boy had ever seen.

"I didn't think so." He shrugged and curled up his lips in a playful manner. "I'll have to push through and get this over with then."

I was taken aback by his emotional maturity, his choice of words and his playfulness.

"What is your name, son?"

"Jayden. What's yours?"

I looked around the room to see if there was anyone other patients receiving treatment behind the partition screens. We were alone in the room, our machines beeping sporadically as it paced the intake of our medication. Without realising it, my fingers were playing with the grey cancer ribbon I had pinned to my shirt.

“Gray,” I answered.

“Mr. Grey?”

“No,” I said absently as the ribbon became undone across my heart. “Just Gray. No mister.” I fumbled with the remains of the ribbon.

“What do you have?” he asked. My confused look caused him to point to the connector where the IV fed into my arm. “What type of cancer?”

“GBM. Glioblastoma multiforme.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then smiled again.

“That’s cool. It sounds way better than mine. Hodgkin’s sounds like a pudding or a porridge. Yours sound like a superhero identity, like a fake name someone would use to do good with when everyone else was asleep.”

There was a brief silence.

“How long do you have left?”

I gasped. His question had been so direct that I couldn’t retreat from it. I had no idea how to talk about diseases and mortality with a ten-year-old boy, especially not when it came at me unannounced.

“It’s OK,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

I rubbed at my forehead, lost in thought and fighting for my solemnity. He was tugging at the door to a room I had kept private for so long. Try as I could, I couldn’t find a valid argument to keep this boy from seeing my misery and my confusion. He was the embodiment of innocence.

“I don’t really know,” I said finally, sighing as I set the words free. “Not long.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.”

“And you? How long do you have?”

“Me?” He sounded surprised. “Oh, no, I’m fighting this thing. I have my whole life ahead of me. I’m not going to let it beat me.”

We continued in this way with bizarre sagacious banter for the better part of an hour, when a thin nurse came in and detached his drip. He pulled off his green frock and rolled his shoulders over in annoyance. He looked on as the nurse detached my drip.

“You done?” Jayden asked, his voice husky and warm.

“Not yet. I have to go in there so the next aunty can zap my brains.”

His eyes grew wide in amazement. His forehead expanded so much that his curly hair pulled back in an obscure manner.

“What? For real?”

I nodded.

He gave the nurse an intimidating stare, who offered him a wry smile in return.

“Only zap the bad parts, Miss. This man needs his brain.”

I followed Jayden out the door and into the corridor. The next part of my treatment would be done in the room across the way.

“Mommy!” he called and shot down the corridor.

My sneakers squeaked over the linoleum floor as I made my way towards the next room. The sound echoed down the narrow corridor and tugged at Jayden’s curious sense of entertainment.

“Hey,” I heard behind me. “Come meet this man, Mommy.”

My body was already taking strain after the treatment. Or maybe the tumour in my brain was forcing out its apprehension of the coming radiotherapy. Either way, my body was fighting my mind and my spirit.

As my one hand curled around the cold steel door handle, I felt Jayden’s soft warm hand taking hold of my other. The warmth of his body and his innocence nearly drove me to tears at that point. The closer I edged towards death, the more I treasured the life of others.

“Gray,” he said. “This is my mom. Mom, this is Gray.”

She was a small woman. The intensity of her spirit leapt out at me when her almond eyes locked with mine. Her smile was forced, but I could sense a sincerity inside of her that could not be detained. It radiated outward and bounced off the walls of the corridor. I instantly like her.

“Good to meet you,” she said, without offering her name in return. She touched her braided hair self-consciously, gently pulling Jayden back as only a protective mother could do.

I greeted, smiled, and let go of Jayden’s hand. I did not let go of the door handle.

I realised two things in that moment. The first was that Jayden’s mother was his inspiration and his source of positivity. Of that, I had no doubt. The other thing was that I had seen this woman before. She showed no sign of recognizing me, but I knew I had seen her before.

“We have to go, baby,” she said in a firm tone.

“Pleased to have met you, Jayden’s Mom,” I said in my most sociable tone, then to Jayden, “You keep on fighting, young man.”

We parted ways. His jovial chatter carried down the corridor as the door pulled shut behind me. I replayed the encounter throughout my radiation session, then went home.

Jayden and I were chemo buddies a couple of times after that. He told me about his mother and his grandparents, how they played together in the park, took turns throwing ball for their dog, dug out sea snails when visiting the beach. He was a bright boy, and his positivity was infectious. I traversed the plains of my memory in search of Jayden’s mother but could not find any sign of her. My memory filing glitch was unpredictable. I could access some memories at will, while others shifted around in the shadows. Regardless, my brain was telling me that I should have known this woman.

I opened my eyes and stared out over the large expanse of sea that stretched out in front of me. Its endlessness drew me into a moment of peace, then slowly released me back into the world. I went back inside and slid the door shut behind me. I prepared a cup of herbal tea and plonked down on the couch.

Earlier that morning, Jayden had received his final treatment. He was in remission. He was winning his fight.

“Mom says we’re going to kick Cancer’s butt,” he had said.

I had returned from my treatment incredibly vexed. For the first time since our time together, Jayden had mentioned his father. The absence of a father had never concerned me, but when he spoke about a custody battle between his mother and his father, it had perked my interest. After I asked, he reluctantly gave me his father’s name. The revelation was nothing extraordinary, but it was enough to persuade me that even the slightest coincidence had merit of influence.

When the nurse returned, I asked her to take a photo of the two of us hooked up to the IV systems, green frocks and nervous smiles. I waited for him to finish his treatment, cut mine short and left. I raced home and went into my study where I searched through the red files in the Denver Daniels grouping. I took out the file of Vuyo Jola and paged through the contents until I found a photograph of a woman in a pants suit. In the picture, the woman was walking out of the Bellville Magistrates’ Court building, one hand pressing a cellular phone to her ear and the other holding Jayden’s hand. His face had been turned away when the private investigator took the shot. Without seeing his smile or his bright eyes, I could tell it was Jayden. Vuyo Jola and Sindi Makwetu had been engaged in a tense custody battle over their son. Vuyo had tried furiously to win, but his arrest record and his involvement with drug dealers had caused favour to rest with the only sense of security in Jayden’s life, his mother. Because the child had been born out of wedlock, the name and surname of Vuyo and Sindi’s child was listed as Simphiwe Jayden Makwetu in the legal documentation.

I printed out the photo the nurse had taken of us at the clinic, added it to a pile of documents, then slipped the paperwork into a blue file and wrote his name on it in capital letters. That had marked the end to my research. Jayden had been the final piece missing from my elaborate puzzle. After adding his file to the months of research, a calm came over me. I immediately went on to the next phase, which brought me to the cup of herbal tea.

I finished my tea and took in the quietude. The wind outside had started up as though announcing the arrival of a storm. It made me shiver. I was about to get up and get dressed for the night when the doorbell rang.

No one knew where I lived. No one cared. Or so I thought.

I put my cup in the washbasin and peered into the peephole to see who my visitor was. I sighed and rested my head against the door.

“I know you are in there,” the voice said.

I pulled the door back and left it ajar. I returned to the comfort of the couch. There I waited until the door closed and Bertie September slunk into the living room. In one hand he held his satchel, with the other he pushed his spectacles back until it pressed into the bridge of his nose. He gave me a half-salute.

He rolled his eyes around the apartment. My bedroom was off to one side and my study was off to the other side. An en-suite bathroom adjoined the bedroom. It smelled of vomit and detergent.

The bedroom smelled of deathly sleep, the office of determination and the kitchen of herbal tea infusions.

“Nice place,” he said in his annoying, whiny voice. “Smaller than I thought.”

I hadn’t heard from Bertie September in months and would have been happy if I never saw him again.

“I thought we had concluded our business. I paid you to leave me alone.”

He went to the opposite couch and wiped at it with a napkin before sitting down. The couch was one month old. No one had ever sat in it.

“That was a down payment,” he said.

“Oh, piss off. You’re not getting another cent from me, pal.”

He opened his briefcase and removed a page from his satchel. He scanned through it and folded it over. Bertie slid it across the table, licking his lips as he did it.

“I’m not doing this again,” I said and got up from the couch. “You know the way out.”

I got dressed and readied myself for the night as though I was alone in the apartment. I had no interest in engaging with the man beyond what I already had. He sat quietly in the living room and waited for me to finish. His small hands were crossed over his crotch. He pouted his lips as he stared out the sliding doors.

When I returned, I was clad in black cargo pants and a matching sweater. I was energised. I was going to kill Denvor Daniels.

“Thought I told you to piss off?”

He leaned forward, peered up at me over the rims of his spectacles and tapped a finger on the folded page.

“We need to talk about this first.”

“I said no.”

When I sat down, Bertie sat back so that I was forced to look at him. His eyes bore into my soul and kicked down the door I had been guarding.

“Gray, we need to look at these payments. Time is running out.”

“You are not a claims investigator, are you?”

“Heavens, no.” He giggled, more to himself than in response to my question. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“You did when you introduced yourself.”

Bertie got up and went into the kitchen. He removed cups and spoons as though he had watched me do it a hundred times before.

“Did I really say that? Doesn’t sound like something I’d say.”

He made us herbal tea while I put on my new boots. I was dreading the possibility that they would chafe me furiously before the night was done. Even my loafers and my sneakers hurt my toes. A week ago, I had battled an infection on one toe. I had learned that, with my immune system in tatters, minor cuts and scrapes could become lethal if not dealt with promptly.

“Who are you working for?”

Bertie put the cups on the table, dipped one finger into his tea and licked it off. He sighed and leaned back into the couch as though a great pleasure had washed over him.

“I work for whomever welcomes me through the door.”

“What does that mean? You forced yourself into my business from the start.”

“That’s not true, is it? I only nibbled on what you fed me.”

“Rubbish, you were following me around all this time, looking for ways to get in on the action.”

I fetched Gavin’s weapon from the bedroom cupboard and slipped it into one of the large side pockets of my pants. I put the silencer in the pocket on the other side.

Sensing that our meeting was drawing to a close, Bertie rose and made his way to the doorway.

“You should know, I’ve made anonymous calls to Daniels and Collins,” he said as an afterthought. “I painted them a scary picture of who you are. Enough to make them think you are a supplier from Rondebosch muscling in on their territories. They sounded furious.”

“Why the hell did you do that?” I screamed. “You know I’m innocent. You understand what they did to me. Why do you go and do this now. I’m so close.”

Bertie licked his lips. He grimaced involuntarily, and said, “You are divided. Anger is muting the justice you are claiming. I’ve watched you plan this, but you are going about it the wrong way.”

I dropped down on the couch. I was exasperated. My entire being was drained. It felt as though I was sparring with a prize fighter.

“You are not Bertie September. Who are you?” I asked in a defeated whisper. “What’s your name?”

“You know who I am. Your memories are jumbled up, but I’m in there. Look harder and you will find me.” He gave me another half-salute and pointed a finger at the page on the coffee table. “Make those payments. There’s not much time left. The fuse has been lit.”

The door rattled shut behind him. His footsteps grew faint as he made his way down to the entrance. I heard the gate whine open and slam shut as Bertie left the complex. A damning silence ensconced me in my little apartment and left me in a confused state. Night hastened after his visit. The golden dusk turned grey as shadows stretched across the world outside. I couldn’t bring myself to open Bertie’s note. I left it on the table.

When sufficiently motivated, I snuck into the darkness, ready for malice. I promised myself that Denvor Daniels would not survive the night. He had to regret what he had done. He had to share in the pain he had inflicted on me. And then I would do the same to Shane Collins.

What difference did it make if Bertie had tipped them off? It would not alter my plans in the least.

CHAPTER 22

Denvor lived in a quiet neighbourhood on the outskirts of Kuils River. He was in the process of relocating to his new house in Highbury, which would be difficult to gain entry to because it was in a cul-de-sac. I had a narrow window of opportunity to take him out. The drive up felt like an epic journey. My thoughts were in constant conflict. My mind kept wandering to my meeting with Bertie. I had so many questions. This internal debate stirred up a headache.

I parked my Honda under a large tree a couple of blocks away. In the months of planning, this always seemed like the safest spot. I walked the rest of the way. It was early evening in a suburb, so the traffic was light. I kept to the shadows. Though cautious, I was fuelled by the notion that I was a dying man. Somehow that rendered the reality of death powerless. I wasn't being completely reckless, but I was aware that the worst-case scenario would simply hasten death on. With the end in sight, I didn't really care if anyone saw me.

I had lost so much weight at this point that I must have looked like black smoke shifting across the tar, bouncing through the glare of the streetlamps. The soft grating sound of my laboured breathing echoed in my ears. The extreme exhaustion I had experienced early in my treatment, had become familiar to me, so this was mild in comparison. My energy levels fluctuated haphazardly. At times I was dead tired, other times I was the best version of myself.

I rounded a corner and saw Denvor Daniels's double-storied house take shape in front of me. It was a modest place for someone involved in the drug business. The house had a flat front façade, light grey with dark grey trim. I hadn't been inside yet, so I relied on pictures to gauge its dimensions or layout. There was a small balcony on the top floor where I assumed Denvor and his wife, Tamara, slept. I had numerous pictures of them, sitting there in the mornings, engaged in deep conversation, sipping at cups while the steam blurred their faces.

In stark contrast, Shane Collins owned a mansion in Durbanville. He lived among the affluent and revelled in the joys that money wielded. He had a horde of security on site, especially after his brother had been murdered. I was still not sure how I would kill Shane. Denvor was the easier target at this stage.

During my reconnaissance, I had noticed only two ways into the yard. One was over the wall or through one of the gates. The main gate was a large black metal gate on a galvanised track at the bottom of a pebbled drive. Once the main gate was activated by remote, two lamps atop the side posts would turn on and the gate would roll open or shut. I had no remote and I wanted to avoid the light. The only other gate was a side gate to the right side of the property, which led to a small porch and what was supposed to be the front door. This gate was obscured, seldom used and had a dated magnetic locking mechanism.

When I reached the barrier wall of the Daniels property, I hunched down in a nook behind a tree and slipped on the grey balaclava Gavin had given me. My scalp was still itchy where the hair was starting to grow back. I suppressed the urge to scratch.

