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**Part A:** Thesis (Creative Work)

**Part B:** Portfolio

**NINE STORIES**

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## SOPHIE'S REVENGE

### I

I loved Sophie and would have trusted her with anyone except my boyfriend. That's just how it was with her. Put Sophie and a boy – any boy – together, and you had the burning fuse of a dangerous hormonal bomb. And because everyone knew that about her, that's exactly what we counted on.

It happened like this, years ago...

We're at the pub down the road – *The Beaver Lodge Bar* – and Rodney walks in with a friend of his who neither Sophie nor I had met before. I hadn't seen Rodney for a week or two after we had a bust up over his always wanting me to do the anal thing which I think is gross.

Anyway, in comes Rodney – who by the way, I still have feelings for, despite his weird ideas about sex – and this other guy who looks like Justin Bieber, only older and nicer. In other words he's got a pretty face and a tight little bum. Sophie sees them about the same time I do and next thing, she turns away and quickly tugs down her top to show even more of her overly visible cleavage. Then she's all, hi Rodney and leans forward for a double air kiss and a hug. Listen, when Sophie does hugs with the guys she does full body hugs, making contact all the way up and down, but mostly in the middle where it counts the most.

So Rodney's wide open for the hug and a peep at her breasts – like, what's new? I smile at the new guy, and Rodney – when he manages to drag his eyes up and away from Sophie's chest – goes, hello girls this is Steve. I hate it when he does the hello girls bit – it always sounds so condescending, and stuff him anyway, I'm not a girl. I'm a twenty-four year-old woman.

So, I'm already pissed off and even more so because do you think he even bothers to introduce Sophie and me to the Steve guy? Not a chance! So I go, hi Steve I'm Rose and this is my friend Sophie, it's nice to meet you – which is what everyone on the planet says when they meet someone for the first time. Isn't it? But even that's not good enough for Sophie who's already lining up the new guy for one of her patently obvious invitational hugs. She goes, hi Steve, I love that name and oh man you've got the sexiest mouth, and I bet your tongue's just as cute.

I kid you not. That's Sophie for you.

The Steve guy has probably heard it all before because he just offers a killer grin and says, hi ladies.

That's better – at least he doesn't call us girls!

Anyway, none of that worries Sophie who's already thrown herself at the guy and is busy moulding her body into his. She doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry and neither does he. So they both get a good sense of what's happening behind the thin layers of denim and cotton that separate them.

Rodney's all smiles and gives me a wink, like I'm meant to know what that's all about. He probably thinks it's a good bet that Sophie and Steve will hit it off, leaving room for him to have another go at me. Well that's not on my shopping list – not a chance. I've had it with Rodney, and yes, like I said, I still have feelings for him but I know that I can do better for myself. He has to get over his weird ideas before I'll even go out on a coffee date with him again. I mean, the anal stuff is bad enough but he's also got this thing about wanting to have animals in the room while we're doing it. He's got these two pugs, small little squashed-face dogs that he's trained to bang each other while he's banging me – on the bed, like all four of us at once, the two dogs doggy-styling each other while he's doggy-styling me. He says it helps to keep him hard. I told him that if he needs a dog to keep him hard he needs to see a shrink or join a circus. When he figures out a way to make things happen without the dogs around then maybe we can talk again. Until then, I'm freestyling.

Sophie and Steve have unglued themselves from each other and Steve's offering to buy drinks, which is okay by me. Sophie asks for something with gin in – actually, anything with gin in – and I ask for a beer, but a light one. Steve goes off to arrange drinks and Sophie's immediately like, where's he come from, does he have a girlfriend, to Rodney – who hardly has enough time to explain that Steve's an old school friend of his who's just moved back to town – when the Steve dude reappears with the drinks.

Rodney finds us a table and I'm careful to position myself across from him with Sophie on my left and Steve on my right. I don't want Rodney's hands on my legs or him whispering whacky ideas into my ear, which is very likely what's on his mind as I receive yet another wink from him. Actually, if it wasn't because I was there with Sophie and she being seemingly taken by the prospect of getting laid by Steve, I would have turned down any suggestion of having a drink with Rodney.

Sophie gives me a funny look which I interpret to mean, why are you sitting next to the Steve guy and not allowing me in there? But I don't respond and anyway I'm thinking I might like to find out a little more about him myself. So we settle into our nook and the drinks go down fast and Rodney's next up to get another round.

I'm trying to get a conversation started with Steve while Sophie's rearranging herself and fiddling with her bra like she usually does after a few drinks. I get the impression that Steve's happy with the seating arrangements and is okay sitting next to me. I mean, it's not like he's gaping at Sophie's bra tugging stunt or even noticing what she's doing. The guy doesn't talk much but at least he keeps his eyes on me while I'm talking to him.

Rodney comes back with drinks and two more friends. It's Ronnie and Val who we all know except Steve who actually stands up when Rodney introduces them to him. I'm like really impressed. I mean, who does that anymore? So it seems like I'm talking to a gentleman and that's not a bad thing. Rodney stays standing to talk to Ronnie and Val while I focus on getting to know more about the Steve dude. Sophie's got the sulks. I know because I see that she's given up on the bra-balancing antics and is just sitting there with nobody to talk to.

Next thing I know, all at once Sophie's shouting, oh shit, oh shit I'm so sorry!... and I've got her newly replenished drink knocked into my lap. It's the oldest trick in the book and Sophie's a pro. She's all, I'm sorry Rosie, I'm so sorry... and I'm really pissed off, but also dripping pink gin and tonic and so I have no choice but to head off to the rest room to do

some damage control. I do that as fast as I can because I know what's going down. Sophie's going to move in on Steve the second I'm through the bathroom door.

I'm one hundred percent right but I'm not fast enough.

I get back to the table to find the two of them gone and that Ronnie and Val have also drifted away. All I'm left with is Rodney the delinquent dog imitator. He looks a bit coy and says that Sophie and Steve have taken off together and that Sophie says not to wait for her and she'll see me in the morning and sorry again about the spilled drink. Oh yes, and that she feels terrible about it, and hopes that I've forgiven her. That's typical of my friend and flat-mate – Sophie the double-crossing, double-talking bitch that she is. I don't know why I love her so much.

Anyway, so clearly Rodney sees this as the big opportunity to get back into my panties. Yeah, sure they're damp, but not for the reasons that he'd like to believe. It's the gin, damn it! He asks me to sit down next to him and offers to get me yet another drink. And then the idiot winks, again!

I've had enough. I tell him, Rodney you can't be fucking serious, or too clever, because as far as I know you still have the two pugs lined up on your bed waiting for you to tell them that it's show time, and I thought that I made it clear a week ago that I didn't want to be part of that circus, nor did I want you trying to stick your stupid dick in the place I reserve for a basic toilet function.

I'm really pissed off about everything and so I tell him to take his drink and his miserable little cock and go arse-fuck his dogs and leave me alone. Then I walk out and head home to the flat that I share with Sophie, who shouldn't be my best friend – for about a million reasons I can think of before I even reach my front door.

Of course she doesn't come home that night which is what I expected but then she doesn't come home the next day or the next night and I start to get worried.

By Thursday morning I'm really worried. Sophie's phone is off, she hasn't made contact and I haven't seen her since the gin and tonic incident at the *Beaver*. I phone Rodney and ask him if he's seen or heard from her and I can hear he's a bit miffed with me but he says no, she's probably having a whale of a time with Steve and I should lighten up a bit and get more adventurous and maybe I'd also get to have a whale of a time instead of... I interrupt him right there and ask if he's seen Steve and he says no, but that's probably because he's having a whale of a time with Sophie and... I put the phone down. And then I phone back to ask if he's got Steve's number or does he know where Steve lives and he goes no to both of those and that's the end of the call and now I don't know what to do.

The next day when I still haven't heard from Sophie I call Rodney again and tell him that I'm really worried and please will he realise that there's something wrong because no way would Sophie stay away for three days without making contact. I ask him to think about it and would he please do his best to locate this Steve dude so that we can figure out what's going on. He seems to get a sense of the urgency by my tone and says he'll ask around.

By that afternoon I think that I'd better get hold of Sophie's parents and let them know that she's missing or something. Oh fuck! What a shit-storm that sets off! Next thing I know, her parents are in the flat screaming at me why didn't I contact them earlier? And why did I let Sophie out of my sight at the bar? And who's this Steve guy and what's Rodney's phone number and where does he live? And, and, and...

Then the police get involved and we're all interviewed and Rodney's interviewed and so are Ronnie and Val and the owner of *The Beaver Lodge Bar* and all sorts of other people who were around at the time and who might know this Steve guy and where he lives. There're lots of questions for Rodney who doesn't take long to admit that he doesn't know Steve at all and that he'd met him outside the bar that night and they got chatting about the scene. Steve had wanted to know where was a good place to meet girls and Rodney said to him right here, and then said to Steve I'll tell you what, I'll introduce you to some chicks I know and ease the way in by telling them that you're an old school friend.

Well, that at least diverts Sophie's parent's anger away from me, refocussing it squarely on Rodney who, I then realise, is an even bigger idiot than I'd ever thought he was. I'm so angry with him I lose my shit for a moment and start screaming at him right there in the police station and would have hit him with the coffee mug I happen to be holding, if I'd not been restrained by two officers. The fuck-wit! Can you believe the man's stupidity? And arrogance!

That's how it all happened.

## II

As the days and weeks dragged by it became increasingly obvious that the police were not making any progress in finding either Sophie or this Steve, who by now it was assumed, wasn't a Steve at all. The police reckoned that wasn't his real name, and the fact that it took them almost a month to figure that out, sent Sophie's parents into a renewed bout of shock and anger. I managed to stay out of their way and was kept up to date with the investigation by one of the two detectives assigned to the case. Detective Aiden Daniels was decent enough to not keep any false hopes alive, confirming that precedent had shown that the longer a case such as this went on, the less likely it was that there would be a happy ending.

I preferred that level of honesty to the overly optimistic sentiments of Daniels's partner, Detective Iris Osbourne, who kept telling me that a breakthrough was imminent. As time wore on I simply made contact with Daniels every week or so to find out what, if any, progress had been made. The answer to that question was always the same and I began to really loose hope.

We all deal with grief in our own private way. In my case, the grief that I felt about Sophie's unexplained disappearance grew into a realisation that in all probability I would never see her again. Not knowing for certain was harder than allowing myself to finally accept that this was the case and so, without any hope remaining, I began the long process of mourning the loss of my closest friend. At the same time I tried to deal with my own sense of responsibility and guilt.