My research suggested that Denvor spent Wednesdays with his family. The security at his house was minimal, usually one guard in the front yard, and his sleek black Jaguar sedan was nowhere

to be seen. He usually arrived home around 8 or 9 PM, though this was never a set time. I looked at my watch. It was 7 PM. I had to get into the house before they returned.

I took out a small plastic bag from my backpack, which contained small pieces of raw sausage. At home I had inserted veterinary grade sedatives for dogs into the minced meat. I had inserted triple the required amount. I took aim and tossed it over the wall. From beyond the wall came a curious beastly growl, then I heard Denvor's two large Rottweilers rumbling and sniffing around in the grass, followed by the sound of jowls smacking.

The guard turned and approached the side gate. He was a stout man with a trimmed goatee. He wore a black sports jacket that fit so tightly that it made his arms flap in semicircles. He stopped at the gate and studied an approaching car. The beams of the car's headlamps poked into the dark night and swiped across the pavement where my feet were. I shifted my shoes out of sight and hugged the tree. The guard sniffed, turned and walked off, his shoes scrunching pebbles as he crossed the yard. He lit a cigarette and kicked at the pebbles.

Ten minutes passed and he didn't move. I was about to leave when an idea surfaced. I took out the weapon and screwed the silencer into the barrel. I worked slowly to avoid making a sound. The irony of working silently with a silencer was not lost on me. Once done, I rested against the tree. The chips of bark were so hard that it bit into my shoulder. I had never used a weapon before, so I had no frame of reference. I was unsure what to expect. B-grade actioners hadn't equipped me with weapons training, either. I extended my arm and closed one eye, half-expecting the gun to explode in my hand. I closed one eye and took aim at a BMW parked on the opposite side of the road. I drew in a deep breath, then released it slowly. I pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

I stared at the gun in the glare of the streetlights, then remembered putting the safety latch on after the glass factory incident. I flicked the safety off, then took aim again. There was a puff of air, followed by a ripple that crept up my arms and into my scalp. I heard a clunking sound as the bullet sunk into the metal of the driver's side door. It was alarmingly quiet. I squeezed the trigger again, then heard the welcoming smash of a window. A car alarm screamed into existence. The repetitive orange glow from the flickers cast menacing shadows across the grey walls.

Using the sound of the alarm as a decoy, I mounted the side gate. I was halfway over when the main gate's lights flared up. The gate began rolling back on its track. If the guard had known where to look, he would have seen a black-clad figure perfectly poised on the top of the side gate. Instead, he stepped out into the road to see what the commotion was about.

I let go and fell to the ground on the inside of the property, losing my gun in the process. The spot where I landed was mostly covered with grass, though my upper body was subjected to the thorns of a rose bush. I extricated myself from the bushes as quietly as possible, lacerating my hands and cheeks in the process. While the guard was distracted, I used the light from my cellular phone to locate the gun. Once reunited with my weapon, I crept across the front yard, passed the porch area, hiked over another gate. While the guard was engrossed in conversation with a neighbour, I snuck around the side of the house.

I was about to try one of the side doors when I heard an obscene gurgling sound behind me. The heels of my boots grinded over the cement as I turned to face one of Denvor's Rottweilers. Its head was tilted to one side, teeth bared. Its eyes were swimming around in its large skull as though it was unsure where to bite me. I raised the weapon and pointed it at the animal.

The strangest hesitation fell over me. I was there to murder a man, yet nothing inside of me was satisfied with the idea of killing his dog. While weighing up my options, the Rottweiler tipped sideways and smacked into the wall. Its legs moved as though it was charging at me, but its eyes kept rolling over. A froth appeared in its jaws, then it yelped softly and became motionless.

I didn't waste a second. I tried the door. It was locked. I moved around the backyard and found an open window. On the grass I made out the other dog, sound asleep. I heard it snore as I shimmied through the opening. I dropped down onto a soft bed, bounced sideways and rolled across a carpet. I had to force my grunts into quietude as I slammed into an empty laundry basket. I struggled to my feet.

I was in a bedroom that didn't see a lot of traffic. There were pillows arranged on the bed, but the curtains had been pulled shut and the bedside lamp had been unplugged. In one corner stood a couple of boxes half-filled with linen. The cupboard doors were ajar and had been partially emptied.

The corridor was deserted. There was a foyer section ahead of me. I saw no sign of a staircase to the left, so I figured that it had to be to the right. I was about to make a run for it when I heard the guard clear his throat. I froze. My body tingled all over.

To the left, the garage doors rattled, banged and a stunning white light blazed to life. As the sound of a car's engine rumbled in the confines of the garage, the guard lumbered passed the room. He was so determined in his stride that he went by without looking my way. He went out the foyer and to the front where he had been stationed, providing me an opportunity. I flew down the corridor and up the steps. There were doors to two more rooms, but I went straight into Denvor's room, which was the big one overlooking the front yard.

The room was incredibly dark, even though the dark grey curtains were open and had been slung over metal restraining hooks on either side. My eyesight was not what it used to be. I kept my eyes focused on the light that played across the sheer curtains until my sight began to adjust. I eventually made out the bed, bedside cabinets, walk-in closet, vanity chest, a white cot for a baby and a large painting above the bed, which was warped by the shadows that fell about the room. The sliding door that opened onto the small balcony slowly took shape behind the sheer curtain.

A hushing sound came from the stairway. The sound approached the room. I began searching for a place to hide, but it was just a large room. The bed was too low for me to fit underneath. I leaned into an en-suite bathroom leading off to the left of the room, but there was no place to hide. I went back into the bedroom as the hushing exited onto the landing and turned towards the room. I opened the walk-in closet doors, stepped into the layers of clothing and closed it behind me. The wardrobe was smaller than expected, but large enough for me to hide in. I aimed the tip of the silencer through the slanted slats of the closet door as Tamara entered the room with a baby in her arms.

She was an attractive woman, with large eyelashes that I could make out even in the dark. The rest of her body moved across the shadows seductively. I remembered studying her in the surveillance photos. She had a youthful appearance, shoulder-length brown hair and almond-coloured eyes. Her lips were thin and formed a permanent half-pout. Her alluring qualities were drowned by a gentility that didn't fit in with the drug world. Though Denvor and Tamara had been together for years and had a teenage daughter and a baby boy, I had no insight into the intricacies of their relationship.

Tamara approached the walk-in closet. Her small feet sank into the thick carpet, emitting soft patting sounds that grew dangerously close. I floral qualities of her perfume drifted through the slats and pinned me deeper into the hanging clothes. Breath caught in my throat. I became one with the dresses and jackets that draped over my shoulders. Tamara stepped up to the cot, which stood right beside the closet doors and leaned forward. She was so close that I could make out her hair in the dark.

“There, there,” Tamara whispered as she put her baby down into the cot. She pulled a tiny blanket to one side and covered his legs. Once satisfied that the boy was asleep, she turned on her heel and left the room as swiftly and quietly as she had entered it.

I released a tense sigh and steadied myself against the inside wall of the closet to avoid passing out. I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead as a wave of nausea hit. My fingers trembled and my vision blurred. These bouts of sickness came quickly, but I had become attuned to its approach.

I stepped out from the closet and gripped the side of the cot as the sickness washed through me. I stepped back into the closet and waited there for about fifteen minutes as the spell dissipated. When I regained control of my body, I was hunched over next to the cot. My knuckles almost glowed white in the dark. When I stood erect and let go of my grip, my hand burned from the pressure it had endured. I had no idea where I was or how I had got there. When I noticed the gun, it jostled my memories. I remembered Bertie, sitting on the new couch in my apartment, his fingertip tapping a document.

I was busy retracing my steps when I heard hurried footsteps advancing. Only when I looked down the corridor, did I realise I was in Denvor’s house. The footsteps spilled out onto the landing. From where I stood, I could see a teenage girl at the end of the corridor. It was Misty-Anne Daniels, Denvor and Tamara’s fourteen-year-old daughter. The girl was tall for her age and lean. She had an athletic flair, which showed in the way she stood tiptoed and leaned over the banister.

“I know, mum. I told you my homework’s done already,” she called down to Tamara, then went to her room, grumbling as she slammed the door shut behind her.

As the door slammed shut, the outside post lights sprung up and the gate rattled back, which brought back the memory of how I had snuck into the house. I heard voices entered the house, then they fell silent. Moments later I heard the crunch of the guard’s heavy footfalls cross the yard below the balcony. The nausea removed its hold on me and completely subsided, but it was replaced by panic.

I was listening so intently to the guard’s movements outside that I didn’t notice the next set of footsteps coming up the stairs. When I sensed another presence outside the room, I returned to the closet and closed the doors. I swallowed my breath and became a statue.

An obscure shadow entered the room – and with it returned my intent. I remembered why I was there. Instinctively I brought up the memory of the night my brother had been shot, how the shadows had parted for but a moment to reveal Denvor. I had seen the lot of them. Anger bled into my confusion. I lifted the weapon and took aim at Denvor’s back. This was my moment to claim justice, to fight back for Allan, my mother, Satí, and especially for Brenda. I was prepared to sacrifice my innocence for this moment of justice. Then little Erwin Daniels grumbled, twitched his legs and cooed loudly.

I looked down over the barrel of the weapon and into Erwin’s sleepy eyes, staring up at me through the slats in the closet door. The sight of the baby filled me with ice. A cold fist wrapped around my body and began squeezing the life out of me. The burst of adrenaline surging through my veins evaporated. A clarity washed over me. Whether because I had my gun pointed at a baby’s tiny head or whether I had just returned from another one of my spells, I couldn’t say.

In that moment I realised that my presence there was as criminal as the crimes I was hoping to avenge. I was not welcome in this place, in this house, in this present moment. This was the grey area where the lives of the innocents and the sins of the diseased converged – and I was in danger of crossing over from one group to the other, even if by accident. I suspect a part of me, the part that operated my fractured mind while I was in the throes of a spell, had already crossed the grey divide and was waiting for the rest of me to arrive. My revenge plans suddenly seemed ill-conceived and pointless.

Baby Erwin's eyes drew shut and he drifted back to sleep. His one arm twitched as he grumbled, then a profound stillness came over him. I leaned forward, my head touching the closet doors, until I could make out the faint rasping sound of infant breathing. It reminded me of a fine spring morning when I sat in our paediatrician's waiting room, watching a child drift off to sleep his mother's chubby arms. Brenda was crying in the toilet, coming to terms with the reality that she would never have children.

"Here you are," Tamara said in a firm, cold tone.

I shifted deeper into the folds of the clothes and lowered my weapon.

The figure next to the bed moved, then Dumeko stepped out of the shadows.

Tamara's tone and demeanour changed. "Oh, it's you. Where's Denvor?"

"He has business," Dumeko said and looked down at his moccasins.

"You mean the whore in Kraaifontein?" Tamara dropped her shoulders in disgust. "What a life I picked for myself?"

She made her way towards a small dresser near the closet, unhooking her bracelet in one swift move. She placed it on the dresser and approached the cot.

"Why did he send you? He sends Brian or Vuyo to do his shit work. He keeps you for himself."

Dumeko didn't move.

"Vuyo has personal matters. And we suspect Brian has turned. He's with Collins now."

"Brian?" Tamara said and faced Dumeko, two fingers resting over her lips. "No, that can't be."

"Last Monday we fed him dirt on a dealer with a load in Belhar. Then Zahier and Plankies show up at the exact location we fed him. How can Collins's crew know about a dealer that doesn't exist?"

"But Brian's mother stays just down the road. Why would he betray Denvor now?"

"I don't get it, either." Dumeko moved towards the windows on the other side of the sliding door. His sigh carried a personal weight with it. "Maybe he was concerned. What happens to his mother when you move to Highbury? Maybe Collins got to him another way. Who knows? In our world loyalties are challenged all the time."

Tamara moved closer to him, her face and her slanted eyes formed an intoxicating mystery.

"And you? How long will you stay loyal to Denvor?"

Dumeko bit his lip in restraint. The frown on his face caused his eyebrows to scrunch down over his small eyes.

"Dammit, Tamara, I don't know anymore. Denvor crossed the line when he killed Shane's brother. There will be consequences. It's about to get dangerous. You should leave."

"I'm not leaving without you," Tamara said. She flung her arms around his big shoulders and leaned her cheek against his left arm, so that she was able to keep her eyes on little Erwin. "And I'm not leaving without our boy."

Dumeko gently put his hand over Tamara's and said, "That will be the death of all of us."

THE FINAL CHAPTER

The room erupted. Everyone was screaming at the same time, launching accusations at one other. Spittle hung in the air, coating the atmosphere with tension.

I looked at their angry faces, their taut lips and squinted eyes. Everything went into slow motion as a wave of nausea came over me. Denvor screamed at Dumeko, Vuyo at Plankies, Dumeko at Shane, Brian at Vuyo, Shane at Denvor, Dillon at Errol, Malique at Dillon, Plankies at Malique, and Errol at Brian. Every head had a gun pointed at it – except mine.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember where I was, or how I had got there, but everything inside my mind went grey as the screaming intensified. I left the room in a dream. In this dream I stepped out of my body and walked through a doorway. On the other end of the doorway, I found myself standing on a balcony overlooking the pebbled drive of the Daniels's property. The post lights were asleep for the night. There was no sign of dogs nor security guards. The night had a blue tinge to it. The air was crisp. Silence roamed. I climbed over the railing and slid down a rain gutter, careful not to make any noise. I scaled the side gate and ran down the road as fast as I could. At home I tended to minor cuts and bruises, then began working my way through Bertie September's list of names and account numbers. It was legible enough because I was accustomed to the handwriting.

I realise that every name on the page was supposed to be fresh in my memory, but it took me a while to reacquaint myself with them. They were all innocents, people who had been hiding in the chaos, their flickering flames dimmed by the furious glare of the criminals around them. These names called out to me while I had been plotting my revenge, reaching through my anger, finding purchase somewhere in the soil of my corroding mind. They had sprouted there and become special to me.

Many details fail me when trying to relive the last couple of months. I'm unable to retrace my own steps. I don't know how I was able to set in motion something so pure while I was secretly planning something so sinister for those who had wronged me. These two sides of my psyche had not been at war with each other. Instead, they were in perfect synergy, working together behind my back. When I peered into the dark where my thoughts and their secrets wriggled, visions and dizzy spells were quick to dispel sense. Clarity came and went, while confusion lingered and blew smoke into my mind. The growing tumour, and the accompanying treatment, had caused such severe cognitive impairment that I became two different people. These two parts of me collaborated towards a resolve that would bear the appropriate fruit.

As the screaming continued in the room, my mind wandered further into the abyss, seeking the closure it had designed for itself. After leaving Denvor's house, I paid all my money over to those names, as I had prearranged with Bob Sampson and my banking institutions. That night I transferred R167 million to twenty-five people in equal portions, the last of which was to a fund in the name of Jayden Makwetu, which was to be facilitated by his mother until he turned twenty-one. The other twenty-four people who received these anonymous pay-outs, were all related to, or close to, the people I had been planning to kill. While I fostered no sympathy towards these cruel men, I had found compassion for those who were pulled along in their wake. They were the remnants of good that spilled out in bits after evil left.

Brian White's mother, who still prayed for Brian's salvation every night. I had first heard her do this after joining her church group. She spoke of him as a loving mother could speak of her only child. From Erwin and Misty-Anne Daniels to Jayden Makwetu. The same with Malique's sister who was facing a series of operations. Or Errol Davids' uncle in Mitchell Plain, who raised him when both his parents passed away. Astrid Spickerman, Damian Stols, Carmen Moodley – all of them who were uninvolved. I poured my fortune into their struggles in hope that my sacrifice would rescue their innocence when the evil had been stripped from their lives. If I could buy one life with my pain, it would be sorrow well paid. The mere thought of saving a life seemed like a worthy prize.

I had kept only a small amount for myself. By bribing pimps and druggies, Bertie was able to convince both Denvor and Shane that I was muscling in on their territory and that I had a stash house where I hid R100 million in cash or drugs. Soon afterwards, Shane and Denvor called an alliance to protect their Northern Suburbs trade. Their henchman abducted me one morning at my house in Camps Bay.

As I envisioned the large grey sock sliding over my head, so my vision cleared. I returned to the room. My ass felt ragged from having remained seated for such a long time. I was thirsty again and my head hurt. I had another treatment booked early that evening, though I imagined I'd probably not make it their alive.

"Bring Tamara here," Denvor ordered Vuyo, who had his gun levelled at Plankies on the opposite side of the room. "Fetch her now!"

He screamed so loudly that it drowned all the other voices into submission. In all the months spent studying him, I had never seen Denvor this perplexed.

"Move and I'll put your eyes out," Shane called from where he towered over me, without removing his weapon from Denvor.

Denvor, having momentarily forgotten his enemy, turned to face Shane, his one eye twitching in irritation.

"*You* killed Macky, you piece of shit! You blamed it on the Rondebosch clique, but deep down I knew it was you, bra."

I began laughing before Denvor could respond. It was a fit of hysteria and I couldn't refrain it. This part of my spells normally ended in me breaking something, but I just wanted to laugh.

Shane looked at me as though I had interrupted him. Everyone stood on the edge of a precipice, aware that the slightest move would set off a series of gunshots.

"You are all so poisoned. You can't see a damned thing," I said when my laughter dribbled to a whine. "You probably still think I have money stashed somewhere." That got me laughing again.

Shane, the only one without any innocents in his life, shifted his weapon towards my head when he heard about the money. Macky Collins's death had impacted Shane quite a bit, but not enough to make him forget about the possibility of easy money. He was a strange creature.

"Are you shitting me, bra?" he whispered. "All this for nothing?"

I smiled at him for a long time, counting down the seconds as they stretched out in my mind. His glare was cold and determined, but there hid a glimmer of defeat.

"Not at all," I said. "I had R167 million to my name."

“Had?” asked Shane in a strained voice. He began tapping the gun’s barrel against his leg, preparing himself. “Where is the money?”

“I gave it away. I gave it to Astrid Spickerman, Damian Stols, Carmen Moodley, Erwin and Misty-Anne Daniels, Bethany White, Jayden Makwetu, Hilary and Steffy Bredenkamp, Nosipho Moyana, Hilton Julies...”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“... Hilton Julies, Vincent Dumeko, and Karim Limba.”

“Shut up!” he screamed so that his afternoon breath fell over my face.

I scanned the faces in the room and could see I have reached every one of them. “Only when you all die,” I said, “will their portions pay out. In death, you will benefit them. You will have some worth.”

“I don’t know these names, bra,” Shane said in a grating voice. “Where’s my money?”

I leaned close to Shane, forcing him to make eye contact.

“I tried with all my might to find something pure in your life,” I said and shook my head slowly. “But you are pure evil. You hurt those who enter your sphere. Even in death, you have no worth. I donated your portion to a schooling initiative in Zambia.”

When he heard this, Shane lost it. He swung the barrel at my face and struck me across the cheek so hard that blood spewed into my mouth. The chair I sat in was flung back by the force, which caused me to roll across the floor, from plastic to cement. Blood dribbled over my lips, turning black when it splattered on the dusty surface of the cement.

I pushed myself into a seated position and stared at Shane, ready for the final blow. My head was spinning as the spell worsened. A blinding light came over my ears and I trembled. He raised his weapon and put it to my temple. The tip of his finger drew back across the trigger guard, but it never reached the trigger. A loud compacted blast bounced back from the walls.

A bullet struck Shane high in the chest. He was pulled off his feet by the impact. He became airborne for a moment, feet dangling comically as he was flung through the air, then fell to the floor with a muffled rumbling sound. As I turned to look at him, I lost my balance and fell backward. I did nothing to stop the fall. I yielded to the nexus of the spell and let go. My head hit the cement. My vision blurred and my ears buzzed.

There was another report, then another seventeen shots in quick succession. Nineteen shots in total. One shy of twenty. The consecutive gunfire had been so loud and so fast that it was jarring to experience, even while lying down. There followed a long, uncertain silence.

I waited for the spell to subside, which left my body in waves.

The smell of gunpowder settled over me. It stung my nostrils and caused my eyes to water. On the upside, it drew me from my daze far faster than anything else I’ve tried before.

I sat up, fighting back the urge to throw up. I scanned the room and saw blood on every wall. Not nearly as much as I thought I would see, but enough to realise that weaponry yielded injury. There were confined red splatter marks at obscure angles across the white paint interspersed with gaping holes in the plasterwork.

I pushed myself into a crouched position, then got to my feet. My knees crunched from having been in a seated position for so long. The cut inside my mouth burned furiously. I was still thirsty and my bladder was ready to burst.

Dillon Moyana groaned softly behind me. I was no doctor, but his face was missing a nose and an upper lip. I was not convinced he would survive the night. A quick glance confirmed that everyone had been shot at least once, some twice. Here and there, blood had started pooling on the floor, but the cement powder caked it into doughy patches.

I made my way across the room, swiping at the smoke that hung in the air. I wanted to get out of this mess. What I had set out to do, had been done. I had no more purpose, so I no longer belonged in that room.

I took hold of the cold lever, shifted upwards until it sprung loose, then pushed the window outward. It was large enough for me to fit through.

“Why?” I heard Denvor’s faint voice say. “Why do all this?”

He had fallen awkwardly near the window, with his head pressed up against the skirting. He looked uncomfortable, though the small hole in his stomach might have contributed to his unease. The blood looked dark. It was thick and mucousy, a stark contrast as it bubbled out of his body and dribbled over his mustard shirt. His face looked a couple shades whiter than before. His lips had a blueish colour and his hair was matted back with sweat.

Based on the way he had fallen and the positioning of his weapon, it was clear he had shot Blaine Dumeko. When I turned to look at Dumeko, I immediately regretted it. His throat had been flayed open, revealing the inner workings of the throat and windpipe in a grotesque manner. I fought back another wave of nausea and turned back to Denvor.

“Why...” He licked his lips with marked difficulty. “Why give it all away to strangers?” His voice was so soft now that I had to lean close to hear him.

“Because I’m already dead,” I whispered.

Using the last of his reserves, Denvor raised his weapon at me. The barrel seemed unsure of its direction, swinging this way and that, until Denvor forced his failing eyes to focus. He took short breaths.

I closed my eyes to welcome the bullet. I could taste the blood in my mouth, could smell it in the room, and feel it in my veins. My mind became still once more. Just as before, there came a loud bark of gunfire but no surrender of death.

Behind me I heard a grunt. I turned, just in time to see a bloodied Shane stammer forward and topple over Brian White’s corpse. When I turned back to Denvor, he had no life left in his eyes.

I shimmied out the window as the door flew open. Two armed men stared down at the mess on the floor. I dropped out of sight, disappearing into the shrubbery below the window.

I waited there for a minute or two, then crawled to the hedge, where a wild hibiscus shrub provided ample cover. I made my way towards the edge of the property and slipped away as the sirens pulled into the bottom of the street. The shrill scream of cop cars tore through the suburb, their blue lights muted in the daylight.

I walked down to the first available bus terminal and left the northern suburbs behind. An elderly woman wearing a green cardigan, offered me the serviettes she had got with her take-out meal to clear the blood from my lips.

About an hour later, I was near Camps Bay again. I walked the rest of the way.

When I arrived at the clinic, death welcomed me home once more. I felt the door emit a pleasant sucking sound as it drew shut behind me. There was a new nurse at the reception desk. I could tell she was new because her smile was sincere.

“I’m here for a treatment,” I said.

“Sure, can I please have your name?”

“It’s Graybert September,” I said. “But you can call me Gray.”

Part B: Portfolio

James Fouché

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

James Fouché

October 2021

In compiling my reflective journals, I arranged them according to the assignments as they arrived, interspersed with bouts of reading that fuelled the creative process, then finished with the completion of my thesis work.

This document consists of: My edited reflective journals, my poetics essay and book reviews.

Contents

1. The Beginning.....	3
2. Fierce Writing	4
3. Reading #1	4
4. Writing From the Body	5
5. Seminar Facilitated by Mxolisi Nyezwa	5
6. The Only Writing is Rewriting	6
7. Writing With and Writing Against Narrative	7
8. Reading #2	8
9. Reflections on the Book Reviews Assignment	8
10. Poems From Other Poems.....	9
11. Poetics Essay.....	10
12. Writing About Sex	11
13. Reading #3	12
14. Writing Death and Dying	12
15. Reading #4	13
16. Tell it Slant.....	14
17. Samuel Beckett and Monologues.....	15
18. Reading #5	16
19. Voice, Context and Intention	17
20. Motif in Writing	17
21. Reading #6	18
22. Epistolary Seminar	18
23. Reading #7	19
24. Thesis	19
25. Reading #8	20
26. Gray.....	20
27. Editing.....	23
28. The End.....	25
29. Poetics Essay.....	26
30. Book Reviews	33

The Beginning

Following a five-year hiatus from writing, my passion for words was gnawing at me. After three children and numerous personal setbacks, I was ready to embark on a personal journey. It was not that easy, though. I was all caged up inside. There was nothing left in the tank. My wife and I had discussed it at length. It was decided. I would tackle the master's degree in creative writing at Rhodes. I had to immerse myself into a creative pool with like-minded people. I had to surrender.

On the bus trip to Makhanda, I considered the holiday assignment. I loved the newness and the excitement of all the new authors and genres on display. How had I never read these authors before?

The campus. The classroom. Clammy hands. Erratic pulse. Way out of my league. I felt like a veteran and a novice at the same time. And yet, stimulated. I got that urge to set off again, to rattle the keyboard like a bull on a rampage. I had to choke it back. I was trying too hard to focus, instead of just taking it in. I was also recovering from the consequences of a creative drain. Writers needed creative input to produce creative output. Had I been denying myself input? Or output? These were some of the more pertinent questions I had to work through.

The week blew by quickly, swallowed up by nervousness. That first week nearly broke me. The sudden influx of creativity and the lack of having produced anything in a while, caused a creative blockage. It was difficult to digest. Not only was my creativity drained, but I was mentally exhausted. Heading back home on the bus, something felt different. Something had changed, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

The reflective journals had a delayed effect. Either that, or I was a bit slow. I was more reflective about the previous two-week cycle than the present cycle. I kept calling up little things, like when Nathan Trantraal, one of the lecturers, mentioned something while we were evaluating our portfolio excerpts. He said information dumps slow down a narrative. He referenced a quote from *The Cold Six Thousand* by James Ellroy, which I later found: '*Koethe jackknifed. Koethe re-posed. Koethe tried some karate shit. He flailed. He threw fists. He positioned. Pete judo-chopped him. Pete nail-raked his face.*' I couldn't stop pondering about its simplicity and its effectiveness.

Before leaving Makhanda, I'd gone to the library. Chester Himes' *Cotton Comes to Harlem* had been booked by someone else, so I took *A Rage in Harlem* instead. Himes intrigued me. The opening chapter was gripping. One passage described a train station which 'sat beneath the trestle like an artificial island.' The full passage read like this: '*Passengers alighting there for the first time had the impulse to turn about and climb back into the train. The platform shook like palsy and the loose boards rattled like dry bones every time a train passed.*' It was crazy, sublime writing! Clean and concise. The intense creativity reverberated within the pages.

Of all the tasks that lay ahead, the most daunting one was the compilation of book reviews. I dreaded reviewing someone else's work. The artist in me so badly wanted to acknowledge fellow artists but wanted to do so without being overly critical of their work. Reading Himes, I imagined how I would review his work.

In our first reading group we read through the hand-outs we had received in Makhanda. I was moved by 'The Fifth Story' by Clarice Lispector and 'The Ghost of the Pig' by René Ariza. Both had elements of humour contrasted by a deeper, darker satirical undertone. I gathered that Lispector was a marvellous tease with words. When life consisted of words, intellectual playfulness was wordplay.

Fierce Writing

Our first assignment was for Kerry Hammerton, called Fierce Writing. Her selection of intense prose poems challenged me to push the boundary. I didn't mind pushing boundaries. That's writing.

However, something happened. I'd never done reading and writing assignments in quick succession. Copywriting was different. This felt like filling the cup, then emptying it immediately after, while having a slow puncture on the side. It pushed me to a personal place. Each piece tugged deeper, as though my creativity was adjusting to the sudden demand.