I suppose one grows up a little in the presence of such a loss. *The Beaver Lodge Bar* no longer held the same attractions that it had previously done. Hooking up with friends over a glass of wine or a beer and meeting new guys just didn't excite me anymore. After Sophie's parents eventually removed her belongings from our flat, I rearranged things to make it more comfortable for one – me. I preferred to stay at home with a good book rather than hang out with friends. I didn't feel any need to find a replacement flat mate, so I didn't. And needless to say, by then I had cut all ties with the anally obsessed Rodney.

Months passed and the pain of the loss of Sophie slowly subsided.

Years passed and I moved into a new flat closer to town and closer to where I'd recently found work at an award-winning advertising studio. The work was great, allowing me an outlet for my creativity as a graphic designer that was unrestricted by the overly corporative governance that generally rules the workplace. In fact the studio was renowned for a progressive working environment that allowed employees to dictate their own working hours. And they had their own gym and in-house restaurant. The studio was housed in a renovated warehouse in an area of the city that had been targeted for regeneration. The district's vibe was tangible. It had a youthful, energetic feel to it and had attracted an eclectic array of small businesses, artists' studios, coffee shops and bars.

Shortly after starting work there, I attended a function arranged by the studio to acknowledge its clients – a regular event that allowed the studio team to interact socially with the people who kept us in business. It was at this function that I met Geoff, two years older than me, but already a director of a company that had a successful business model that explored the commercial deployment of drones as small scale delivery vehicles. Geoff was the financial director and his company was a new client of ours. He and I hit it off immediately and after a few dinner dates and social outings, we cemented our relationship as a couple. He's a great guy, kind, caring and considerate. And he rocks in the bedroom – horny as hell, but patient and slow!

More years have passed and Geoff and I have been married for three of those. We now live in a small but comfortable home in the suburbs and I am pregnant with our first child. Life is good. I'm no longer working and Geoff's company is literally flying. Life has treated me well. I still think of Sophie from time to time, but I always use her memory to remind myself of the great times we shared. The investigation into her disappearance all those years ago never went anywhere beyond the confines of a detective's small office. All of the interviews with so many people led nowhere. The mystery of the guy called Steve was never solved. No trace of him was ever found and the file on Sophie's disappearance, although probably still open, is probably gathering more dust as I write this.

Perhaps I shouldn't, but I feel compelled to write this account all the way to the end, both for reasons of completeness, and to finally exorcise the ghosts that still linger. Sophie's disappearance changed us all – all of us who knew her. My own change was from a free-spirited, somewhat reckless young woman, to a more conservative, responsible and slightly introverted adult. And most of that change was carefully orchestrated, because I know what happened to Sophie

I helped her plan her own disappearance. And afterwards, I felt genuinely remorseful for the pain that it caused others – not for her parents, but for her circle of friends. I knew, but I couldn't say anything. Not only was I sworn to secrecy, but I also felt blackmailed into keeping quiet – although I would never have said anything anyway. My remorsefulness, uncertainty and confusion were misinterpreted by those who investigated her disappearance. They all thought that my sadness and changed way of being was indicative of the deep pain that I felt at the unexplained disappearance of my best friend. But things were not as they seemed. I played my part – in fact, was deeply instrumental – in the disappearance of Sophie.

Perhaps I should go back to the beginning.

## III

I met Sophie at Art School. My parents had helped to establish me in a two-bedroom flat nearby, and I advertised for a flat-mate on the School notice board – one of the many first year students to have done so. Sophie's was the first application I received and she and I gelled at our first meeting. We were similar in stature, both physically attractive – although she was a lot bustier than me – and we quickly established that we had a similar outlook on our impending lives as students. We worked hard, played hard and met as many boys as possible without getting entangled in the messy grip of romantic love.

We set up home and soon became the closest of friends. We went everywhere together and had no secrets from each other. We were both capable students and had no problem getting through the three year academic programme. We partied hard and built a reputation for being fun-loving, easy-going girls. But we were also known as a twosome who had each other's backs and that if you messed with one of us, you messed with both.

The partying continued after we graduated as we both found jobs with the same employer where we sharpened our teeth on the world of work. Times were great. We were earning enough money to keep us comfortably housed in our flat with more than enough left over to pay for our regular forays into the bars and clubs that were local to the area.

Sophie's home life as a kid had been horrendous. She was an only child who, from a young age, had suffered the sickeningly inappropriate attentions of her father. What the slime-ball did was to slowly, ever so slowly, groom his young daughter to accept the gentle but out-of-bounds advances of her own parent.

It began innocently enough, Sophie told me. Her father was just a sweet adoring parent who loved his daughter so much that he couldn't leave her alone. What started out as a simple but perhaps excessive display of parental love insidiously morphed into something completely different. The slow evolution of his attentions allowed her father to draw Sophie into his web of perversion. He was so patient and so crafty that by the time she reached her early teens, much of what her father was busy doing to her felt strangely normal.

It was only in high school that Sophie realised that her father's adoring behaviour was far from normal. She began to resist his advances, but he was a forceful man and generally had his way with her. She tried turning to her mother for help but her attempts in this direction were shrugged off as nonsense. Her mother ascribed her daughter's plea for help to a typically imaginative young girl's emergence into womanhood. Her mother told her to be more appreciative of her parent's love for her and to stop her exaggerated and hurtful stories.

Many were the nights that Sophie and I chose to stay at home to talk about our lives, our dreams and our fears. It was during these evenings of hot chocolate indulgences – in our onesies, on the sofa in front of the TV – that Sophie began to share the stories of her father's abuse of her. I was horrified. Unskilled at dealing with matters of this kind, all that I could offer was to be the supportive, listening friend that Sophie seemed to want me to be.

Slowly however, Sophie started talk about payback. I was intrigued, initially thinking of it as a theoretical exercise, but soon came to realise that she was deadly serious. I became a co-conspirator. As we expanded on our plans to exact revenge on her parents, it became

apparent that Sophie wanted their suffering to continue for as long as they lived. And she wanted this as badly for her mother as she did for her father. In her mind, and by then undoubtedly in my own mind, we saw her parents as two parts of the same disgusting equation. As much as Sophie's father had been the initiator and the perpetrator of the abuse that she had endured as a child, so had her mother allowed it to continue by turning her back on her daughter's cries for help.

Sophie's anger and her desire for a justice that she would consider appropriate was enough to fuel both our imaginations.

In time a plan formed.

I found it hard to imagine life without Sophie, but it soon became clear that the only way that she felt she could punish her parents sufficiently, and enduringly, would be if she staged her own disappearance. Even more effective would be if this disappearance was linked to the uncertainty around what would ultimately be accepted as her death at the hands of an abductor. Although her parents' casual obscenities may have suggested that they would not be affected, Sophie trusted that the uncertainty around her disappearance would unhinge them. And that was exactly what she wanted, because that was exactly what they deserved. I had to agree that if we could stage such an elaborate ruse, it would undoubtedly have the desired effect. Just how we were going to pull it off remained a difficult conundrum to solve.

Sophie's patience was admirable. She knew that she would only have one shot at getting it right so she went about her initial preparations stealthily and quietly. I had almost forgotten that we'd talked about actually going ahead with the plan because for months Sophie said nothing more about it. Then, one evening at home in the flat, she showed me a new passport with her photograph in it and a name that she carefully concealed from me. She told me that a friend of a friend of a friend knew someone who could produce such a document, properly authenticated and properly registered with the Department of Home Affairs – in essence, a validated alternative identity. She wouldn't show me the name because she said that the less I knew the easier it would be for me to play my part when the time was right. I said okay, I got that.

The new identity, said Sophie, was the first step in making reality of our plan.

Then things began to speed up. Sophie was suddenly anxious to get this done and to start a new life somewhere else. Where exactly that would be, she also wouldn't tell me for the same reason that I wasn't told what her new name would be. She had decided that she wanted her parents to start their suffering sooner rather than later. As it was, since she'd left home, her father was forever phoning her and sending messages for her to come home for a weekend because he and her mom missed her so much.

Our plans started to come together when Sophie joined the local amateur dramatic society where she befriended a young guy by the name of Jason. Sophie told me about him and also explained what his part in the plan was to be. But she wouldn't let me meet him and she wouldn't expand on the timeline that she had in mind, keeping me always slightly unsure of when the actual plan would be put into operation.

A few months after making his acquaintance, Sophie convinced Jason to agree to play a trick on Rodney and me. That's how she sold it to him.

He was to carefully disguise himself in such a way that his new 'character' could not be later traced back to him. Then, on a prearranged evening, he would show up at *The Beaver*

*Lodge Bar* where he would engineer a meeting with Rodney, and allow himself to be introduced to Sophie and me, hinting to Rodney that he would assist by distracting Sophie so as to open the way for Rodney to have another go at bedding me. It was elaborate, but not difficult to execute. Jason used his talents and the resources of the dramatic society to create Steve. Rodney was easy enough to befriend and was quick to share his ambitions for reconciliation with me with his new friend. Steve would have told Rodney that all he had to do was make the introductions and he'd keep Sophie occupied, opening the path for Rodney to make a move on me.

Sophie and I knew that suckering Rodney would be easy. He was so eager to reignite our relationship that he would fall for just about any scam that involved the possibility of getting me back into the sack. Jason was superb at creating the believable Steve. His natural abilities as an actor allowed him to easily convince Rodney of his enthusiasm as a co-conspirator. Sophie's plan worked perfectly and her improvisation with the gin and tonic when I deliberately caused her to be sitting opposite Steve, and not next to him, was sublime. It added a twist of authenticity to the whole piece.

Sophie and I had already said our good-byes to each other and had rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed my part in the aftermath of her disappearance. I didn't know what Jason looked like in real life and I was mesmerised by his dashing good looks on the evening of his sudden appearance. In fact, I wasn't even sure that this was the real Jason. Initially I thought that Sophie had staged this as a double bluff practice round, so I was keen to get to know Steve a little better, just in case he really was Steve. That's why I engineered the seating so as to be alongside him, which also – unintentionally – worked to add an authentic tone to the evening.

As it happened, the ruse was executed flawlessly and Sophie disappeared out of our lives – just like that.

When I returned to the flat that evening I wasn't at all surprised to find that Sophie was not there and nor was I surprised when she didn't appear the following day or the next. I played my part as rehearsed, notifying her parents after the agreed lapse of time. Everything else played out after that exactly how we imagined it would. The investigation was bogged down by no useful leads – either in finding Steve or finding Sophie. Sophie's parents were distraught, exactly as envisioned by her. I saw them on a few occasions during the initial weeks of the investigation and their pain was obvious.