During the feedback session, it was insightful to hear the varied opinions from fellow students. What moved me, didn't necessarily move someone else, and vice versa. Writing was a funny, personal thing. Everyone loved my poems but had no idea what it was about. I had edited the prose poem so tightly, that it read like a puzzle. Jeff enjoyed the mathematical precision of it, JahRose the colour references, and Kerry the visual aspects. However, she pointed out that if I had to explain the poem, something wasn't working. I agreed, but couldn't help thinking about poems I enjoyed, which required interpretation to appreciate.

I asked Kerry for guidance in editing the poem. I tried taking words out until I was satisfied, but it was like playing Jenga. A fascinating first assignment. Deep down, I had been terrified of assignment one. But I was where I had to be.

Reading #1

I finished *A Rage in Harlem* by Chester Himes. The novel started at a point in a narrator's life, then the writer filled in the blanks as he took readers on a journey. It rang true to wisdom I had forgotten about: *enter the story late, leave the story early*. On the surface it was a story about nothing, a silly crime caper with no pay-off, a weak protagonist, yet has enough haste and intensity to advance the narrative. That's good writing.

In the reading session I read 'Cueca of the Lady Conductors' by Rosa Araneda. It was a story from *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*, which I got from Paul Wessels during contact week. I understood basic Spanish. I had a fondness for South and Central American literature. I loved the struggle, the deep sense of remorse, their passion for life and appreciation for death. In reading Araneda's story, I noticed that some humour had been lost in the translation. I read it aloud in Spanish to display the musicality of the piece. JahRose read 'Still Life, with Grapes' by Joshua Cohen. I appreciated the morbid playfulness of it.

Ice by Anna Kavan forced me into a post-apocalyptic world and a curious love triangle. Kavan employed techniques to take readers out of their comfort zones, like taking them hostage. She utilised snow and ice as a vehicle to drive the threat of impending doom. It felt like there was a lot more at play than just ice.

Writing From the Body

While the first assignment had been about fierce writing, challenging writers to strive for a more intense writing style, the second assignment by Stacy Hardy leaned towards ‘writing the body.’ I listened to her seminar, reread the assignment. It was clear: *show, don’t tell*. By writing the body, writers are obligated to explore physicality and to rope in the senses.

I waited for the story to come. I was between books, between readings, between jobs, between parenting tasks, when an entire narrative came at me like a freight train. Within an hour I had spun a yarn, one that had been done before, but came as a sensory overload. With the newness of academia in mind, I evaluated my own writing and picked up some fascinating things.

Firstly, similar to Himes, I entered the story late and left the story early. Secondly, while writing the body through senses, none of the characters had been described in full. I neglected to assign race to characters.

Everyone’s feedback on my story was consistent. It echoed my own concerns! Jeff Moloji commented on the excessive adverbs. Stacy mentioned the excessive similes and metaphors. In chiselling at it, I could apply the advice. Was great to get feedback on my writing again. I missed this!

What vexed me, though, was how Kavan’s *Ice* was riddled with adjectives and adverbs. I wondered whether that writing style would demand shelf space today? Would it even get published? While compared to works of Philip K. Dick and J.G. Ballard, I found it more reminiscent of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, or a fictionalised version of *Sybil* by Flora Rheta Schreiber. Was *Ice* about an addict romanticizing their struggle with drugs? Was it an account of schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder? Who knew? Who cared? Unpacking it would rob it of its worth. It could be anything to anyone if they allowed it.

Seminar Facilitated Mxolisi Nyezwa

Assignment number three’s seminar was facilitated by Mxolisi Nyezwa. *The Autobiography* by Nazim Hikmet, one of the assignment readings, was a bittersweet telling of life’s good times and how it stumbled over life’s bad times. It showcased the terrifying balance in the game of life. It didn’t leave me sad or angry. Instead, I felt complete, as though the writer was expressing the fullness of life.

We had to write three poems. I hadn't bothered to observe my writing process before. I was suddenly paying attention. It might've been triggered by my discussion with Kerry Hammerton during the first assignment.

I waited for an idea, like a wicket keeper waiting for a stray ball. Ideas don't take long. They are everywhere. I thought about the readings during Mxolisi Nyezwa's seminar, then the idea of a fiscal shrike (also called a Jackie Hangman) came flying at me.

That was it. I knew the bird well, and had used it as a metaphor in my first novel. I remembered reading about its solitude, how it was a lone hunter. Had it been a person, what would we talk about? Jack and Me.

The next day, I had many browser tabs open, reading about the Southern Fiscal Shrike (*Lanius Collaris*). Zoological studies about their comparative foraging behaviour, research about their mating habits, breeding ecology, from nest building to egg hatching. I watched clips about their hunting techniques, how they lured prey with melodic interpretations of other birds. I jotted down words like hook, bill, fiscal, fence, spike, swoop, survey, and the like, until I saw Jack's life story.

Saturday afternoon we took the kids to the beach. As I watched them play in the sand, I found a piece of string dangling at the edge of my soul. I tugged at it, reeled it in and unravelled my second poem. It washed over me in a single convoluted, condensed, stanza.

The third poem was me trying to be tactical. As a father, I must show my kids the opposite of emptiness. The time will come when I can introduce emptiness to them and show them that emotional emptiness is not a fatal disease, but a part of life that can be embraced, as in Hikmet's poem. In my third poem, I captured gains-and-losses in a calculation that read like noughts-and-crosses. I was happy with it. I submitted it online and awaited feedback.

Mxolisi was not impressed with Jack. He said it didn't work for him. Fellow students liked it. Mxolisi also said we should not change a piece of writing just because someone said something negative. He said that, as a teacher, he was just another person with an opinion, and we should not blindly follow what he advises because he could get things wrong or feel different about something.

While waiting for books, I read *My Name Is Finn Jupiter* by Gareth Crocker. His writing is tight with brilliant dialogue that carries the story forward. I like that.

The Only Writing is Rewriting

Assignment number four arrived, the most stimulating assignment to date. Nathan Trantraal instructed us to rework a piece from our contact week readers. He gave examples. It made sense. Until he gave the word count. 700 or less.

The first story that came to mind was 'The Old Man of Usumbura' by Taban lo Liyong. My research concluded that the two old men in the story would have been Rwandan and Burundian. The lead character unfolded in my mind.

It's impossible to find translations for the language of Kirundi, the spoken language at the time. I applied the official language of Rwanda, Kinyarwanda, instead. The word Umuto means 'the youngest'. In Burundi, the name Emil means rival. It was settled. I had found my protagonist and my antagonist. I researched trees, birds and clothing common to Burundi or Rwanda, then compiled another account of the wealthy man's sons turning against each other.

Later I tried my hand at Kaaps – just for fun. I enjoyed the poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' by CP Cavafy, so I used the poem as a framework to spin a yarn. I changed the setting to modern-day Cape Town with gang members awaiting a merger with a rival gang. Much like Cavafy's poem, the mood was sombre and confused. They anticipate the arrival of their enemies to relieve them of the confusion, but they never come. Nathan said my Kaaps grammar was near perfect. Not having had a sounding board for ages, that made my day.

In feedback it seemed that most students were reluctant to let themselves go. Nathan encouraged us to challenge ourselves. The advice penetrated, made us all dig deeper. Some even rewrote their entire story.

Writing With and Writing Against Narrative Conventions

Things have become difficult with three toddlers underfoot. Writing is a slow process, made slower by lockdown. Reading requires dedication, time, and silence, which was in short supply. I needed input to deliver output. Fill the cup, drain the cup.

Assignment number five from Paul Mason arrived. I listened to the seminar on Sunday evening. I was cutting figs for a homemade jam while my wife was putting the kids to bed. Keywords mentioned in the seminar fell into my mind like seeds. Circus, mystery, prostitute.

One part of the assignment called for a short story with a conventional narrative, the other to rewrite it in an unconventional narrative. With each slip of the short blade, I felt a protagonist stir inside of me. I slid the figs into a large pot, then returned to the cutting board as Adrik, a Russian knife thrower who suspected his assistant, Zofia, formerly a Polish prostitute, of having an affair.

As I envisioned myself flicking the knife at targets, a bizarre idea tickled my funny bone. What if the knife thrower and the clown were caught in a Cain-and-Abel battle for Zofia's affection? Phase 1 became a lover's quarrel. Phase 2 morphed into an unconventional rewrite with the knife as the narrator. I researched knife throwing terminology. When my wife returned from the kids' room, I was knee-deep in a tale of woe. I put my story on low heat to simmer.

The assignment extract from Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, provided valuable insight to writing unconventional narratives. Armah used wood to describe emotions and events. I also enjoyed *The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* by Bruno Schulz. Challenging at times, it was reminiscent of Kaven's *Ice*.

In the reading group someone read 'Afrika Road' by Don Mattera. Making the road a narrator was a clever example of challenging conventional narratives. I read an amazing short story by Jim Lewis called 'The History of the World'. It stirred me, though it confused my fellow students. Simple in its design, yet well-written, made it doubly impactful. The writer told a

mundane story, with a seemingly unstructured subtext of useless information at the bottom. Brilliant.

I wrote a dialogue-driven tragedy for Phase 1 – Conventional. The knife came alive in me as I moved to Phase 2 – Unconventional. I envisioned the act of a knife leaving a hand, twirling through the air and striking a target, as a ballet dancer mid-performance. The piece felt complete. Paul Mason did a firm edit during feedback. His suggestions were spot-on. The elimination of excess words improved the flow. It was a fantastic session.

Reading #2

I received my books from Rhodes. As a pop culture fan, I devoured the anthology *The Soho Press Book of 80's Short Fiction*. For the reading group I selected 'How Soft, How Sweet' by Suzanne Gardinier. This emotional story had a slow suffering quality. I was intrigued by how cleverly it was written. The daughter served as narrator. She described her alcoholic father and how her mother tolerated her uncertain future with him. The show-don't-tell aspect was evident here. To describe his addiction the writer says that her father kept a tiny flask next to his heart. That is sublime.

Following the concept of challenging narratives, I read *Cotton Comes to Harlem* by Chester Himes. It read so easily. Himes maintains a compelling story, never deviating for a second. He is masterful at creating a race-against-time narrative where protagonists and antagonists rush headlong into a night where hell is set to break loose at any moment.

Reflections on the Book Reviews Assignment

Next assignment: Book Reviews. Being critical of someone's written work is challenging. I search for artistic value in writing, no matter how fleeting.

We were urged to find reviews online and to compile feedback. Since I've read Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Chester Himes' *A Rage in Harlem*, I pursued those. Reviews were limited. Elaborate reviews on Kavan's bizarre and chilling *Ice* were spread about the internet. They were personal musings from long-time fans. They flesh out unexplored philosophical depths of the writing, which didn't tell me much about the book.

I found a review of *A Rage in Harlem* on Bookforum, which seemed to challenge the norm. It was deceptively plain, like Himes' novels. Wessels once said Himes had a 'slapstick writing style.' This review, in a slapstick way, was paying homage to the author. Halfway into the review, the title is mentioned for the first time when, coincidentally, describing how Himes introduces the two protagonists. It states that the two lead detectives spontaneously arrive in Chapter 8 and stick around until the end. That is a stunning play on words and a fantastic way to echo the author's style.

Andrew Hultkrans' review of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* was entirely different to the Himes review. Had the reviewer of the Himes novel reviewed *The Metamorphosis*, it would've been a tragic affair. Hultkrans used a specific, semi-intellectual way to highlight the underlying truths of a profound novella. He dispelled what some would call a silly plot by offering a chilling alternative that makes it relatable. He relates the struggle of the family living with the 'bug' to the social impact on a family sharing a house with an addict. It was such a slick way to reveal the core of the novella while adding value to it.

Both reviews had a natural flow, while reviewing the work and the author's writing style. Each reviewer had their own voice. I returned to reviews of my own novels and saw that each review told me something about the reviewer, which permanently altered my perception of reviews.

Poems From Other Poems

'Ode to Tomatoes' by Pablo Neruda stood out for me in Maryke Byers' reading session. My bias for Neruda's work had no impact on my appreciation. It seemed superfluous, then something called me back to it. Was it the writer's discernible passion for the subject matter? Or a simplicity in delivery that caught me off guard? I believe Neruda was a masterful player of words, and his playfulness was tangible, as much in this poem as in his darker poems.

The one reading, 'A Poet and Prose' by Joseph Brodsky, didn't sit well with me. Brodsky was bent on the idea that poets and prose writers position themselves on opposing sides, that prose writers would never be able to produce worthy poems, and that poets writing prose would render the work poetic in style. This, along with Kenneth Koch's essay detailing a writer's process, made me more curious about my own writing process.

For the next assignment we had to write poems inspired by the previous week's readings. I pulled out a poem and titled it, 'Absolution'. My wife asked how long it took to write. I explained that it took 41 years to write, which confused her. I asked if she wanted to be part of my second poem's writing process. She agreed.

The next morning, something hindered an important task from being concluded. As it happened, my wife looked at me and said, 'Fish bone.' My wife always joked that if we were to eat fish fillets or chicken mayo sandwiches, I'd get a bone in the meat. I replied, 'That's the next poem.' And so began 'Ode to the Fish Bone'.

Inspired by Neruda's poem, I researched fish species and their bones. I took notes on its design, function, terminology, and composition. Seeing the notes was like looking at nuts and bolts instead of a completed car.

I turned my notes into a poem, which felt like making music. After turning every word over, it felt like a completed song. A full story in two stanzas. The first was zoological, detailing the fish and its capture. The second stanza was philosophical, showing its culinary end. The conclusion emphasised my trouble with the little bone.

Poetics Essay

Paul Wessels began preparing us for his poetics assignment, which was the next assignment. I kept returning to the Koch piece, the appreciation of the artistic writing process. As though he was reading my mind, Paul forwarded *A Sense of Measure* by Robert Creeley. Hearing about the inner workings of artists and the imaginary mechanisms that form part of the story-telling machine, was inspiring because I've been starved of this type of creative outlet. I read it again and again.

Some of the writings were theorising the concept of writing, while others ventured deeper into the psyche of writers, or explored the writing process. It was writing drawn from the upper tier of creativity and laid bare for anyone who cared to dig in. It was writers, writing about writing, to be read by other writers.

The Federico Garcia Lorca essay I read aloud was about the concept of having *duende*. It hinted that there was more than intellect and inspiration behind good writing, something dark and rhythmic and bloody. I clung to the idea that there are three things to a masterpiece: a clever story, how the clever story is conveyed, and the mysterious glue that kept the story and the delivery together. I pictured this glue as *duende*.

I was profoundly moved by the essays by Evenson and Tiff Holland. I could relate to their treatment of characters. Evenson wrote on the realness of characters:

'I am obsessed with the "thereness" of characters, the way they inscribe their paths on the world.'

Holland allowed characters the freedom to take over and have their way:

'I found myself pulled in by Betty and her tales, often losing my initial plot completely to follow Betty wherever she wanted to take me. For a while, every time I sat down to write – Betty showed up. She could be difficult, demanding, and shinier than I liked. Luckily her visits were brief: flashes. She said what she came to say and left.'

This resonated with me. Betty resembled characters I've written. I imagined myself as an observer when writing a character, there to document a chapter of their life that merited being told. Some characters have swallowed me up, then spat me out again when the story was done. Evenson and Holland seemed to validate this cold experience, which felt like the truest, most intimate way to bring a character to life.

These words by Evenson made a massive impact:

'I know that my work is scrutinized, that I will be held responsible for what I write. This has caused me to measure each word carefully.'

That my writing might be scrutinized, as though the act of scrutiny formed part of a profession, had never occurred to me. It's not fair to assume that readers, whether discerning reviewer or fellow author, read with an air of scrutiny. Scrutiny, in this context, became alive to me.

This golden nugget of wisdom encouraged me to ‘measure each word carefully.’ I’ve always compared words to money. It should not be spent recklessly. While it rang true to the rule of less is more, this view fuelled me to turn every word over.

Dambudzo Marechera finally shed light on the direction I’d take in compiling my own essay. He wrote about his respect for the written word, though he disliked having to read works by authors he disliked. Regardless, I felt his appreciation for all writing. It resonated with me more than the other times I had read it because my assignment had changed. I was more open to it. He hinted at a universal writer’s language only writers could enjoy. After this, all the other essays became more personal and more engaging. It felt as though the words were meant for me.

I changed my approach to the poetics essay. I described how the readings touched or inspired me. I wrote a less complicated, less academic, and maybe less brilliant, piece of writing, but it was true and raw. It was me after having drunk from the voices of old, the literary giants who had already voyaged through the forest I was in, and who had taken the time to write about it to give me direction in my writing life.

Following the poetics essay, came the obligatory mid-Covid virtual contact week and the alternating feedback sessions. It was a weird experience for everyone. Kerry Hammerton posted daily readings to keep us focused. One poem that stuck with me was ‘Letter from Swan’s Island’ by Elizabeth Spires. It was intoxicating and correlated with a novel I was working on. Her words crept into my soul and stayed there.

Henali Kuit’s feedback was refreshing. She referenced nuances in writing that I picked up on. I learned that not every lecturer was correct in their view of written work. They offered varied feedback, sometimes contradictory to that of others. It revealed as much about themselves as it did about us. For instance, Stacy Hardy disliked my piece called ‘Ndidiniwe’. She admitted that her feedback shouldn’t hold weight because her political views were influencing her opinion.

I found her admission to be brave and fascinating. It cast a different light on my master’s degree. This journey was an internal one. The lecturers were guides, not gods. They were there to show us our strengths, weaknesses, and, ultimately, help us to perfect our writing voices. For me, it was an intense struggle to scrape off the rust and to push myself to where I needed to be.

Writing About Sex

Chwayita Ngamlana’s seminar, dealt with the uncomfortable topic of sex. The accompanying assignment, requested a prose piece about sexual fetishes. We had to select a fetish. I read Chwayita’s novel, *If I Stay Right Here*. I enjoyed her writing, especially how she carried the subject matter. It had a natural feel. Her ability to employ WhatsApp messages was done convincingly.

After some contemplation, a story poured out. It was as though I had known the two lead characters for years. Adjectives arrived. Bloody annoying and intrusive adjectives. Why do writers overwrite?! I submitted it with the intention of eliminating adjectives later.

My fellow students submitted unique, creative pieces. Some held promise, others didn't move me. When a student incorporated a poetic voice, I could suddenly pick up on it. When the characterization was weak, I felt it more than before. When there was an over reliance on adjectives, it grated me. Maybe this was the purpose of doing my master's degree, to sharpen my sensitivity to little errors?

I was reserved in feedback. I didn't want my views to be misconstrued. We were there to grow. Hilary Alexander suggested pushing one paragraph up and using it as my opening paragraph to add immediacy. It worked. I chiselled out some naughty adjectives, reworked the sex scene to add awkwardness, and resubmitted it.

I learnt a lot about my way of creating characters in the exercise. Sex, religion and politics can make people uncomfortable. I didn't mind. I'm comfortable with being uncomfortable. I find creative ways of bringing uncomfortable things into my comfort zone, like justifying the thing I'm writing about. If Picasso had to paint about sex, what would he paint? And if he had to paint about the current state of the economy, what would he paint? He had his brush, his preferred paint, and his style of painting. Would he not find a way to make himself comfortable with it before setting brush to canvas? I'm no Picasso, but I can relate to this. Whether a sex fetish, an addiction or a violent act, if it can be reasoned out and there is conviction to it, it makes writing about it, or convincing readers about the struggle with it, that much easier.

Reading #3

During the contact week we were asked to select a genre for our thesis. I asked Paul Wessels for his input. We decided that prose was my genre. Though I loved poetry, I lost readers in my own poetry. Whether too vague or archaic, I couldn't stop that side of me. I loved to construct palaces with words and hide little nuances within the plasterwork. Maybe my appreciation for e.e.cummings influenced me too much. Regardless, I made my way to the prose class and paid attention.

Having enjoyed Evenson's essays in the poetics assignment, I had a go at *Altmann's Tongue*, the controversial short story collection which had caused the writer much grief. The first story, 'The Father, Unblinking', was fantastically put together. I selected it for our reading group. Though Evenson touched on the macabre, which I try to avoid for my sanity, he had a descriptive and visual writing style I appreciated.

Writing Death and Dying

I devoured the readings accompanying Dr Carol Leff's seminar, 'Writing Death and Dying'. She offered alternate ways to accomplish this feat. I particularly enjoyed 'The Swimming Pool'

by Sarah Ladipo Manyika. Her style of writing was in my sphere of preference. I loved how she introduced the characters involved in Mr Adewale's unfortunate story, and how the truth of the tale contradicted the opening eulogy.

The article by Teju Cole, 'Death in the Browser Tab', was poignant. It drew me in. I was taken by how he stressed the senselessness of death. As well as his ability to take readers to the scene of a crime. He described how he perceived there was time to stop a shooting incident as he was watching the incident on video. Though the conclusion was known, it succinctly pinned readers to the reality of the matter. It was a powerful and haunting way to push readers to ask why there was no pause, no cautioning, no restraint, when it would have been so easy to stop.

Our assignment called for a story about the death of someone close. We had encountered a great deal of loss over the last four years. This included the death of my mother and my brother, less than a year apart. I had never been able to mourn the sudden loss or to obtain closure. I had been leading my family through a jungle of business- and lockdown-related challenges. Throwing my hands in the air and letting the steering wheel coast was never an option. Writing about death, when I was trying to suppress it, was complicated.

I eventually wrote a story about my mother. It was not my mourning, nor my closure. It was only a solemn goodbye. I imagined my mother in the house after she had passed, shifting space, like dust particles through a beam of light, until a cicada called her home.

Motlatjo and I were the only ones who gave voices to the dead. Motlatjo ventured into the realm of supernatural mysteries like *Ghost* or *The Lovely Bones*.

Everyone enjoyed my story but wanted more clarity on the conclusion. I never intended to be vague. Maybe my prose was made ambiguous because of my inability to obtain closure? As a writer, I try not to let myself seep into the work. In fiction, I felt I had no right to be there. I was tasked with telling the story of a feasible and relatable character. To be convincing, it needed less of me. But this narrator was my dead mother. Hilary, Motlatjo and Carol suggested ways to add clarity without changing the narrative. It worked.

Reading #4

I reluctantly submitted 'Killing Cats' by Evenson for our reading session. I was aware it could offend some, but I had to, for the sake of better interpretation thereof. 'Killing Cats' was a stoic narrative that showcased the crueller part of humanity. It panned over the flaws of life, poor parenting, senseless violence and how the company you kept dragged you down. This was all dealt with nonchalantly as a couple roped the narrator into helping them kill their cats. There was no justification, no explanation, just awkward facts by an indifferent narrator. The reader arrived – and was subsequently spat out without any clear indication of achievement or completion. That alone was the success of an otherwise forgettable story.

The feedback was mixed. Paul Mason was unimpressed by the senselessness and banality of it. He said there was no literary beauty in the execution thereof. I appreciated his views, but there was something more to it.

In the poetics assignment, one essay painted a sad picture about the future of fiction. Raymond Federman wrote about the theory of surfiction, which he called the modern progression of fiction. He hypothesized that traditional fiction would undergo alarming changes, such as narrative challenges, writing without justification or merit, or styles with multiple points of view or multiple shifts along timelines, with characters that had little to no depth. This quote resurfaced when reading 'Killing Cats':

'What will replace the well-made personage (the hero, the protagonist) of traditional fiction who carried with him the burden of a name, an age, parental ties, a social role, a nationality, a past, and sometimes a physical appearance and even an interior psyche, will be a creation, or better yet a creature that will function outside any predetermined conditions of society, outside any precise moment of history.'

He theorized that surfiction would have no beginning, middle or end, adding this:

'On the contrary, Surfiction will be seemingly devoid of meaning, it will be deliberately illogical, irrational, unrealistic, non sequitur, digressive, and incoherent.'

While it had felt like the death of fiction at the time, it was evidenced in Evenson's story. Every aspect of surfiction was present in 'Killing Cats'. The character was devoid of substance, there was no beginning or end, just a middle, taken from nowhere and inserted somewhere. There was no justification, no right or wrong, no clarity, no reasoning, just the thing itself.

Was this surfiction, the future of fiction?

Paul Mason's views resonated with me, but Federman had clearly hit the nail on the head. I was stuck in limbo for days. It was Mason versus Federman. The concept of surfiction threatened my future as a fiction novelist. I loved characterization, world building and theme development. Surfiction operated seamlessly without any of these literary devices.

Tell it Slant (Writing Obliquely)

Jo-Ann Bekker's seminar readings offered gems worth mentioning. I loved 'Ambrosia' by Rebecca Jean Kraft. Her tale of a murder and subsequent rape was visually stunning. Carmen Maria Machado's 'Inventory' was brilliant because it challenged conventional narratives. There were so many things taking place simultaneously. She juxtaposed her personal life with her sexual encounters, while a viral pandemic was wiping out civilization. Brilliant!

Our lecturer requested a story that was written obliquely, referencing the famous quote of telling the truth, but telling it slant. This was an opportunity to play with words. I didn't want to try to be too clever. Nathan once said he sensed I had a self-lacerating writing style. Meaning, I criticized and restrained myself. I hadn't noticed it until recently. I loved adding layers to a story while leaving it open to interpretation. It was my writing voice, my style. However, in trying for a wider audience, I beat myself down and muddled words.

I was mentally drained and sat nipping at things, unable to find the hook for Jo-Anne's assignment. Eventually it came – and it worked on multiple levels. I hammered the words into place and submitted it.

During feedback, my dialogue came under fire. It had tied up the flow. Jo-Ann hinted at giving readers a nudge in the end instead of being too vague. She was correct.

Jeff's submission had a female narrator. Hilary asked if it was appropriate for writers to write in a different gender or race. I found it strange because she had written something with male narrators making crude remarks towards women. Can a woman not write about a male doctor, having never held a scalpel in her hands? Can a man not write about a young mother reluctantly giving her breastmilk to an elderly man?

Surely research could enable writers to write the unknown. I had been a prostitute, a coloured woman, a five-year-old child, a drug dealer, a gangster, an elderly Zimbabwean militiaman, a Xhosa businessman, and a lesbian. Each required extensive research to make the characters believable, though I never fully walked in their shoes.

If Hilary's doubts on writing 'others' had merit, then writers could only write themselves. Lady Macbeth and Anna Karenina was conceived by a man. Mr Darcy was created by a woman? Were these not feasible characters of the time?

Jo-Ann later sent a link to 'Monkeys' by Keletso Mopai. It was haunting. It not only proved that a black woman could successfully write as a young white boy, but it raised concerns without wasting a single word. Good writing transcended the limitations we placed on narratives and varied points-of-view. I left Mopai a compliment to her great story. She deserved it. And the comment box seemed empty without it.

Samuel Beckett and Monologues

Another Paul Mason challenge arrived, this time about monologues. The texts provided were excerpts from works by Samuel Beckett. How does one take inward discussions and turn them into sense? And how does one sell that sense to readers? I was lost, but I let it marinate.

Having read one Ross Macdonald novel, I went onto another. *The Underground Man* read as easily as *Find a Victim*. The narrator wakes up to feed nuts to birds when a child joins him. The child's father shows up and quarrels with the mother, then takes off with the kid. An approaching wildfire and a mother in distress, serve as the bang from a starter pistol. From this point on, Macdonald unravels this long tale, as if it was right there in front of him. In the poetics assignment, I encountered something by William Carlos Williams. He wrote that the truest way to write was to write the thing as you see it. It felt applicable here.

Macdonald's structure made Beckett's lack of structure (or, rather, his unique approach to structure) more bearable. With conventional juxtaposing unconventional, I perceived the genius of Beckett's prose. Beckett's pieces reminded me of *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville. Maybe because both writers challenged the perceived norm of their time.

Next reading group I read 'City Employment' by Lydia Davis. I enjoyed the humour, the playfulness. Fellow students read excerpts from novels by Kate Zambreno and Ottessa Moshfegh. Lining up Davis, Zambreno and Moshfegh in a straight comparison was dangerous, but mid-week fun for MACW students. Davis was deceptively light with nuggets of wisdom. Zambreno did *Fight Club* for women with a decadent flair. Moshfegh did both, consistently.

The Beckett assignment bugged me. I felt way out of my comfort zone. I kept hearing the voice of E.E. Cummings reading ‘i carry your heart with me’, that monotone droning on comfortably. I revisited the monologues of *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* for inspiration. They were so effective in holding an audience.