I remember feeling emboldened and proud to have been part of Sophie's plan and wished that I could have had the opportunity to somehow get a message to her that her parents, disgusting fuckers that they were, were deeply traumatised by the disappearance of their darling, only child. After all, that was the whole intention. But that wasn't possible, as I had no way of contacting Sophie.

Over the years that followed I made a point of visiting her parents at least once a year, taking them cookies or flowers and sitting with them for a while over a cup of tea. That was also part of the plan. I was always happy to leave their modest home reassured that their pain had not lessened in the intervening months.

But, before I get too far ahead of myself in the recounting of this story, I need to go back once more to the evening of Sophie's disappearance.

## IV

The day after that evening two rather disturbing things happened.

The first was the arrival of a small parcel in my post box. I gathered from the date stamp that it had been posted two days before the fateful evening at *The Beaver Lodge Bar*. What had me very excited was the realisation that the parcel was addressed to me in Sophie's familiar handwriting. I couldn't wait to open it, imagining that this would provide the missing elements to a plan that I had been more than partly privy to. I was sure that Sophie had now, as an act of gratitude, entrusted me with all the parts previously unknown to me – where she had gone to, how she would support herself, her new name and so on. But instead, I was both disappointed and dismayed at what the parcel contained.

In it were nothing more than a short note and a flash drive.

The note said this:

*Dear Rosie,*

*You have been an amazing friend and I will love you forever. The flash drive is a small token of my appreciation for all that you have done for me. I stole it from Rodney and I can assure you with a 100% certainty that other than a copy that I have kept for myself and the one in your hands right now, no others exist. I know that you will always keep to the plan. For this you have my eternal gratitude.*

*Love you always,  
Sophie.*

Naturally, I couldn't wait to see what was on the flash drive and so plugged it in and opened the one file that it contained – a video labelled, *Riding Rose*. I should have guessed from the title – and that the video had been stolen from Rodney – what it was that I was about to see.

I hit the play button.

The video, which must have been secretly filmed by Rodney, featured me crouched on his bed naked, my tits swinging lustily, while he hammers away at me from behind. Of course the two pugs were also in the frame and banging away in unison with their master. Then, in a tumble of dogs and naked flesh the pugs are pushed to one side and I am flipped over and around so that the camera angle gets pointed at my cunt and arse. Rodney then gets to work on me and within a few seconds we're both squawking and moaning before everything gets really messy.

I was beside myself with horror and embarrassment, wondering just when the fucking dickhead filmed this, figuring it must have been early on in our relationship before I got annoyed with his irritating habits and sexual deviances. And it was without a doubt filmed without my consent. I was as mad as a snake and ready to confront Rodney the jerk-wad there and then. Then I calmed down and thought about it.

The one person in this world that I felt I could absolutely trust was Sophie. Her note had said that this was one of only two copies of the video. She said this with 100% certainty.

I believed her – I had no choice. It wouldn't help at all to confront Rodney. But Sophie also said that she had the other copy. I reread her note and concluded that by sticking to the plan I would be assured that the video would ever go public. It didn't say as much, but I got the picture. Fucking bitch! Lovable, fucking bitch friend!

The other disturbing thing that happened on the day after the evening of Sophie and Steve's disappearance caused me even greater concern than the video – much greater concern.

I was glancing through the morning paper and saw a short report tucked away on the third page, on the unfortunate fatal accident suffered by a local young man, an amateur actor by the name of Jason Roberts. I went cold as I read the article. Late the previous night, Jason had apparently been about to catch the last train leaving the central station, on his way home after a night out – it was believed – when he apparently slipped onto the tracks of the oncoming train and had been instantly killed. The only witnesses to the incident, a slightly drunk couple who'd been snogging in a dark corner of the almost deserted station, said they'd heard a shout and then a ghastly silence and nothing else.

I absorbed this information with shock and a sense of deep, deep concern. I didn't want to overthink what I'd just read, but I allowed myself to sit there just for a while, trying to understand how this could have happened. I hoped that the conclusion drawn by those who'd investigated the incident and had decided that it was an accident, was accurate. In fact, I told myself, their assessment should be reassuring, but I couldn't help but wonder where Sophie had been when the accident occurred. I wanted to think no more about that and so went about the business of sticking to the plan that we'd agreed upon.

The rest is history, as every good conspirator will tell you.

Well, almost history. There are just a few more loose ends to tie up. My part in the plan to help Sophie heap pain on the lives of her miserable parents – after the initial trauma and investigations had passed – was to visit them at least once a year, ostensibly to alleviate their suffering. In truth, my role was to help maintain their suffering, by being the constant reminder of the daughter that they had lost.

The plan worked well and although they always welcomed me – having overcome their initial anger at me – my annual visits to them served to keep open the wounds that they suffered. My pledge to Sophie and my continued adherence to the plan were fuelled by the horror of what her parents had done to her.

Even without the veiled threat of Rodney's sex tape, I would have continued to uphold my side of our agreement.

That agreement had one final aspect to it. All those years ago, Sophie and I had decided that the only communication that we would have with each other would be in the event of her parents' deaths. We agreed that when the first of them died I would place a short obituary in the death notice column of a certain newspaper. The obituary would simply state the name of the parent who had died and the cause and date of death.

Three years ago, when Sophie's mother died after a flurry of debilitating strokes, I placed the death notice and waited, hoping that I would hear something from my old friend. But I heard nothing and received no sign or signal that the notice had been observed by her. I

was disappointed, having imagined that this would be the time when she would re-establish contact with me.

Then last week Sophie's father died.

I had recently seen him, not more than two months prior to his death. He had suffered a slow and agonising decline in health over the past two years as cancer slowly ate away at his organs. His struggles had been exacerbated by the unusually slow spreading of the cancer through his body and even more so by a rare immunity to pain killers. The doctors had tried various concoctions and were baffled by his body's resistance to all forms of pain blockers.

When I did see him two months ago, he had been in excruciating agony and had cried helplessly throughout the short time that I spent in his company. I didn't take him any cookies on this visit, although I did take flowers. He seemed barely to notice these. He had no difficulty recognising me as he'd always associated me with his lost daughter and started crying immediately upon my arrival at his hospital bedside. He repeated Sophie's name over and over between bouts of agonised sobbing and kept on asking for her forgiveness. I left him in the satisfying knowledge that I had all but fulfilled my obligations to the plan that I had agreed upon with Sophie all those many years before.

As I left, I felt certain that I'd never see the bastard again.

On learning of his death, I immediately sent an obituary to the newspaper, and waited for Geoff to come home from work so that we could share a celebratory drink to the finalisation of a long and sad ordeal. I was quite sure that this would be the end of it. I had done all that I'd promised to do. Between us, Sophie and I had ensured that her parents suffered greatly in the remaining years of their lives after the disappearance and assumed death of their daughter. From the outset, when I told him of the pact that I had with my old friend, Geoff had been supportive. He did think that our plan – and particularly my unflinching adherence to it – was a little over the top, but then he'd never seen the sex tape that Sophie had sent me. That had been destroyed – along with the note that accompanied it – within seconds of my removing the flash drive from my laptop. I'd never revealed that part of the story to Geoff.

But all of that seemed so inconsequential now. My adherence to the plan was never driven by any fear that Sophie would actually distribute or make public that ghastly sex tape. My own anger at how my best friend had been abused by her parents was enough to keep me tied to the decade-old plan. But it was over now. Sophie's communications to me had ended with the arrival of the parcel containing the note and the flash drive many years previously. I didn't expect to ever hear from her again.

But I was wrong.

The next day I received a registered letter and I recognised the handwriting on the envelope immediately. I sat in my car outside the Post Office from where I'd just collected the letter before carefully opening it. It read as follows:

*Dear Rosie,*

*I read the obituary in last week's paper announcing my father's death, and of course, the one before that, years ago, when my mother died.*

*You have been a true and solid friend and I can't thank you enough for sticking to the plan. I truly despised my parents and feel no remorse for the course of action that we embarked on. Their suffering as adults came nowhere close to the suffering that I was subjected to as a child.*

*I have only two regrets. The first is that I persuaded you to become involved in an act of revenge that had nothing to do with you. But your willingness to do so felt so much like the love that I had always longed for and so I thank you again for that.*

*My other regret is that I told you that I had a copy of the naughty video that Rodney made of you and him cavorting with the dogs. God! We had some wild times, didn't we? Anyway, I never made a copy for myself and so the only one in existence is the one I sent you. I was so scared that you might spill the beans to the police. I should have trusted you more than that. I hope that you can forgive me.*

*My life has turned out for the best and I know yours has as well. I'm married to a wonderful man who knows nothing of what we did. Neither of us wanted children, so our lives are filled with the selfish pleasure of spending almost all our time in each other's company. We are very happy.*

*This is the last time that I will write to you and we will never meet again. My reappearance after all these years would cause us both harm and so, as a final request to you, I'd ask that you destroy this letter and never speak of it to anyone. I'm sure you'll understand why this is so important.*

*Good bye for the last time my dearest friend and thank you for helping me to achieve the life that I wanted for myself – one without parents.*

*All my love,  
Sophie*

There was no return address.

I sat in my car and wondered about Sophie. Where was she? How did she know my address, and that I was happily married? But mostly, I wondered about the accident that had claimed the life of a young actor named Jason on the night of Sophie's disappearance.

## A CONSPIRACY OF ANIMALS

The three men who worked the farm with my father had all been there for years, since when my grandfather was still alive. They knew just about everything there was to know about animals. But the one thing they never learnt was that the animals – including the chickens – were thinking animals, just like us, or even smarter. That's what I learnt.

Reuben looked after the pigs, mucking out the pigpens every now and then, and making sure that they were fed and had clean water to drink. Why it had to be clean, he didn't know, he'd often say, reasoning that most of the time they stood in the water-trough on their shit-caked trotters whether they were drinking from it or not. Godfrey looked after the chickens, always trying out new grain mixes to plump them up in record time so that they could be slaughtered sooner rather than later. Henry followed the sheep around from one pasture to the next, making sure they didn't get lost or stuck in a bush. He was a deft hand at slaughtering. He'd whip a sharp blade across the animal's throat, holding the wide-eyed lamb steady while bleeding it out and then hoisting it head-down onto the hooks. To skin it, he'd push his fist in between the layer of skin that separated the animal's wool-covered dermis and the rest of its body before opening the bare carcass to release its warm entrails into a large baked enamel dish.