I was making slow progress with my Beckett, when the idea of a female doctor came to me. Over the next couple of days, I unpacked it into an engaging monologue, then reworked it à la Beckett.

And then a car accident interrupted everything! While in recovery, I pecked at my assignment until it was done. Paul Mason’s feedback pinged in my mailbox soon after. No sooner had his opinion found me when realization struck. Part one was an introduction, while the rewrite was a denouement, neither Beckettian enough. The story was incomplete. The narrator needed a transition to bridge the two parts. I titled it, ‘Limbo’. Mason liked it.

Reading #5

For the reading group, I avoided another Evenson story – or anything mentioning cats. The first story in *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* was appropriately titled, ‘Story’. It was brilliant in its simplicity, detailing a narrator’s paranoia, indifference, betrayal, and realization, from beginning to end. It felt as though the narrator knew she was yammering on but couldn’t refrain from doing so, because, deep down, she knew that her fears were not unfounded. Lydia Davis managed to keep the reader at length while allowing them to be a fly on the wall.

Paul Wessels had mentioned some authors and titles I’d benefit from. One title was *Find a Victim* by Ross Macdonald. What an amazing experience. I was in awe – and a bit jealous, angry even. Authors like Macdonald make novice writers look bad. There was no point competing. His concise writing, colourful phrases, vivid descriptions, and rapid characterization was in a different league. I couldn’t stop reading. Macdonald used every word to keep readers pinned down.

Then I began reading Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Another Wessels recommendation. I think Paul understood where I was in my journey as a writer. He knew what input would improve my output.

O’Connor’s style was fantastic. Descriptions were poetic and colourful in a time of barren landscapes and poverty. She used longer sentences. I appreciated long, full sentences where every word had purpose. I blasted through her short stories in record time. The title story was so poignant that it will stay with me. It was a diseased telling of what was wrong with the world. Each tale had a tragic Steinbeckian approach, merging misery with opportunism, and documenting it nonchalantly. It was like watching predators hunt buck on a nature show. The tension throughout her work was indicative of the time and setting. As a Southern writer, racism and sexism were unpleasant realities. She wrote truth, but it was hard to take in. Understanding the context and the way of old, doesn’t make it easier. O’Connor knew how to stir up feelings.

Voice, Context and Intention

The next seminar was hosted by Masande Ntshanga. I read Victor LaValle's texts, went through Masande's two example drafts. The LaValle interview struck a nerve. Twice. On one side I agreed with his view on voice, but a part of me was not convinced that it was gospel. Writers grapple with the concept of finding their own voice. Somewhere in the struggle of piecing two books together, I had stumbled into my voice by accident.

However, I believe fiction writers work hard not to put themselves on the page. If they didn't, then all their work would sound the same. The only variance would be their personal maturity, documented in their voice, from book to book. Sure, a writer's blood will stain the pages to some extent. A fragment of their essence had to bleed into their work without them being aware of it. It was the element of self, the thing humming in the background.

I agreed with La Valle's view about not writing a character or a situation you are disinterested in. If a writer's voice smacked of a singular view, then I'd question whether they sufficiently sought to understand the opposing view. In this, La Valle's observation showcased the true challenge of writing. This also explained why I immersed myself in the lives of my characters to better document their journey.

He also echoed one of my most cherished views on reading: the reader had to be willing to take what felt relative and discard what did not. It freed writers from forcing down their opinions, while allowing readers to ponder on it without pressure to submit to it.

I took an excerpt from a novel I'd been struggling with. I put the 2010 opening chapter next to the 2020 version. Everyone said my writing voice was present in both pieces. However, my fellow students were unsure of the narrator's race. I was vexed.

I took great joy in writing characters without painting them a certain colour. I'm of the opinion that character descriptions undermine readers. I believed that if a character was truly relatable the colour of their skin was irrelevant. As a literary device it pissed off some people. In this instance, the narrator was an older coloured lady. One student took offense to a scene where the character was on her knees cleaning house. She said it was stereotyping and sexist, which was sort of the point. How else was I to flay open the sick body without showcasing reality? Why do some people want to sugar coat truth?

Motif in Writing

In assignment fourteen, Henali Kuit described the interaction between writer and reader as a conversation. Someone once cautioned me to never lie to readers because you are telling them a story, which emphasized Henali's words. She tasked us to write to a motif, to allow the story to converse with itself, which was like writing in layers. I played with the idea of switching narrators to carry one narrative.

'The Metal Bowl' by Miranda July inspired the notion of smoke as a motif. Smoke pestered me for the next two days, until it matured into the idea of smoke and mirrors. I also found some

gems in *The Heinemann Book of South African Short Stories*. Bessie Head's 'The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses' was superbly written. She included brilliant descriptions of scenery that captured bits of beauty experienced by prisoners. She employed a delicate sense of humour throughout, while gently touching on the realities of Apartheid. Alan Paton's 'Life for a Life' was impactful. The frail character of Enoch was juxtaposed to the daunting and menacing Detective Robbertse, who filled a small house with his presence. Paton made it clear that Enoch was respected, while Robbertse enforced his authority. A harrowing tale. I read 'Thoughts in a Train' by Mango Tshabangu. The writer used fear as a motif. I figured, if fear could work as a motif, then so could smoke.

I wrote three stories in one sitting and tied them together using smoke. I called it, 'Like Smoke'. I added multiple layers and three narrators. It was like watching a conversation between three people. By adding a bit of smoke to each piece, it became truth versus untruth, with a slight twist in the final section.

Reading #6

I finished *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler, the father of noir and hard-boiled crime fiction. Much like Macdonald, he spared no time on trivial descriptions or explanations. Both had one focus: drive the narrative. Chandler was merciless in pulling readers deeper into the text by assaulting the senses. No feeling words. Tight writing. Macdonald is marginally more poetic and colourful.

With my crime-writing interests piqued, I read *The Black Dahlia* by James Ellroy. In contrast to MacDonald, Himes and Chandler, Ellroy kneaded in loads of human drama. The others lacked humanistic 'fluff' and needless characterization, but Ellroy took readers to the protagonist. Dreams, fetishes, and psyche laid bare for readers to enjoy. This was more of what I enjoyed writing. I wanted to know why people did things. The point of inception. What influenced them?

Next up: *The Steam Pig* by James McClure. Why have I never heard of McClure? It was superbly written. Bit racist at times, like Flannery O'Connor, but current to the time and the setting. Are we as writers meant to write without considering the reader in this regard? Should we use conflict and animosity to fuel our words? The train has arrived at conundrum central. My reservations aside, *The Steam Pig* was an explosive novel. The writer's description of Durban as a whore and her port serving as the part through which everyone abused her, was spectacular writing. Great characterization, steady pace, and dynamic theme development made it a breeze.

Epistolary Seminar

For our final group seminar and Stacy Hardy's second, we had to write an epistolary. I was apprehensive at first. The closest I'd been to writing letters was for a book idea I'd been toying with for years. The characters, who had been living out their infancy, instantly turned green in

my mind. I asked Stacy if I could use the exercise to give birth to the characters swimming around my brain. She obliged.

I researched Australia and began building my world. The letter was to be the catalytic event, a legal communication, and a personal plea all in one. An ordeal for the writer and a prolific experience for the recipient. Once satisfied, I submitted it. Stacy gave me an amazing response. She saw it for what it was, as did my fellow students. It had paid off.

Reading #7

He Died With His Eyes Open by Derek Raymond was next on my reading list. From 50's American PI powerhouses to gritty 70's England detective novels, trading hard-boiled sensory overload for snapshots of an unavenged victim with a leering look at the criminal psyche. With a nameless, featureless detective on the case, the story unfolds in digestible bits. Raymond takes the reader on a cold and grizzly journey. I'm glad Paul Wessels recommended it.

Thesis Abstract

Our next assignment was a thesis abstract, which served as a formal introduction to our thesis. I was confronted with two problems. Firstly, I had to describe a thesis which I hadn't written yet. Secondly, I had to do it in 150 words. Where to start?

Having spent time with Paul and Nathan, my supervisor, I chiselled out a draft resembling a thesis abstract. I wanted to elaborate more, but I had to trim the words. I wanted to push for a novel, but Nathan advised I set the bar at novella, which could always be expanded on.

The premise, lingering in my mind since inception at Rhodes, revolved around a character who excited me. I wanted to pin him to the page. I researched him, adding meat to bones, layer by layer. Who was he? What moved him? How would he respond to conflict? He had to endure a lot of conflict!

I unpacked my thesis idea, which I titled *Gray*. I've always been a plotter. I had to see it in my mind, like a mental movie. I wanted a modern, tragicomic retelling of 'The Book of Job', wrapped in a crime novella. The more I shone light on it, the more its lustre appealed to me. The character took shape – and therein lied the conundrum. 'The Book of Job' never described Job. I suspect his ambiguity made him relatable.

Long ago I toyed with an idea for a superhero called Grey. Set around glum slums, unicolour skyrisers and rampant crime, Grey would sort out the hood. Grey was to be a flawed hero – neither black in spirit, nor white. Movies like *Unbreakable* and *Hancock* stalled me. I couldn't get Grey out the blocks, no matter how I approached it. The idea lingered, then faltered. Now my thesis character enjoyed a similar namelessness, which resulted in the name. It just fell into place. Nathan said the repurposing of the name showed a sense of creativity.

During lockdown a close family member passed away from cancer. Hoping to dedicate my thesis to her, I began researching cancer. Like a bank robber rolling out a blueprint before a bank heist, the plot unfurled in front of me. I let it marinate, biding my time.

Reading #8

I finally read *The City & the City* by China Mieville. I suspect it could become the most influential reading exercise to date. Mieville, part of the weird fiction movement, employed a multitude of literary devices in unconventional ways to captivate readers. His dialogue was perpetually plagued by ellipses, with characters stopping mid-sentence, where I would never allow them to trail off. Even his punctuation had an erratic quality to it, as though he aimed for uncomfortable reading. I aspired to establish an awkwardness, while operating on multiple layers. The idea of the story is unreal, made real through a convincing narrative.

When the kids took to school, I took to books. After Mieville I turned to *Valis* by Philip K Dick. While well-written and imbued with a spiritual-philosophical richness, I couldn't sink my teeth into it as I had with other novels by Dick. I think it clashed with *The City & the City*. To shed the aftertaste of *Valis*, I tackled *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt. The theme and style of the writing appealed to me. Tartt had a sophisticated, precise and intellectual prose style that was subtle, yet provocative. After Tartt, I read *Devil in a Blue Dress* by Walter Mosley, which brought me back to the American crime genre. Mosley expertly sucked readers into a different setting. His convincing narrative required little description. Characterization was swift, and apt. The protagonist's past served as a literary device of foreshadowing that gained momentum. Action was dealt with briefly. It was fun.

Gray

Between Mosley and *Gray*, I scripted a pilot episode and outline for a local crime TV series I'd been pecking at for two years. It felt cathartic to get it out on paper. During my time at Rhodes, I've spent more time reading and writing than the previous ten years of my life.

I kept returning to the humour component of *Gray*. I didn't want the character's loss or sadness to drown out the satirical part of his journey. In the movie *The Bucket List*, they dealt humorously with the theme of death. After much deliberation, I wrote the outline for *Gray*:

ACT 1

Intro to *Gray*.

Catalytic event – brother dies in shootout.

Mother dies.

Insurance and the insurance investigator.

Sister-in-law suicide.

Wife dies in car chase.

Insurance monies.

Loneliness, sadness, humour.

ACT 2

Gray plots revenge.

Cancer arrives.

The investigator.

Chase scenes and/or action/suspense.

Revenge plans go awry.

Gray discovers human side to baddies.

Empathy for antagonists?

Introspection, what is the point, death is inescapable.

ACT 3

Cancer threat.

Studies baddies.

Create secrets for readers.

Build towards climax and denouement.

Big reveal.

I continued prewriting *Gray*, piling on notes, mental location scouting, etc. I thought an American setting would make it more international but abandoned the idea. The entire story loomed over me like an inverted pyramid, waiting for the nudge. Looking up at it, I sort of saw the whole story upside down; different characters, facets, themes and layers, all revealed in one glimpse.

The excessive reading and writing of the past year had made me more sensitive to writing tools and techniques employed by writers. It felt like looking at a table and seeing the carpenter slaving away at his workbench.

During Zoom meetups it became clear that fellow students had begun writing their theses. Their creativity got me excited. Days later, I set a date to start transferring *Gray* from mind to laptop screen: Monday, 1 March 2021.

I allocated 2 months to finish the novella. 40,000 words spread out across 8 weeks. 5000 words a week. Crunch time.

At Nathan's suggestion, I downloaded a trial version of Scrivener. I've never used writing software. This made it official. I pumped out the introduction to *Gray*. 1000 words. A solid start. I realized that the most important lesson learnt during this course was that a writer should never go into hibernation. I'm a naturally disciplined writer, but I'd become rusty, or lazy.

I submitted the introduction to Nathan. His reply was brutal – and rightly so. He said the parts where I spoke directly to readers were awkward. It sounded like a great idea but backfired on the page. He noted that the opening lacked urgency, pace. Terrible, fantastic news. I'd never received feedback so early into the writing process. Nathan knew exactly where I was heading. It was refreshing to discuss narrative structure without discussing the story itself.

As for setting, Nathan asked this question: 'Which setting do you know better?' A fellow author once told me to 'write what you know.' I suddenly understood this statement. It's not about choosing a familiar setting. It's about persuading readers that the setting was familiar to the narrator. *The City and the City* had a setting that the author couldn't possibly have visited, yet the narrator was comfortable in his surroundings.

I thought about the other novels I had read that year. Their opening paragraphs were all captivating, near perfect. I reworked my introduction, wrote the next two chapters and submitted this to Nathan. To motivate myself, I posted daily progress updates on social media platforms.

As I obtained clarity about my setting, the story became clearer. I tried to write every day, but weekends I was on daddy duty. Before long I was on 15,000 words. I pushed on, rust particles flaking off every time I opened my laptop. On good days, words flowed without end. On terrible days, when daily woes penetrated my thoughts, the flow of words were hindered. Regardless, I persevered and completed my novella in 63 days.

I had chosen a first-person narrative, which I had never attempted before. Mieville and Tartt had used it masterfully in their novels. It seemed fitting for *Gray*. However, something critical went wrong while I was having fun.

My lead character was not a proactive protagonist. He was an unconventional hero with a conventional character arc. He stumbled into chaos by accident and became a witness to his own maladies. He was retelling, rather than enacting, his own tale of woe. His most intimate moments required a degree of absence to attain the satirical view I wanted.

The narrator told the story by means of witness statements, video footage and police reports. Adjectivitus got the better of me. I added fluff to spice the tragic tale of unfortunate events. In the process, he related sensory elements he couldn't possibly have known or experienced. That turned it from first-person to third-person narrative. I had switched narratives! At first it seemed so slight in occurrence, but the more I returned to it, the more glaring the error became.

I panicked.

My concern of the narrative switch was confirmed during our last contact week when students and lecturers shared a mixed view. Some didn't mind the narrative switch, others found it a bit

jarring. Regardless, the two chapters had to have fluency. I had to remove any trace of a third-person narrative.

Then another problem came to light. A sensitive one.

My first two novels contained no swearwords. In writing, I've never felt the need to include swearwords. Not because it impedes my ethics or morals in any way. I simply live with the belief that if it doesn't have merit, I shouldn't say it.

When writing screenplays, I find swearwords a waste of words, a hindrance to plot advancement, and a means of distancing the audience. In the context of storytelling, swearwords felt like telling readers what to feel, instead of showing them. In other words, where an enraged character would swear vehemently, I would rather have him or her flip over a table or slap someone. I aimed to be a writer who turned every word over to validate its presence in the text.

With *Gray* facing off against drug dealers and murderers, the foundation of my argument was challenged. The consensus was that the bad guys were too nice. Obviously, they were not nice, but many wanted them to swear. It was a straight 50/50 split in feedback. There was no way to win over 50% by editing the antagonists' dialogue. I didn't find a solution. What I did find, though, were articles about authors like Lee Childs and Mary Higgins Clark, who have accomplished best-selling status as crime novelists without any trace of profanity in their work. That was worth reflecting on.

Besides the conundrum of cursing, I benefitted immensely from the group engagement. It was amazing to see how my fellow students had progressed from the start of the course. Their works were more focused, more identifiable to their own styles. I sensed a similar improvement in my own writing.

I sat down to finish the pilot episode for my crime drama TV series, but I had *Gray* withdrawal. I froze up for a bit. It was bizarre, but I had experienced this with my other novels. It was as though my brain experienced creativity spasms after a character's departure.

Two days later I finished the pilot episode, got an investor on board to fund the filming of a proof-of-concept video, and prepared to pitch the show to networks.

Editing

The Draft Thesis Reader's Report confirmed many of my own fears and uncertainties. The reader set out to critique the writing based on my Thesis Abstract, which mentioned my interest in delivering work that was *crisp, uncluttered and uncomplicated*.

Editing is the part of the writing process where I can detach myself from the writing and analyse the text with a clear mind. It was time to get to work. I've never evaluated my own writing or editing before, so it was enlightening to track my editing process.

I discussed the Reader's Report with my supervisor. Nathan shared my aspirational view and agreed that the report will serve to improve the final product. The two points that came up were: a) over-writing and b) unlikely scenarios.

The reader gave sufficient examples of sections where I elaborated on something, having already made the point in the previous sentence. I know this bogs down the narrative – and yet it often shows up in my writing. The reader further explains (with examples) how some scenes are 'painstakingly detailed' and that the story would benefit from 'courageous editing'. I love that phrase. The idea of viewing the task of editing as a courageous undertaking appealed to me.

I do feel that over-writing is the one problem area of my writing which has benefitted the most during my time at Rhodes. When looking at my work from five years ago, my writing has tightened up tremendously in the last two years. However, though there has been a marked improvement, it would need continuous effort from my side to perfect. For this exercise, I was committed to apply objective scrutiny to every word when culling through the novella.

With regards to the mentioning of 'unlikely' elements in the story, the reader mentioned the unlikelihood of:

- a) the protagonist losing everyone in quick succession;
- b) the collaboration between the two gang leaders;
- c) obtaining the insurance in a swift manner when estates can take years to wind up;
- d) the way he refrains from calling his mother instead of delivering the news in person;
and
- e) the protagonist remaining unseen behind curtains in the final scenes.

Apart from the first point, all the others had merit to be addressed. I exclude the first one because Nathan and I discussed it at length. He echoed my sentiments that the unlikelihood of Gray's entire family passing away in quick succession, was the one allowable unlikelihood that could remain, because the fact that it is so unbelievable is what drives the narrative. It was the vehicle I chose to use. It was my true North.

To approach the improbability of the collaboration between the two bad guys, I removed all the sections where the two antagonists were in conversation with each other. This had to be made more plausible because it was the glue that kept the story together. Before I began with edits, I put these sections together and went through it repeatedly. The flaws became apparent. I suspect I was so involved with the protagonist, that I overlooked the minor characters and the questions that could form in a reader's mind.

I began working my way through the novella. I had worked incredibly hard to make the first pages impossible to put down. However, from Chapter 3 onwards, tiny blunders hindered the flow of the story.

At times I was trying to build suspense by overusing foreshadowing as a device. The power of my narrative was its surprises, which arrived unannounced, was delivered almost bluntly, and contributed to the satire of the piece. In trying to create suspense, I slowed down the narrative. In removing these bits of foreshadowing, it made the implausible less so because it was not expounded upon. It occurred as abruptly as it did in life.

The concern of switching narrative points of view came to light again, especially where Satí kills herself and again where Brenda dies in the traffic accident. I went through these two scenes with a scalpel and eliminated any narrative concerns by taking the story down to the bone. My explicit intent was to keep the narrative moving forward. When I encountered a pothole, I removed it.

To make the fiction more believable and less unlikely, I weaved in tiny nuggets of information that would substantiate the likelihood of something. I realised that this was something I was good at. For instance, I amended the timeline of events after the deaths of the protagonist's family members. This gave more credibility to the processing of insurance pay-outs. Then I added tiny references to how Gray had structured the estates to expedite the winding up process.

The magic of creating feasibility in fiction writing is important to me. I observed this creative ability in authors I enjoyed reading – and it is something I aspire to. I reworked the reader's report many times and gleaned what I could from it. In editing the novella, I created a rigorous editing schedule around my private life. I put everything on hold and went at it with all seriousness.

In turning every word over, I timed myself at 90 minutes a page. At 55 pages, the editing of my novella ran over 80 hours. I removed around 7500 words and added another 2000 words at strategic points for feasibility. The result was a novella that I was incredibly satisfied with.

The End

My thesis has been submitted. My last conversation with Nathan was a sobering one. I asked him if my thesis was worthy to submit as a publication possibility. He said I must never ask him anything like that again, that I should never doubt my own work. And that culminates my time at Rhodes.

I've considered my current position from many different angles, especially when thinking about how I have been influenced by my studies. What impact has the reading, the research and the writing had on me? Has it changed me? Has it improved my writing? It is something far more than change or improvement. It is reclamation. It feels as though I have reclaimed my identity during this time.

I have no idea where I was going before attempting my master's degree, but I know it was a dark space. A hole from which I would probably never have emerged. What is life without a bit of introspection?

It's the end of the degree, perhaps. But it's the beginning of something else.

I'm a writer. I know that now.

Assignment for Paul Wessels

Poetics Essay by James Fouche

'Stories are not told whole. Stories live and breathe and change with each telling. Stories are shaped, in the moment, by the audience, the setting, the season, the body and voice and memory of the storyteller.' – Craig Santos Perez (2015)

As a child, I always existed in a little nook somewhere. One day, this much younger version of myself was waiting for the school bell to sound, turning his latest weekend find over in his hand. It was a paperback, black design with yellow wording. *The Shining* by Stephen King. Counting off the last minutes, he thumbed through the first pages until he came upon a foreword written by the author. It was like finding a buried skeleton in a play park.

That was the first time I had encountered a writer writing about writing. Though the idea seemed strange to me at the time, I had no idea how often the experience would light up inside my mind. My copy of *The Shining* would later be confiscated by a teacher. I would subsequently face being expelled for reading something which deviated from the curriculum, and which they deemed inappropriate reading for a child. What he wrote about, I am unable to recall. What I felt while taking in the words, was what made it so memorable. Even now, reading essays about the creative writing process by other literary legends, I am taken back to this moment. It is only now that I fully grasp why.

In writing, two writers might have two distinct literary voices, based on their experiences in life or their cultures. Amiri Baraka describes this when drawing the link between writers and musicians:

'An A flat played twice on the same saxophone by two different men does not have to sound the same. If these men have different ideas of what they want this note to do, the note will not sound the same.'

While this is true of music as well as writing, there is a congruence when you read through essays by writers, which were specifically written for other writers. There is a language that lifts off the page, or filters through the screens, and bangs you in the head. Ever so gently, but still hard enough to make you listen. It is a language that almost takes you by the hand and offers to be your guide. This language is familiar to me, simply because it is my own writing language. I wonder if this was what Barbara Guest spoke of when she urged writers to *'respect your private language.'*

I do not just mean that those essays on writing merits attention by writers simply because it would show a mutual respect for the craft (though a smidgen of respect is not completely without worth). No, there is certainly something more to it, something transcendent. Dambudzo Marechera best describes this linguistic link when detailing his experiences as an African student exposed to European languages:

'From early in my life I have viewed literature as a unique universe that has no internal divisions. I do not pigeon-hole it by race or language or nation. It is an ideal cosmos co-existing with this crude one.'

That quote perfectly sums up my thoughts on the matter. By no means do I think writers have a unified voice. There is a multitude of different and fascinating voices, all saying something unique, either in seductive whispers or in expressive screams. However, when you take hold of the guiding hand of which I spoke, you are navigated along a language that serves to bring you clarity about the internal workings of writers.

Adrienne Rich touched briefly on a common language when she wrote the following:

'But most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an "I" can become a "we" without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers.'

Not only is this a moving quote by a great American poet, but I believe it can be applied to prose writing, especially fiction writing. For me, it confirms that there is a language for writers, within which other writers can reach out and help younger writers.

When Marina Tsvetaeva writes that *'the condition of creation is a condition of entrancement,'* something inside you tells you to shut up and listen. It feels like your inside voice is alerting you to wisdom which is being conveyed by one of your own. She continues by writing: *'Something, someone, lodges in you; your hand is the fulfiller not of you but of it. Who is this it? That which through you wants to be.'*

No matter how empty my creative cup would be, writing like that fills me up. It births in me something that is newly inspired and ready to grab hold of pen and paper. Sure, it doesn't seem like much to anyone else, but to most writers it is like taking drugs. Why, though? What about that quote seeps into me and fills me with a desire to write?

I'm of the opinion that the answer lies in that statement: *'The condition of creation is a condition of entrancement'*. It is something that only writers can fully understand. We are creators. We make characters and create scenarios to challenge them.

The concept of birthing characters stems from the fact that *'we are impossible beings, ruthlessly evading scrutiny,'* as Camille Roy words it. Since *'writing grinds itself into what's familiar yet unbearable,'* the writer should first become familiar with the characters in their minds before the application of misfortunes and sufferings, thus enabling them to better detail the journey.

William Carlos Williams best explains this process of creation:

'There the thing was, right in front of me. I could touch it, smell it. It was myself, naked, just as it was, without a lie telling itself to me in its own terms. Oh, I knew it wasn't for the most part giving me anything very profound, but it was giving me terms, basic terms with which I could spell out matters as profound as I cared to think of.'

This makes character creation sound like a type of literary *high* that makes writers want to spike. Maybe it is about the quest to understand different characters to better tell their stories? Just like Brian Evenson, I am *'obsessed with the "thereness" of characters, the way they*

inscribe their paths on the world. My obsessiveness is hardly worthy of addiction, but it is an unhealthy ideal. Perfection in writing feels like an illusion.

Whether this is the case or not, the act of creating characters certainly contributes to the formation of this unique language that only writers, and perhaps other artists as well, can appreciate. This is not meant to be a discriminatory view.

Essays about writing almost corners me and pins me down. It's like it is calling me out and putting me to task, confronting me with the hard work of other writers and expecting me to *man up*. It makes me chase the *duende* that Federico García Lorca spoke of so eloquently.

'In a simple way, in the register that, in my poetic voice, holds neither the gleams of wood, nor the angles of hemlock, nor those sheep that suddenly become knives of irony, I want to see if I can give you a simple lesson on the buried spirit of saddened Spain.'

While the concept of *duende* originated in Spain, it is not inherently Spanish. It fits into my mind as something that any artist can achieve. Lorca's essay inspires me to seek out this *something* that is invisible, something that will only be made visible if I search for it hard enough. The words of his essay lands in a similar way that the words of a grandfather, or a wise influencer of some sort, would fall on the ears of someone who needed it. I almost receive it as a challenge. Did you find your *duende* yet? Why not? Get at it. Spark!

Since there are far fewer writers than most other vocations, it almost makes it a close-knit community. This might be grand speculation, but what if this sense of fewness is the key reason why writing about writing is so treasured? As a writer I receive essays from other writers in sullen awe, excited to apply their wisdom to my writing, yet aware that they have said it so well that I can't imagine my own writing ever being of the same calibre.

One might think that essays on writing sets an impossible standard – and it probably does. But what good would it be if the standard was even remotely obtainable? That would instantly rob your words of any value. You would have achieved that which should have been unachievable. This brings us back to the *duende* again.

It's not always about improving your writing or equipping you as a writer with new skills. Sometimes essays on writing takes on an entirely different shape. I am reminded of a letter by Helen Moffett to aspiring authors. It was not very inspiring. Yet it brings writers into the mindset of an editor, which is a vital component of writing. Take for instance the *12 Theses on Fiction's Present* by RM Berry and JR Di Leo, which casts a light on the future of fiction writing. As a fiction writer these types of essays are invaluable. Without such pieces on writing, there is little sense to go on writing. It makes you want to sit down and ask yourself that dreaded question:

Why do I write?

I think every writer asks this question a couple of times in their life. Well, I have. Often. The question grounds me, gives me a baseline from which to operate. With all the readings we have been doing in the course, this question has come up regularly, a literary conundrum of sorts. While there are more obvious ways to answer it, I like the basic conclusion I always come to.