The sixty-hectare farm had been in our family since it was established by my great grandfather almost a hundred years ago. I would represent the fourth generation to farm this land, when I took over one day – as my father was always proud to tell anyone who cared to listen. But he made no secret of the fact that I had much to learn. He kept me busy, expecting the same degree of commitment from me as he did from the three seasoned workers. They were all much the same age as him and their experience would always be greater than mine, he would often remind me.

The animals we raised were all destined for the dinner table. We had an arrangement with the local farmers' co-operative to deliver, on a regular basis, chickens, lambs and pigs, all slaughtered, gutted and cleaned. When they left the farm they were ready for the wholesalers whose demand for fresh meat never waned. The toughest work on the farm involved the slaughter and preparation of the animal carcasses because it meant carrying a lot of dead weight around. That's what my grandfather used to say when he wanted people to know that he had a witty way with words.

He had introduced a rotational system whereby animals were selected for slaughter the day before the killing took place. This allowed them enough time to void their guts and to get used to the idea of being separated from their kin. He'd say that it gave them time 'to make peace with themselves', a comment that the three farm hands had latched onto, often referring to the separated animals as the 'peace corps', but preferring to pronounce 'corps' as 'corpse'. They'd learnt their mildly irritating humour from my grandfather, who held that 'animals were God's way of showing his disdain for vegetarians.' The workmen thought that

this clever remark, a standard of his, confirmed their assessment of him as a man of enormous wit and wisdom.

I wasn't so sure. As much as I loved the farming way of life and working with the animals, I never got used to the idea of killing them. Fortunately, I managed to keep this thought to myself. Had I not done so, my father would never have considered me as a worthy successor. So I spent my time observing and learning, but all the while also secretly forming a vision of what could be.

The slaughtering of animals was a regular and well-coordinated event. Starting early on the morning after selection day, the animals were quickly and efficiently dispatched, then gutted and cleaned, refrigerated and delivered to the co-operative as fresh as can be, the very next day, or two days later at most.

Every Monday pigs were selected for slaughter on Tuesday. On Wednesday chickens were gathered for slaughter on Thursday and on Friday, lambs, and sometimes sheep, were rounded up for slaughter on Saturday. On Mondays and Fridays the walk-in refrigerators were cleared of carcasses and the meat was driven to town in our old Nissan refrigerated truck to be weighed and registered against the farm's account. Some days we drove more carcasses into town, and some days less. But the farming operation was set up in such a way that there were always animals ready to meet the blade or bullet, so we hardly ever missed a delivery.

On slaughter days, we all pitched in. Godfrey and Henry would help Reuben with the slaughter and cleaning of pigs, Reuben and Henry would help Godfrey with the slaughter of chickens and Reuben and Godfrey would help Henry with the slaughter of lambs and sheep. My father did the driving of the refrigerated truck because he wanted to confirm that the proper carcass weights were credited to the farm's account by the farmers' co-operative. I helped out wherever I was needed and so I became proficient at just about everything, from raising and caring for the animals to feeding them, selecting them for slaughter, slaughtering, cleaning and hanging the carcasses in the refrigeration room, and loading them onto the refrigerated truck for delivery.

Sunday was a day of rest. No work was done on the farm unless absolutely necessary, because that's how it had always been. Sunday lunch roasts – alternating between chicken, lamb and pork – were a family tradition. My mother and sister, both of whom spent most of their time in the kitchen, loved cooking. Sunday lunches were my mother's favourite meal to prepare. She insisted that the eating of meat on a Sunday was done to honour the animals that provided our family with the good living that we enjoyed. She said that the animals we ate would have preferred to be eaten by those who had raised them, rather than by someone who had no respect for the sacrifice that they had made.

When I once rashly told her that I thought that they may have preferred not to be eaten at all, I was told to mind my manners and to be grateful for what I was given. My father said nothing at the time, but the following day while Reuben was selecting pigs for Tuesday's slaughtering, he took me aside and told me that if I wanted to follow in his footsteps I'd have to learn how to fit into his shoes. Meat was our bread and butter, he added, and I should never forget that. The metaphor seemed odd to me and despite the fleeting image of a ham sandwich, which I wisely kept to myself, I got the message and chose to act respectfully, accepting the chastisement as a young know-nothing boy should.

I loved the farm and wanted nothing more than to take over from my father when he retired. I had nothing against eating meat, but I thought that our farming methods were archaic. I had set as my secret goal, a complete overhaul of the operation by introducing modern farming practices. I also wanted to change the farm's direction away from an animal-based slaughtering enterprise to something more humane.

The three workmen had adopted practices and ways of dealing with the animals that I found quite worrying. My father, who had idolised my grandfather, was not much better and had adopted his own father's methods without question. Worse though, was his unwavering acceptance of the habits employed by his three long-serving workmen. As long as they deferred to him they were allowed to do as they wanted. By this I do not mean that they shirked their duties. I could not argue with their loyalty and hard work, but I did find unpleasant their obvious disdain for the animals. My father was simply satisfied that the job was being done and didn't care much at all about how it was being done.

All three of the farm workmen, Reuben, Godfrey and Henry, had over the years developed a palpable hardness about them, so that it was quite apparent that none of them had the slightest sense of respect for the animals. Initially I thought that this may have had to do with the great length of time that each of them had spent on the farm, doing much the same work, year in and year out. But their hardness appeared to have nothing to do with the numbing of sentiment that one might expect of people too long in the same job. Instead, they seemed to take a special joy from that part of their work that resulted in the death of the animals that they were responsible for. I eventually ascribed their callousness to an unspoken resentment towards the animals who I felt they believed were somehow responsible for the rather ordinary and monotonous lives that they were doomed to endure.

They certainly had no reason to resent either my father or my grandfather. The latter had built each of the three men a small cottage in which to live on the farm – so each had lived in a house provided for them for almost thirty years. Every week they each received a whole, slaughtered chicken, continuing a tradition initiated by my grandfather. In the same manner, they shared between the three of them a slaughtered pig or lamb, or sheep, given to them annually at Christmas. They were paid more than the going rate for experienced farm hands and they were not required to pay for the water or electricity that was supplied to their cottages. I never saw or heard any suggestion that any of them were unhappy with the treatment that they had received from my family. Their attentions were focussed fully on the farm and I concluded that their dedication to it – at the expense of enjoying a greater richness of life – was out of gratitude to my grandfather, whom they revered.

I was curious as to why all three of them had remained single. My father explained that they had all chosen to do so because in their youth all three had made enough mistakes with women to put them off romantic attachments for life. They had chosen rather to marry into our family by devoting their lives to the farm.

But that somewhat cynical story didn't adequately explain their odd temperaments and their marked contempt for the animals in their charge. Growing up, I'd asked my father many times as to why he thought they were so brash and uncaring and why it didn't worry him. His response to these queries was usually terse – reminding me that I had much to learn and that there was no place for sentiment if one was to farm successfully. He'd also use the opportunity to remind me that the sooner I learned to emulate the dedication displayed by

Godfrey, Henry and Reuben, the sooner I'd be in a position to carry on the proud tradition of our family's farming heritage.

So I spent my youth doing everything I could to prove that I was a worthy and willing successor. I used every opportunity to devote time and energy to learning and implementing all of what was required to be a successful farmer. I was a weekly boarder at a school no more than thirty kilometres away and so I spent every weekend of my childhood on the farm, cleaning pigsties, feeding chickens, herding sheep and rescuing lambs – and reluctantly learning the craft of slaughter. My school holidays were devoted to these pursuits and over time I won the acceptance of my father, who finally came to realise that I would be a solid replacement when he was ready to retire.

The three workmen appeared to be similarly encouraged by my desire to learn, provided I didn't question their methods. They tried hard to dissuade me at times as they were not short of ideas on how to initiate me into the messier aspects of animal husbandry. But I took it all on without complaint, eager to show them that I was more than capable of doing the work that they had already mastered.

As a young man I spent many hours carefully studying the ways of the animals, learning their habits and quirks. It slowly dawned on me that our chickens – the hens mostly – had adapted their social instincts to form a matriarchy that protected certain among them from being slaughtered. For the most part this was just a matter of delaying the inevitable, but I became intrigued by the way they conducted themselves on Wednesdays – the day of selection. I began to observe them with a deepening interest. In time, I noticed how some of the older birds would gather together – intentionally, it seemed – to nudge and push the younger birds forward, towards the arms of Godfrey, whose sole objective was to catch those chickens which he could most easily latch onto as he sought to fill the quota for the following day's slaughter.

More intriguing than that was the discovery that the chickens communicated with each other in a way that appeared to be human-like. It took me a while to recognise that their regular clucking and deliberate movements were reminiscent of a highly refined mob dynamic. I discovered by listening carefully to their audible interactions with each other, and by observing their associated physical positioning, that there were distinct patterns to their movements and utterances. Further study of these phenomena resulted in the startling realisation that I was able to register in some indeterminate way, the actual meaning of what they wished to convey.

I don't mean to imply that they talked to each other – of course not. But what I did learn by concentrating very carefully was that their interactions could be interpreted by my brain in a way that made them understandable. So for instance, I could hear, behind the natural sounds that they made, the calling of hens to each other to gather around in order to make less of a target of themselves, while forcing one of the weaker hens into Godfrey's orbit of capture. By concentrating on these concealed messages, I soon realised that much of what was being transmitted between the hens centred on the primary instincts of food, surviving the slaughter, and a collective disgust of their executioner.

I began to wonder if the same subliminal messaging occurred among the pigs and the sheep. Sure enough, the pigs had a similar strategy when it came to the selection of who would be slaughtered and who would survive another week. Their jostling and attempts to

hide behind each other when Reuben made his selection on a Monday was characterised by pig utterances and behaviours similar to those that I'd witnessed among the chickens. And indeed, their background muttering and snorting translated itself in my head as an understanding of their shared revulsion of Reuben, their arguments over food, and plotting the staged selection of those pigs not in favour with the pigpen leadership.

I wasn't too surprised to discover that the sheep had the same ability. It was a little more difficult to confirm this because they generally roamed about independently and without the same regularity of communication. However, after studying them for a few weeks – sensing and listening to what transpired between them – I came to realise that they too harboured feelings of great hatred for Henry and that other than surviving selection day, their primary concern was to enjoy the pastures in which they roamed, as they bleated the discovery of fresh food sources to each other.