I write because I have many people inside my mind pulling my strings. They all want to tell a story. They want their tales to be laid bare. I have no idea where they came from or how they got to be there, but no amount of pondering has succeeded in removing them from where they

now sit. Only in telling their stories am I able to lighten the load. In expressing their thoughts, their emotions, and their ambitions, can I fully shed them from the tiny little James hiding under the load. Reading essays by other writers helps me to better do this. It makes me want to tell their stories better.

To me, the writing platform, be it poetry, prose, even journalism, is the place where concerns are voiced and disputes are settled, though it must be conducted creatively. In fact, the more creative the discourse, the more likely is a solution to be found. Again, this is where the wise voices come in as guidance.

This does not empower a writer to spew out their dissatisfaction without recourse. I have long since maintained that writers will be held accountable for their words, a view which has recently been echoed when I read an essay by Brian Evenson:

'I know that my work is scrutinized, that I will be held responsible for what I write. This has caused me to measure each word carefully. It has made me attentive both to the style and the content of what I write, has made writing a serious task to me, and has helped me realize that my commitment to writing, for good or ill, is greater than most of my other commitments in life.'

Before committing to do my master's degree, I had never heard of Evenson. Reading his words, a wave of simpatico came over me. His essays are extremely personal and open, a style that can be dangerous as a writer. It's as if he invites you into his life and shows you some of his blunders in a cautionary way. Not only can I relate to this, but I appreciate the fact that he shows himself openly, and still warns that writers can be held accountable for what they put on paper. I have put my foot in my mouth, or my pen in my arse, many times before and was always prepared to face the music. Even today, posting the simplest thing on Facebook, can be misinterpreted and you can be taken out. Evenson's wise words just renews my caution when expressing myself. Do it creatively and know that you can be held accountable.

So how do you bring concerns alive in the writing world? Is there a right way? Best thing would be to read pieces by the authors you value, those who voiced their concerns and fears in a way that appeals to you. In their essays, in their explanation of their writing styles, you will find the answer.

Recently, I have read some books by Chester Himes. He was an expert at showcasing social issues in a crafty manner. He was showing the world what things bothered him in society, while entertaining everyone with the story. I would read his words and think that there was a grain of truth in what he was saying. It was subtle enough to bring the point across. It's not necessary to hit someone with a hammer to get their attention. At the same time, I came upon an essay from bell hooks that reminded me to always stick to that which I wanted to say, but not to slap on too much extra bits, especially if the context touches on something that is beyond your scope of usual writing or deal with a subject matter that could enjoy extreme scrutiny. She advised that *'writers working in nonrevolutionary context must be careful not to appropriate narratives of struggle in ways that reduce them to colourful spectacle.'*

Writers need words like these. Yes, it is important not to make light of an issue that might be an incredible burden to someone from a different walk of life. Yes, you should do research and make sure you portray each side of a matter. Writers are aware of these hurdles, yet we often need to hear it from someone far wiser than us. If you have something to say, then bring it to

life creatively, not so much that it becomes a colourful spectacle, but just enough to dish it up for those who need to take it in. Though it's practically impossible to do it as concise as Himes, I have gathered it is best to keep things as brief as possible.

Essays on writing gives me direction, and purpose. It is easy for me to deviate from what is required. I am aware of this. Best to understand your shortcomings and to make peace with them. Reading essays like the ones I've been reading since attending Rhodes University, are the types of essays that I need to get me back on track. It's like taking the reins and steering the horse again. My life and all the different facets thereof have become muddled. I frequently tell my wife that my antennae sometimes get bent, and then my reception is all messed up. At these times, I need creative input to generate creative output. By creative input, I am talking about pieces on writing, not criticism.

I have learned to open myself to critique and to give feedback the weight it deserves, depending on the source from which it came. However, though I can take critique, I still struggle to dish it out. It feels like I am not yet worthy to dish out harsh feedback when it is needed. Who am I to mete out my views of those who are far more accomplished than I? Whether this flaw stems from an insecurity or an endurance of countless failures in life, is irrelevant.

Failure, much like success and death, will come to your door. Getting proper motivation to overcome those times, is not easy. During the national lockdown, I was at my lowest low. I had been working at something and it kept failing. No matter how hard I tried, the thing just always came undone. I employed different styles and writing techniques to better say what I wanted to say, and it kept bombing out. In one of the readings, we read an essay by Ann Lauterbach. I had read it the week before but somehow the genius hidden within it had purposely eluded me, as though I had not yet been ready to receive it. She said the following:

'The risk, the peril involved is that you may not make it across the suspension; the experiment may fail, but a willingness to risk failure, to make mistakes, seems essential to turning promises into facts. To risk failure, one needs a sense of unfettered play, the play that would allow a failure to become useful for the next attempt, that would, in a sense, recycle the disaster.'

This pierced so perfectly that it floored me. I'm sure there have been times where I have inadvertently given similar motivation to other writers. Though, it might not have been quite so perfectly worded. But I needed these words at that given time. I had to embrace a failure to appreciate the entirety of the task. And Ann Lauterbach's words had to bring me to that point of acceptance. I had been so snowed under by surface dust that I couldn't reach any deeper. The harder I worked at it, the more it dwindled off into something obscure. It wasn't until someone came along and told me that it was alright to fail, permitting you learned something from the experience, that I came out of the fog. I deleted the entire project and started anew – and was better for it. Nothing beats a clean word document with a flashing cursor.

My thoughts on writing about writing, and the reading thereof, is mostly limited to the ways in which it affects me personally. I am aware of the greater reach it might have in literary spheres, but as a writer I must unravel the thing inside myself first. The lasting effect is always a positive one, though at the point of inception, not all things gleam instantaneously. Whatever I take in, usually requires some form of meditation and intense consideration. The words had to marinate and take shape in me.

Perez, Craig Santos. 'Excerpt from "Unincorporated poetic territories"' in *The Force of What's Possible: Writers on Accessibility & the Avant-Garde*. Lily Hoang and Joshua Marie Wilkinson, eds. Nightboat Books, 2015.

Baraka, Amiri. 'Expressive Language' Accessed online:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69473/expressive-language>

Guest, Barbara. 'The Beautiful Voyage' in *Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing*. Kelsey St. Press, 2015.

Marechera, Dambudzo. 'Beneath reality there is always fantasy' in Flora Veit-Wild, and Ernst Schade, eds. *Dumbudzo Marechera (1952–1987): Pictures, Poems, Prose, Tributes*. Baobab Books, 1988.

Rich, Adrienne. 'Someone is writing a poem'. Accessed online:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69530/someone-is-writing-a-poem>

Tsvetaeva, Marina. Extract from 'Art in the Light of Conscience' in *Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry*. Trans. Angela Livingston. Bloodaxe Books, 2010.

Roy, Camille. 'Experimentalism' in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*. Gail Scott, et al. eds. Coach House Books, 2004.

Williams, William Carlos. 'Projective Verse + The practice' in *The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of their Art*. Reginald Gibbons, ed. University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Lorca, Federico García. 'Theory and Function of the Duende'. Accessed online:
<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.php>

Berry, R.M. 'Introduction: Writing in the Present' in *Forms at War: FC2 1999–2009*. R. M. Berry, ed. Fiction Collective Two, 2009.

Evenson, Brian. 'Afterword' in *Altmann's Tongue: Stories and a Novella*. University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

Hooks, bell. 'Narratives of Struggle' in *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*. Philomena Mariani, ed. Bay Press, 1991.

Lauterbach, Ann. 'Use This Word in a Sentence: "Experimental"' in Ann Lauterbach, *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*. Viking, 2005.

Book Reviews

“A cold love story that can’t melt ice”

Ice by Anna Kavan.

Peter Owen Publishers. 1967. 158 pages.

Ice by Anna Kavan is a love story that side-steps all the usual fluff of romance novels. Not only is it set during an apocalypse, but Kavan also fills every chapter with the presence of an impending ice shelf that is slowly drowning out civilisation and freezing over the earth.

The lovestruck protagonist pursues a frail woman with such passion that it nearly chokes the reader in the process. Besides the ever-present ice, his indecision and confusion seem to always keep the love of his life, completely out of his life. Things are further complicated with the arrival of the Warden, who lays claim on the protagonist’s love interest, so turning an already uncomfortable relationship into a lover’s triangle.

From the first paragraph, the reader is transported to a cold world that is so real and yet completely alienating. At times, I was swooped away to barren, ice-filled landscapes where terror resided. Other times, I was running after a mysterious and impossible lover who pained to get away from me. As the reader, immersed in a plotless narrative, the lover is impossible to please, while being impossible to let go.

This is where the elusive genius of the author resides. It has long been speculated whether the story is about an addict’s struggle with drugs, or whether it is science fiction of the highest order. Kavan, a heroin addict and depression sufferer for most of her adult life, died months after the release of *Ice*, thereby leaving readers to contemplate endlessly about what her intentions might have been.

I found it to be an unusual love story that often goes where it is not expected to go. If Kavan set out to write a novel that would be unique or wrote it that way by accident, does nothing to the end product.

She used colour and confusion very cleverly throughout by jumping from scene to scene at seemingly erratic points. The reader enters the scene late and leaves the scene early, which is a great literary device and works exquisitely in a post-apocalyptic drama. As soon as things begin to look rosy, she shifts the tale to keep the reader pinned under her thumb. This makes the journey real and engaging, which is why *Ice* is a fascinating book worth reading.

“The chase is on in Harlem ... again”

Cotton Comes to Harlem by Chester Himes.

Muller (UK). 1965. 159 pages.

The electric personas and thrilling adventures of Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones, captivate readers yet again in *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. As before, Chester Himes sets us off on a chase with no end in sight.

In this instalment, the crime fighting duo face off against Harlem's most notorious criminals. Everything starts at a Back-to-Africa rally, where folks give money to a preacher to buy their ticket to Africa. A quick heist robs investors of their money. The quick-witted cops work their way through dead bodies, bits of cotton, a blind eyewitness, seductive women and cruel criminals to track down the money and the mastermind to the heist.

Only Himes can put together haphazard plot points and pull them all together in the end as though he was waiting for the final paragraph to come to him. His words are slick, the descriptions are doubly as smooth, the characters memorable and the locations dusted with grit. Though not quite as memorable and demanding as *A Rage in Harlem*, this is still another great Harlem caper from a crime-writing legend.

“Macdonald hits true noir form in *The Underground Man*”

The Underground Man by Ross Macdonald.

Penguin (UK). 2012. 320 pages.

Ross Macdonald pushes readers as far as the noir genre can in this clever tale of family secrets, intrigue and murder.

In typical Macdonald form, the story starts with a tiny piece of string. Lew Archer, private eye extraordinaire, wakes up to the sound of birds outside his window, goes down to the communal yard and feeds the birds, where a child joins him. Before long, an arguing father and mother arrive and the disgruntled father leaves with the boy. Hours later, when a fire threatens to envelop the area where the father had taken the boy, the mother comes to Archer and acquires his services to return her son.

From here, Macdonald simply pulls on the string and documents what the narrator sees, hears, feels and uncovers. Before long Archer finds himself knee-deep in several plots which can go either way, which heightens the tension and creates a sense of urgency for the reader.

It's almost unfair that the writer makes writing look this easy. The story seems to flow without any effort, as a shooter would tick off cans with a pistol without even aiming at them. The reality is of course that the author worked very hard and turned every word over twice, which makes it even more exceptional. The plot had to have been worked and reworked, while character descriptions had to have been worded carefully to quickly introduce them. Chapters are sprinkled with memorable phrases that stick with readers for years after reading it. This makes *The Underground Man* an entertaining and uncomplicated read.

“A tale of two cities – and the murder binding them together”

The City and the City by China Mieville.

Macmillan. 2009. 312 pages.

Detective Inspector Tyador Borlú leads the investigation into the death of a young woman in this unconventional crime rollercoaster. What starts off as a typical whodunnit murder mystery in the city of Beszel, quickly takes on the elements of the bizarre when Borlú discovers that the victim was a resident of the city of Ul Qoma.

Beszel and Ul Qoma are described as two East European cities that coexist in the way that conjoined twins would occupy the same body. These two cities share the same geographical location, but only insofar as borders permit them to share that same space. The left side of a street might belong to Beszel, while the right side of the street might belong to Ul Qoma. The only way to cross over from one city into the other, is through a stringent immigration process. From a young age, citizens of both cities are taught to ‘unsee’ the other cities and to turn a blind eye to what is happening in the conjoining jurisdiction.

While there are signs of the two cities warring with one another in the past, they seem to have struck a happy medium. This peace consisted of clearly defined borders, immigration control, local policing, and a secret cross-border agency known as Breach, who steps in when borders are challenged and makes sure that the perpetrators disappear.

The concept of the two cities intensifies the intrigue of the plot when Borlú is forced to investigate the murder in both cities at the same time. He must pass through border control every time it is required for him to pursue a lead to another city.

The two cities are divided amongst themselves, not just by means of factions, but by the ever-present, yet invisible, Breach. Who lurks in the shadows where the borders of Beszel and Ul Qoma converge. Almost creating a third city that belongs exclusively to the agents who police the borders and enforces compliance of both cities. As Borlú is drawn into a complex investigation that challenges the borders of the cities, so readers are forced to follow blindly until the story reaches an explosive climax.

Miéville has established himself as the master of weird fiction, a modern writing style that challenges conventional narratives. Weird fiction writers often employ unusual protagonists, who face off against unusual antagonists in unusual settings.

In the majestic realms of conventional fiction writing, writers create convincing stories that keep readers glued until the last page by carefully weighing up every word before setting them free in the text. While enjoying more freedom than conventional fiction, weird fiction faces many more challenges, which Miéville expertly overcomes.

The art of world building can be a stumbling block to many authors. Constructing a feasible world that does not exist, takes planning in the writing process to not confuse readers. However, creating two conjoined cities, where friend and foe could touch each other in the street if it was not for the criminality of sight, but must first pass immigration services to ‘see’ each other, is an entirely different level of creativity.

Miéville constantly keeps the narrative moving forward, occasionally sprinkling just enough confusion to complement the mystery behind the initial crime. *The City and the City* was strategically compiled that the timing of every revelation feels intended, and that made it an electric reading experience.