I was amazed by these discoveries and, as was the norm with anything related to my learning about farm life, I foolishly asked my father if he was aware of the animals' abilities. I told him that I was certain that the sheep, chickens and pigs were able to communicate, not only with each other, but also in some barely describable way with humans. My father's response should have been predictable. He laughed dismissively and told me quite emphatically that my childlike stupidity was an indicator to him that I may not be suited to the business of raising animals for slaughter. I reflected on his curt rebuttal and realised that it contained a message that I would be wise to act on – to keep my foolish observations about animal communications to myself.

Staying true to my own counsel, I never again spoke to him or anyone else about my ability to understand the animals, or more specifically, to interpret their sounds and noises as spoken words. I avoided asking Henry, Godfrey or Reuben if they knew anything of what I'd discovered because I realised that if they had known they would surely have said something to either my father or me by now. And also, I didn't want to suffer any more humiliation by them if they thought, like my father, that I was not fit to farm.

Over the following months, I learnt that if I concentrated carefully, I was able to send my own thoughts back to the animals and that they in turn would translate these into their own understanding. This was confirmed by the nod of a head, or by way of eye contact, or by a deliberate movement towards me – all indicative that we had established communication by way of telepathic means.

At the heart of our communication were the three issues that had existed since the very beginning of our ability to understand each other. These were: an insatiable desire for food, the survival tactics of the stronger and more organised of the animals, and the deepening hatred that was felt for Reuben, Godfrey and Henry.

Then one day, while sitting quietly in the chicken shed watching the birds on the day after slaughter selection – when the mood was always a little lighter – a few of them who I recognised as the matriarchal elite, about twelve or so, approached me with a silent proposition. The word in the shed was – I sensed them saying – that I was a decent young man who was secretly opposed to the weekly slaughtering of animals and that if I could put a stop to it, I would. I thought about this for a while and could see that the hens knew that I was doing so. They continued with thoughts of their own and I soon realised that they had an idea that they wished to share.

It went something like this. If Godfrey was to leave his job permanently, and were his two colleagues to do the same, and were all of this to happen in a sufficiently dramatic fashion, it might alter my father's feelings about the continuation of the farm as it currently existed. Were this to happen, he may be tempted to give it all up and pass the farm onto me, and then I would be at liberty to change direction.

It was all very speculative, but was certainly worth thinking about.

If this outcome could be plotted and achieved – the birds patterned into my thinking – then they would undertake, on behalf of all the other birds, to ensure a steady and profitable supply of fresh farm eggs. If the slaughtering stopped, they would guarantee in exchange, eggs aplenty! One other thought I infused from their quiet communication, was that I should seek the guidance of the wisest pigs and the sheep elders. The hen contingent was certain that I'd hear a similar proposition were I to gauge their thinking on the matter.

Sure enough, a few days later on a Wednesday, when the pigs were at their calmest, I spent some time sitting atop the pigpen wall watching them as they grunted and squealed their way through buckets of spoiled vegetables, stalks and grains. Eventually, two of the older sows and a handsome older male ambled over and looked up at me through their piercingly blue-grey eyes. After a while their thoughts found their way into my consciousness and vice versa. Soon we had a robust conversation going, filtered backwards and forwards through the ether of pig and human connectivity.

The pigs' thinking was similar to that of the chickens. Their proposal however centred on the provision of a steady stream of live piglets to the market, ensuring the preservation of life for the farm pig population. We would need some gender balancing to ensure optimal breeding conditions, but generally the feeling was that selling live piglets rather than dead friends and family members was an altogether more desirable scenario for the future. The pigs also intimated that they considered it vital to the success of the plan if their tormentor, Reuben, were to be decisively disposed of. It would be important, they transmitted, that the episode in the farm's history that would change its economic model, should be such that my father would wish to retire immediately.

Not surprisingly, a few days later, as I strolled through the pasture then currently occupied by our flock of sheep, I was similarly apprised of their vision for the future. They stressed the importance of the dramatic exit of Henry, in the belief that my father would then willingly and eagerly surrender the farm to me. The sheep offered their wool as an alternative to their meat, pointing out the sustainability of this product. Their rationale, not unlike those of the pigs and the chickens, provided me with a compelling impetus for a change in the farm's strategic objectives.

I realised then, that the communication that I had recently become aware of among the three unrelated groups was not limited to them in isolation, but that they were also able to communicate with each other in the same way that they were able to communicate with me. How else could their thinking be so well-aligned? This was an exciting development and I was sorry to not be able to share it with anyone.

During the weeks that followed, my engagement with the chickens, the pigs and the sheep, took on an urgency that I could not have foreseen. At every moment during the day, irrespective of which of the three I was visiting, I was immediately caught up in deep and urgent thought. The animals were understandably anxious to move things forward as the

weekly selection of animals for slaughter continued unabated. I became a little frantic myself, wishing for the carnage to end and hoping that there would be sufficient survivors with whom to cement a new relationship that would ensure the ethical and morally strong foundation of a rejuvenated farm.

Eventually we agreed on a course of action and the timeframe in which to complete our essential transformative work.

We chose a week which was a traditionally quiet one as far as the slaughter routine was concerned, thereby minimising the number of animals who would be converted into meat for the very last time on the farm. The Christmas and New Year rush was over and demand had fallen sharply, as it always did during January.

On the Wednesday of the last week of that month, Godfrey selected a handful of younger chickens for slaughter. As usual, the selected birds were temporarily housed in a separate cage in the larger chicken shed. The other birds bid their farewells in unobtrusive groupings. I watched as all of this took place, thankful that this would be the last of the many years of chicken killings on what would soon be my farm. I couldn't stop the few tears that welled up as I too said goodbye and thought-thanked the selected birds. I felt that it was important to show my gratitude for their sacrifice.

On Thursday morning, Godfrey got to work on the birds. Removing them individually from the holding cage, he held each one down in turn and deftly sliced off their heads with a long-bladed knife that had been his tool of choice for years. He told me once that he had estimated that in his career on the farm this lethal blade had taken off the heads of at least ten thousand birds, if not more. He was very proud of that.

Each bird, as its head was sliced from its neck, was dropped into a large steel container mounted on wheels which, once the slaughtering was complete, would be wheeled over to the preparation area where the birds would be plucked, gutted and dressed for the refrigerator. Before that though, each freshly beheaded bird would stumble and wobble about on the floor of the container, tripping over the bodies of those that had already come to rest, before finally collapsing into the bloodied heap.

Godfrey loved that part, telling me repeatedly throughout my youth, how the headless staggering birds made him laugh.

But then everything changed.

Later that same day, just as my mother was serving dinner, Reuben and Henry came running across the yard in front of our house shouting and calling for my father in a voice of terrifying unity and incomprehension. Once my father had calmed them down and was able to understand what they were saying it was revealed that they had come across Godfrey in the chicken shed where he had apparently tripped over a feeding trough and fallen badly. So badly it seemed that he was dead. They surmised that he had been cleaning his knife at the time and in falling had somehow managed to bury its razor-sharp blade deep in his own throat, severing a carotid artery and almost his head. Godfrey was dead, they wailed, and was lying in a pool of his own blood. The two men broke down in unison and then added that the chickens, dozens of them, had surrounded the body and were pecking furiously at it, some even standing on Godfrey's corpse, pecking at his eyes and his tongue and at the gaping wound that had been his throat.

My mother was stunned into silence. My sister cried in shaky little gasps, making noises that sounded as if her own throat had been punctured. My father's face was drained of its colour, but he appeared for the most part to be composed and ready to take charge of the situation. He told me to call for an ambulance and to say that it was an emergency. We couldn't be sure that Godfrey was dead until a medical team had pronounced him to be so. He told my mother to pour herself a stiff whiskey and he told my sister to calm down as her snivelling and snorting wouldn't help anyone. He then told Reuben and Henry to follow him to the chicken shed.

The ambulance didn't take too long to arrive. By then my father and the two workmen had returned from their investigation and had joined my mother in making short work of the bottle of whiskey. I made a cup of coffee for my sister whose crying had thankfully faded to a whimper. The medical team quickly confirmed that Godfrey was stone dead. They also concluded that he had tripped and fallen awkwardly onto his own knife and that his death was clearly an unfortunate accident. They had covered his body with a blanket so that the chickens would not be able to continue pecking at his remains. They also logged a call to the police who needed to confirm the findings of death by misadventure. This didn't take too long either and shortly before midnight, the mortician's van removed Godfrey's body from the farm after the police had given them the go-ahead to do so.

My father asked me to take over the running of the chicken shed for now, saying that we wouldn't need to slaughter for a week or two which would allow him sufficient time to decide what to do next regarding the birds and their breeding and feeding programmes.

An unusual quietness fell over the farm. The animals themselves came across as being a little shocked by the events of that Wednesday evening and not much was said about it, as far as I could gather. Certainly the animal frequencies that I had increasingly become attuned to were largely hushed. It all had the feeling of anticipation. I kept this thought to myself as my father and his two remaining workers went about maintaining an air of stoicism in the face of Godfrey's tragic passing.

Reuben was the next to go.

As usual he selected one unfortunate pig on the Monday following the events of the previous Wednesday. This last pig to face slaughter on the farm was hurried out of the large pigpen and temporarily housed in a smaller adjacent one. This had been the method for years. On Tuesday morning Reuben, as was his custom, arrived at the pigpen with a .303 rifle that had belonged to my grandfather and given to Reuben when my grandfather retired.

Positioning himself in full view of the pigs housed in the large pigpen, he steadied his arm against the wall separating it from the smaller pen and took aim at the single pig selected for that week's slaughter. Reuben waited until the pig turned to look directly at him and then shot it between the eyes.

I was in the chicken shed at the time and heard the shot go off from there.

I'd watched Reuben carry out his work before and had once asked him what it felt like to shoot an animal as large as a pig at such close range. He said that it didn't bother him at all and that in fact, he rather enjoyed it. He'd explained that he liked to wait until the pig turned to make eye contact with him – the way they always do – before pulling the trigger. That way, he said, the pig would know, in its final moments, that it was about to die. He told me that it felt good to have that amount of power over a dumb animal and that he never missed. I

could go measure the wound if I wanted to – he guaranteed that I would find that it was dead centre between the eyes.

This was all before I started communicating with the animals, but even then I thought that it was monumentally arrogant of Reuben to describe the slaughter of the animal in such righteous self-congratulatory terms. I later learnt from the pigs themselves that the shooting of their friends and family in such close proximity to where the week's survivors dwelt, was harrowing. But they also signalled to me that the reason why each pig looked Reuben squarely in the eye when facing his rifle was their way of showing contempt for his savagery.

As usual, that Tuesday's pig was then hoisted onto a pair of large hooks to have its belly opened and its innards removed. All of these internal organs were meticulously cleaned and stored away in the overnight refrigerator. Not much was wasted and the organs would eventually find their way into a variety of spicy sausages and exotic dishes that my mother and sister lovingly made using old family recipes. The carcass itself was then lowered from the hooks and scrubbed with boiling water and a wire brush to remove all of the animal's hair and the first few layers of cracked, flaky skin. The cleaned animal was then rehung in the walk-in refrigerator pending its delivery to the farmer's co-operative.

By all accounts, Reuben finished his slaughtering and carcass work by mid-morning on Tuesday and then busied himself with other work in the area of the pigpen. Shortly after lunch, Henry came over to the chicken shed to ask me if I'd seen Reuben. I said that I hadn't seen him since earlier that morning when I'd observed him walking towards the pigpen with his rifle. I joined Henry and we walked over to the refrigerator room to find it neat and tidy and smelling faintly of freshly slaughtered pig. Next we walked over to the pigpen where we confirmed that the pigs had been recently fed as they were all busying themselves in amongst the fruit and vegetable material that formed the basis of their diet.

We were just about to turn away when Henry noticed that the gate to the slaughtering pen was ajar and beyond it, just visible from where we stood, was a booted leg, which we both immediately recognised as Reuben's. We dashed across the main pigpen to find Reuben lying on his back, his head bent away from his neck at an odd angle. His shirt had ridden up above his belt-line exposing what had once been his flabby tummy, around which now stood three large pigs each with their snouts buried in Reuben's hollowed out gut. As one, the animals looked up with blood-soaked snouts and I immediately recognised the two older sows and the large male with whom I'd recently formed an association. Henry let out a wild scream and promptly fainted, sliding face first into the muddied and bloodied ground of the slaughter pen.

If Godfrey's death had only slightly shaken up my father, then Reuben's death had the effect of multiplying that small reverberation a hundredfold. I saw the man literally age in front of my eyes. For a change, my mother took control, encouraging and reassuring my father that we would find a way to continue with the farm. He had all but given up. My sister had heart palpitations, or so she said.

The cruel coincidence of two accidental deaths in the space of a week weighed heavily upon us all. Naturally there was an investigation, the result of which confirmed that Reuben had lost his balance while carrying out his duties. It turned out that he had just finished hosing down the slaughter pen after the morning kill and must have slipped while distributing food to the remaining animals. It appeared from the thick smear of blood on the

wall separating the small pen from the larger one that he had lost his balance and had cracked his head hard against the stone wall on the way down. He had fallen badly and the whiplash effect of his falling body, counteracted by the hard knock to his head, had caused his neck to snap on making contact with the ground. It seemed likely that he had died almost immediately, and almost certainly before the pigs entered the enclosure and begun to eat their way into his soft belly.

Understandably – given the coincidence of Godfrey’s death a week earlier – we were all questioned at length by the police who treated us with great respect and compassion. Henry had fortunately not done himself any harm on fainting. And because of his long association with his two recently departed colleagues, the police were particularly gentle with him as they listened to his recollection of events. But the real victim of the whole sad affair was my father who was made suddenly old and tired after the sudden death of two of his trusted workers. I gently suggested that he hand over more responsibilities to me and he was clearly relieved to do so.

Following Reuben’s death we all decided that slaughtering activities would be suspended for the immediate future and that we would spend some time re-evaluating the farm’s viability and its way forward. I worked hard to show that I was ready to take on even more responsibility and I sensed in my father his relief that I was eager to continue the farm’s proud family tradition. Soon enough I began to take charge, making small changes here and there, testing my father’s resolve to not change course from the multi-generational approach that he had held onto. But he had been weakened by the startling loss of two of his three workers, and had little fight left in him.

I began to suggest and implement changes that would have been unimaginable a month earlier. My father had hardly anything to offer by way of any counter-suggestions. He seemed merely grateful that I was exhibiting a genuine appetite for the added authority that I had now assumed, albeit with my own approach. My mother offered to assist in additional administrative duties and any other work that didn’t take her too far away from the precinct of the family home. My sister said that she wanted to leave the farm and attend a fashion design school. She said that she hated farm life and couldn’t understand how anyone would want to live in a place as dirty, dull and dangerous as this.

My father, who usually had an answer for everything, said nothing.

If the death of Godfrey and Reuben signalled the beginning of the end of my father’s will to carry on farming, then Henry’s death drove him completely over the hill of no return.

On the Saturday after Reuben died, only nine days after Godfrey died, Henry took a walk through the pastures that housed our small flock of sheep, saying that he would head out along the boundary fence to look for holes and for any sheep that might have used these to cross onto our neighbour’s land.

We only noticed on Sunday that Henry was not around. Although Sundays were rest days, we would always bump into one another at some time during the day. It was rare to not see anyone at all. My father, subdued by the recent tragedies, went looking for Henry and walked down the road to his house, now bleak and lonely next to the two identical houses that had until recently housed Henry’s two old friends and work colleagues. But Henry was nowhere to be found. We all assured each other that there was no need to be alarmed and that he had probably taken a walk back into the fields where he spent much of his time, probably

to have some private moments to himself. My father asked me to take a walk into the pastures to make sure that he was all right. I did as asked and found Henry not too far away.

He was dead.

It seemed obvious what had happened. Henry had tried to climb through a fence and had become entangled in some loose strands of wire. He must have panicked and in doing so become more entangled. More entanglement led to greater panic and ultimately to his death. When I found him the wire was twisted tightly around his neck and had cut deeply into his flesh. His body had taken on the stiffness of one that had gasped its last strangled breath a day earlier.

After interview upon interview with my father, my mother, my wimpy sister and me, the conclusion of those who investigated this tragedy was that it was, coincidentally, yet another death by misadventure, just like the two that had preceded it.

My father was shattered. The fierce spirit that had driven him to achieve the farming successes of the past left him as abruptly as his trusted workers had done. There was no discussion about the future. I made it quite clear through word and deed that I was ready to take over the ownership and running of the farm and to do it my way. My father was equally ready to surrender full control to me. He and my mother retired to a small coastal town where the memories of his life as a farmer slowly receded. He bought himself a small boat and spent his days quietly angling in the sheltered cove above which the town lay. When not baking or cooking, my mother fussed over him, helping to keep at bay the ghosts of his farming life. My sister left for the city where she enrolled as a fashion design student at a trendy academy. I was left with the remaining farm animals, a reasonable bank balance and the freedom to steer a new course for my farming future.

My first step in rebuilding the business was to seek new farm hands. I advertised locally and after interviewing those who applied, I settled on three young men who appeared to share a similar farming ethos to my own. We would apply our skills and knowledge to build a sustainable farming business that didn't rely on the slaughtering of animals. We would work honestly and we would work as a team. We would honour and protect the animals that provided us with the opportunities to build a farming enterprise founded on the humane and ethical treatment of animals. I installed these young men in the newly painted cottages vacated through circumstance by their predecessors, and the four of us got to work, guided by my own newly invigorated vision.

And of course, I consulted the animals.

The disruptions of the ten day period that framed the demise of Godfrey, Reuben and Henry had initially caused a temporary rift in the channel of communication that I'd previously enjoyed with them. The awestruck silence that marked this period was apparent to me and so I was relieved when shortly after my parents left the farm and I was sitting pensively in the chicken shed, a group of about twenty birds approached me and started a quiet dialogue that soon developed into a squawking attack on my senses. Through it all I realised that they were expressing their excitement at the prospect of a life stripped of the threat of weekly executions. Their excitement was palpable and my mood soon lifted on realising that there had already been a marked increase in their egg production.

The dismantling of the slaughter selection cage was greeted with a loud and grateful clucking and a veritable stream of congratulations and messages of gratitude – all relayed directly to my brain – from the gathered mass of chickens.

It was no different with the pigs. They all looked positively cheerful when I visited them and we were soon in joyful telepathic conversation as they too expressed their satisfaction with the new direction that I had steered the farm towards. Little piglet snouts peeped out from under the sagging bellies of their mother sows and a general air of well-being filled the pigpen. One of the first jobs that I had attended to as the new owner was to break down the wall that separated the large pigpen from the smaller slaughtering pen, making for an expanded area for the pigs and their youngsters to cavort in.

The sheep grew fat on the surrounding pastures and their woollen coats took on a healthy and promising sheen. Both they and the pigs expressed their delight at the dismantling of the hooks from which so many of their brethren had been suspended as their innards were cut from their limp, dead bodies.

The animals had clearly done their bit and had already shown promising signs that they were ready to play their part in a future that ensured their co-operation in return for my commitment to a farming enterprise that didn't rely on the meat of slaughtered animals as a product.

I had done my bit as well.

Our plan had been brilliantly executed. At the urging of the animals I had conspired to eliminate Godfrey, Reuben and Henry. Everything had gone according to plan. Each was taken completely by surprise, and the youthful advantages of my speed and strength had ensured that none of them were given a chance to take any defensive action at all. This helped greatly in forming the official conclusion that they had perished as a result of three unrelated and very unfortunate accidents.

I now converse regularly with the animals and we have established an early warning intelligence network to ensure that we are not led back into the dark days of the past.

Recently they have started to feed me with telepathic reports that one of the new farm hands – George – has been overheard encouraging his two young colleagues to join him in approaching me with the idea that the farm could do a lot better if we were to occasionally slaughter the odd animal.

The term 'odd animal' is abhorrent to our alliance.

George's rationale for this bizarre suggestion is apparently driven by his realisation that the farm is well and truly a free range locale. It is his intention to convince me that limited, occasional slaughter in such a perfect setting would greatly add value to the meat that we could produce and would ensure a constant demand for high quality product that would, because of its rarity, command the highest price.

I think that George is getting ahead of himself.

Lately and with growing enthusiasm, I've been mulling over the animals' suggestion that we investigate the feasibility of entering the trade in human organs.

## RESORT TALES

### A large red apple

He brought two towels, a flask of iced tea, two plastic glasses and sun hats, but forgot her book. He didn't forget his own book, just her book which he didn't notice next to her side of the bed, or think of when he packed his book into the large canvas bag that they used to carry their stuff down to the pool every morning after breakfast.

'The bag's for our stuff, not just yours, you know,' she reminded him sharply. He was already on his towel, on his back, book opened above his head, his large round belly gleaming above the waistband of his Hawaiian-print swimming trunks.

'Obviously I didn't mean to forget it. I'll go get it now,' he said, turning a page.

'Don't bother,' she said, and without waiting for a reply headed back to their chalet. She returned with her book a short while later.

He said nothing and kept on reading.

She said nothing but spread out her towel near – but not too near – his, and removed her sarong to reveal a figure for which she had all but finally lost hope. But having accepted the high price that time exacted for a long life, she was still proud enough to make the effort to arrange her sagging body as best she could into a two-piece swimsuit designed with a woman at least twenty years her junior in mind.

Lowering herself onto her towel she reached into the canvas bag as she tried to locate something. Then, after peering into the bag while turning things over, she asked, 'Have you seen the suntan lotion?'

'No,' he said, 'I don't need it, thanks.'

She said, 'Pay attention, damn it! I'm not asking if you need it, I'm asking if you've seen it.'

'No I haven't,' he said.

She didn't say anything to that but got up to return to their chalet. He looked up and said, 'Where you are going?'

Without pausing or turning back she said, 'To fetch the suntan lotion,' adding, 'which you forgot to pack.'

He called after her, 'Please bring me an apple.' She didn't answer but when she came back with the suntan lotion she also brought a large red apple.

After placing her body carefully onto her towel and without a word to him she leaned back and took a bite.

### Dragonfly, damselfly

When the children called excitedly from the side of the pool for someone to rescue an insect as it flapped weakly against the water he ambled over to lend his expertise.

‘It’s drowning!’ one of the little ones exclaimed. Two others were arguing about whether a dragonfly could save itself from this fate, or if it knew how to swim, or take off from the water when in such obvious distress.

He immediately saw that it was a damselfly and not a dragonfly, but understood enough to know that the children wouldn’t know how to differentiate the two. The insects look similar but had obvious differences. Children, it seemed, for one reason or the other, knew only the name dragonfly and not the name damselfly. He wondered why this was, thinking that if he’d had children of his own he would have made sure that they knew the difference. It was like calling a harmless grass snake a cobra, as had happened the day before when some of the kids had come running into the dining room, shouting, ‘There’s a cobra in the garden! There’s a cobra in the garden!’

There was no cobra he’d quickly ascertained, and had pointed out to the children and the few curious adults who had followed him into the garden, that it was a harmless grass snake. He had then explained the differences between the two reptiles.

He leant over the small huddle of excited children and scooped the damselfly into the safety of his palm. As it lay there recovering from its near drowning, he explained to the group of youngsters that, ‘Damselflies have smaller eyes than dragonflies, and look... you see that its wings are folded down the length of its body? That’s a damselfly. Dragonflies hold their wings out to the side. Also, do you see that the wings taper towards the body? Well, dragonfly wings generally bulge a bit where they join the body. And by the way, the dragonfly’s rear wings are larger than its front wings. Damselfly wings are all much the same size.’

He looked up from the tired insect as it slowly regained its shape and composure and noticed that all but one of the kids had drifted away, pool noodles and an oversized inflatable pink flamingo having now won back their attention.

The last remaining child asked him if the dragonfly would be okay.

He felt exasperated and wanted to repeat his explanation of the differences between the two insects but instead simply said, ‘Yes, it’ll be okay. The dragonfly will be okay.’

### **A pretty smile with good teeth**

There were more than enough young girls to keep him interested, and as things usually worked at the resort it didn’t take him more than a day to form a youthful holiday bond with a group of similarly aged teenagers that included the best looking of the girls. It kind of worked like that, he’d noticed – whether back home at school or here on holiday, the good looking guys, of which he counted himself as one of the best, always ended up hanging out with the really cool chicks; the best looking of their gender, basically.

He remembered something from his history class or his geography class, something about a guy called Darwin who called it ‘natural selection’, where the strongest of a species would seek out the other strongest of the species and would mate and produce offspring that served to carry the best genes forward to the next generation.

He gave himself a virtual pat on the back for remembering that, and thought that’s exactly how it works; we good-looking kids ensure that those same good looks will be carried

into the next generation. He was sort of amused with himself for even thinking that far into the future.

But there was one of the girls in his newly formed holiday group who was just stand-out gorgeous and he couldn't take his eyes off her for a second, although he tried not to be too obvious about his interest. She was slim and tanned and had a pretty smile with good teeth, long silky black hair, a figure that oozed sex appeal and a walk that made him hard just watching her. And she had a pair of jugs on her that looked as firm and inviting as any pair he'd ever seen in any magazine.

That was his target for the holiday – sorted.

On their first night at the resort someone hooked up a laptop to the speakers in the teenager's rec room and after the old ping-pong table and armchairs and settees were moved over to the edges of the room, the music was fired up and everyone started dancing – by themselves, with each other and in groups. Kind of sorting the wheat from the chaff, he thought.

He looked around to see if he could locate the girl and was relieved to see that she was dancing by herself, slowly and seductively, swaying to an old number that he thought may have been from his dad's generation. He loosened the top button of his shirt and ambled over to her, leaned in close so that she could hear him above the music and, using his driest, sexiest voice, said, 'Dance?'

The girl walked straight into his arms, put one arm around his waist and the other around his neck and her head on his shoulder, melding her beautiful young body into his. Not overly surprised at his immediate success, two thoughts entered his mind – she's mine and, I hope I don't come in my jeans.

Then she bit his ear off.

### **An unlikely stroke of good fortune**

She swung hard at the ball and missed. A few laughs went up around her, the way little wafts of flatulence are at first privately and then publicly released. She responded with a mild and nervous laugh of her own, and then said, 'I'd better have another go.' Everyone graciously agreed that this was a good idea. And anyway, 'It's just a fun game,' one of them observed.

One of the others in the four-ball, her best friend, cheekily said, 'Come on sweetie... show us what you can do. Hit a hole-in-one and I'll make all your dreams come true! That's a promise.'

She picked up her ball, wiped it on her skirt and then replaced it on the tee. She thought of herself as a holiday golfer and knew that the others in her relaxed four-ball, all good friends, were not much better. Nevertheless, it was never easy being on display, with everyone watching her as she steadied herself for her second attempt off the tee at the 9<sup>th</sup> hole.

The resort's course, it must be said, hardly made the grade as a golf course. A long drought meant that it received very little water which made it hard and dry. The fairways, such as they were, comprised mainly loose stones, short scrubby bushes and ground squirrel holes. The greens were weed-ridden and needed a mowing, making it almost impossible to read them. It was a short nine-hole holiday fun course that no-one expected to play well on.

That was fine with everyone. After all, this was just for fun. But she was still relieved to be coming to the end of what had been a dismal round.

She lined up her shot at the short three-par final hole and with one mighty, smoothly executed backswing, launched her 8-iron's club face at the ball, keeping her head down and following through in a perfect arc. She struck it beautifully – the best shot of her golfing life! The rest of the four-ball were quick to shout their approval and then all watched in amazement as the ball landed on the front edge of the not-too-distant 9<sup>th</sup> green and rolled directly towards the hole. Even louder shouts went up as her ball dropped neatly into the hole for a perfect hole-in-one.

That night, the celebrations in the bar went on for quite a while. She felt justifiably proud of her unlikely stroke of good fortune and got into the swing of things with vigour. Her friend, the one who had generously offered to make her dreams come true as reward for her getting a hole-in-one, was unusually subdued and didn't join in the celebrations with as much gusto as the rest.

Later that night, after the party had died down and everyone had traipsed off to bed, with still half of the holiday ahead, her best friend's husband broke the news to his wife of fifteen years, that he wanted to divorce her. He apologised and said that this was a difficult decision, but one that he had been mulling over for a long time, for as long as he had been having an affair with his wife's friend, the lucky hole-in-one golfer.

### **Everyone smiled at everyone**

Mr and Mrs Green didn't mind sharing a table with Mr and Mrs Davis although they weren't going to be happy if Mr and Mrs Brown were at the same table. Mr and Mrs Brown liked both couples and would have been surprised and probably a little hurt had they known that Mr and Mrs Green didn't want to be seated at a table with them. Mr and Mrs Brown however also had their preferences and neither of them wanted to be at a table even remotely close to Mr and Mrs Ramsey.

Mrs Ramsey, a difficult woman by any standard, would have preferred to have her own table alone with Mr Ramsey and not have to share with anyone at all. This was not possible as all the guests were allocated to dining room tables that seated at least two couples and in some cases as many as six couples. So now they had to contend with Mr and Mrs Bancroft, a couple widely referred to behind their backs as 'The Bickerers.'

Mr and Mrs Murray were happy to sit anywhere as long as they didn't have to sit too close to the door. Mr Murray didn't like drafts.

Mr and Mrs Pearson were not happy that they had been placed at the same table as Mr and Mrs Davis because Mr Pearson and Mr Davis had recently had a squabble on the resort's bowling green after Mr Davis had insisted that Mr Pearson had deliberately nudged one of Mr Davis's bowls a little further away from the jack, causing Mr Davis's team to lose the eighth end. The incident had become a really sore point because Mr Davis suspected that Mr Pearson had committed exactly the same offence on the third end. As far as Mr Davis was concerned, this proved that Mr Pearson was a serial cheat and he wished to have nothing more to do with him.

Mr and Mrs Appleby did not want to sit at a table that included Mr and Mrs Brown or Mr and Mrs Pearson. They'd just prefer not to.

Dr Wagner was happy to share a table with anyone who was happy to share their drinks with him. Mrs Wagner, a mild-mannered teetotaler, got on with everyone except her husband and so she was content to sit anywhere, as long as it wasn't next to her husband.

Mr and Mrs Cartwright thought that Mr and Mrs Ramsey were a little strange and had decided that they were also poor parents because they allowed their children too much freedom around the resort. They didn't want to sit at a table with people whose children had bad manners. They liked Mr and Mrs Davis whose children seemed respectful and well-adjusted and would prefer to sit with them.

Mr and Mrs Robinson were not going to sit at a table with Mr and Mrs Green. Mrs Robinson had made it clear to Mr Robinson that she felt uncomfortable with Mr Green's poor table manners. Mr Green had a habit of stretching across the table to snatch the crispiest roast potatoes as soon as the vegetable platter arrived at the table. Mr Robinson was equally keen to sit elsewhere, but only because Mrs Green had on the previous evening when a little drunk, whispered to Mr Robinson that she'd like to give him a blowjob.

Everyone smiled at everyone and they all got on with their meals in a jovial spirit.

### **A striped field mouse**

Going for a long walk across the endless veld that surrounds the resort was one of their favourite activities. They'd rise early, possibly earlier than anyone else, get dressed, pack a small day-pack with two bottles of sparkling water, a couple of sugar-free health bars, a camera and binoculars and then set off for a walk that rarely took less than two and a half hours.

The chance of spotting wildlife – various antelope, hares and other small mammals – was always good, and a wide variety of birds, always guaranteed. Today however, was different. The veld was unusually quiet. Even the grass was quiet, with the expected crisp early morning breeze completely absent. 'Maybe it's going to rain,' she said to her husband. This was always a possibility in summer, but usually only in the form of a late afternoon thunderstorm. But this morning the air was still and without a cloud in the sky it was hard to imagine rain anytime soon.

Her husband, an academic whose field of expertise was applied mathematics, was inclined towards rational thinking but even he was puzzled by the stillness of the veld on this new day.

As the resort receded into the distance behind them they noticed that the grasses and shrubs through which they were walking appeared to get taller the deeper into the veld they walked. Eventually, after walking a little further, he said to his wife, 'This is really odd. The grasses in this area are almost as tall as us. And these shrubby bushes seem oversized.'

'And have you noticed how tall the trees are?' his wife replied.

By now the resort was completely out of sight and the couple found themselves pushing their way through grasses that rose above their heads by at least a metre and more. The small scrubby bushes had been replaced by bushes much larger than themselves and both

husband and wife were struggling to negotiate their way around and between boulders the size of small cars.

Suddenly the husband stopped, grabbed his wife's arm and said, 'Hold on. We'd better turn back. This is outrageous.' They stood still for a moment, observing their surroundings and feeling very, very small. Just then, a large animal, easily as big as them, eased its way around a nearby bush.

'Good heavens!' the husband exclaimed. 'It's a striped field mouse... except, except, it can't be. It's enormous!' The mouse sniffed the air audibly, a harsh snorting sound, its whiskers rattling against the vegetation, and then – thankfully, the couple thought – it turned and disappeared back into the bush.

'We've grown smaller,' the husband mumbled to himself as his rational mind struggled to make sense of this realisation. Taking his wife's arm again, they hastily retraced their steps towards the resort, finding to their great relief that as they progressed closer towards their destination, the grasses, shrubs, stones and trees all slowly regained their usual proportions.

Their friends thought they were unusually quiet at breakfast.

### Arrogance

She thought her talents were plain for all to see, but for those with impaired eyesight she was ready to remind them of just how good a bridge player she was. 'I was playing with the National champion the other day and he was astonished by my powers of concentration and my ability to keep tally of all four suits at the same time. Anyway, I told him that there was nothing that can't be achieved with sufficient experience and, by Jove; I certainly have plenty of that.'

The others at the table were not as practiced as she was and all three of them, including her bridge partner for the afternoon, felt quite intimidated by her.

'Oh, I wouldn't have called three hearts. I would have jumped straight to three no trumps to signal my strength in the other suits,' she bellowed after the opposition under-called on the previous hand and only just managed to make the contract. 'Clearly you left two easy tricks on the table. The finesse would have worked both times, if you'd had the courage. But, that's how we learn.'

The other three nodded in appreciation of her expertise and gratitude for her sharing of it. But all three of them wished privately that they hadn't accepted her invitation to play. Many others had been less hesitant in making their excuses and the three ladies admired their strength.

It was her chance to deal. Dealing clockwise, first to her left, and managing a skilful flick of each card as the pack was dealt into four neat piles, she expounded on the importance of dealing, 'One needs to handle the cards with confidence. It's so important to ensure that each player is certain that the cards have been properly dealt and that they are easily picked up without the need for excessive gathering.' The other three players all shared a similar thought – this woman is nuts.

The four picked up their cards together, ready to sort them into suits, highest to lowest... and as one, exclaimed loudly, 'Oh my word!' or words to that effect. Each of the

four women had been dealt an entire suit – all the Clubs, all the Diamonds, all the Hearts and all the Spades had found themselves in four separate hands. There was no avoiding this revelation. ‘That’s jolly, jolly amazing!’ the dealer exclaimed, taking immediate credit for this extraordinary event. ‘Do you know that the chance of this happening is in the order of one in several billion, billion, billion?’

And while this unheard of miracle caused great elation and excitement among the four women, and particularly for the dealer who saw it as a mark of her expertise, it rendered the playing of the hand pointless. So after the excitement wore down and photographs of the four hands had been taken and the pack thoroughly reshuffled, she dealt again... and dealt exactly the same impossible hands. This time there was silence around the table.

After the third attempt and the third impossibly identical distribution of cards, the game was abandoned. The four women went their separate ways, three of them gratefully, one in tears.

### **Nothing made sense**

Nothing made sense to the man. His holiday had been lovely up to a point, but then things had gone horribly awry.

Most worryingly, his wife and two daughters had disappeared.

They’d been with him before breakfast when the four of them had enjoyed a brisk and fun-filled early morning game of tennis. He and his youngest daughter had teamed up against his wife and their eldest daughter. It had been a close contest but he had held back, allowing his wife and eldest daughter to win. The game had been played in great spirits and they had all enjoyed the valuable family-time spent together.

After the game he had elected to go for a quick swim while his wife and the girls had headed back to the family’s chalet for a shower. That’s the last he saw of them.

At the pool, after taking off his shirt and shoes, he had briefly paused on the edge – at the deep end, taking in the glorious mid-summer morning freshness – fascinated by the slow reflected movement of a few overhead clouds mirrored upon the surface of the pool. I’m diving into the sky he told himself, as he launched his body into the image with a fluid dive. Allowing his body to drift with its own weightless momentum – just below the surface – he had then swum the last few metres to the steps at the shallow end. On exiting the pool he retrieved his towel and dried himself, humming a soft tune of contentment as he did so. Gathering up his shirt, shoes and tennis racquet he then made his way back to the chalet to join his family before breakfast.

At the chalet, there had been no sign of them. Their tennis racquets were leaned up against the wall where they were usually kept, and their towels were over the portable drying rack just outside the front door. They must have already showered and gotten dressed, he thought. He wasn’t concerned and assumed that he had taken longer at the pool than he thought he had. He concluded that his wife and two daughters had gone on ahead of him. He shaved, got dressed and then made his way to the dining room, looking forward to breakfast after his early morning exertions.

He was a little puzzled that they were not there either, but decided that they must have gone for a quick stroll around the gardens while waiting for him.

He considered going after them, but the smell of the breakfast preparations emanating from the kitchen finally got the better of him, and so he placed his order. When his scrambled eggs, bacon and grilled tomato with two slices of toast were served, he lost no time getting stuck into the important business of eating a hearty first meal of the day. Only after he'd left the table did he begin to feel anxious about his family's whereabouts.

But now he was getting really worried.

He'd asked around and nobody had seen them. They had simply disappeared. Not wishing to raise the alarm unnecessarily, the man had hurried about, searching for his family, hoping to find them soon, but growing more and more distressed as it became evident that they were nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, at the same time and at the very same resort, the wife and her two daughters were equally distraught. They had seen their husband and father making his way to the pool and that's the last they'd seen of him. They had reasoned that he had ended up chatting to one of the other guests at the pool and so when they were ready, they made their way to the dining room without him. They had eaten alone and then, with growing concern, went looking for him, starting at their chalet and then the pool, but he had simply vanished into, well... thin air.

The very same people – friends and guests – who they asked for help in their quest to find him were the same people who he was busy asking for help.

But there was no help.

Unbeknown to them, in their desperation – running about, this way and that – they passed within touching distance of each other on at least five different occasions before finally giving up.

### **The next chapter**

Perhaps because she was trying to make a point and took a bigger bite of the apple than she would normally do, or perhaps because she was lying on her back, or perhaps both, but whatever, she gagged and then choked on the hard wedge of fruit now firmly trapped in her oesophagus.

The shock of this sudden blockage to the essential passage of air into her lungs is what probably caused the devastating neurological shutdown that she simultaneously suffered. The result of this was that now, immediately in the grip of complete paralysis, she was neither able to roll herself onto her side to expel the chunk of apple nor was she able to make any movement to signal the distress that she found herself in. The doctor who later pronounced her dead chose not to share with her husband his opinion of the agonising circumstances of her slow asphyxiation.

As it was, at the time – at the crowded swimming pool – nobody was any the wiser that she was quietly suffocating to death.

Her husband, still on his back reading his book, was aware of her return from the chalet and was equally aware of the deliberate positioning of her towel just a short distance away from his own – only barely in reach if he were to have stretched his hand out to touch her. Not that he wanted to do that, not after her very obvious expression of annoyance with him. He had also noticed out of the corner of his eye how when she returned from their chalet

with the apple that he had asked her to bring for him, she quite calmly took a bite of it as if to deliberately annoy him. So he lay perfectly still on his towel while she lay perfectly still on hers, and while he calmly breathed in the fresh resort air, she slowly died from the lack of it.

Sometime later – about thirty minutes later – he decided to make a peace offering and so lowered his book to the soft resting place of his sizable belly, half turned to her and asked, ‘Would you like a Cinzano and soda?’ Had she said ‘Yes please’ or even just ‘Yes’ he would have accepted this as a sign of her slow return to the normal iciness that was the benchmark of their relationship. But she remained still and silent, making no move to acknowledge his question. He took this to be confirmation of her lingering annoyance and so abandoned his effort to make up for whatever it was that had angered her. He retrieved his book from the mound of his belly and carried on reading.

Almost forty-five minutes passed before he even thought of her again. Finishing a chapter, he lowered the book to his side and stretched luxuriously before brushing away a fly that had entered his space. He watched as it switched targets and landed on his wife’s face, walking across her cheek to her mouth where a faint line of saliva leaked from one corner. He watched in fascination as the fly stayed put, and she did nothing to discourage it. He was about to shoo it away but then thought, what the hell for, before reopening his book and turning to the next chapter.

### A lesson

Later, as he lay on his bed after the damselfly lesson, he thought about the way people accumulated false knowledge through the acquisition of flawed information. The children at the pool that morning were a perfect example. They had misidentified a common damselfly as a dragonfly. That information was then shared among the group and so all eight or nine children added that mote of incorrectness to their individual pockets of knowledge. The notion that the world was drowning in so much misinformation had worried him for a long time and so he had made a point of trying to stem the growing tide of inaccuracies whenever he encountered them.

What troubled him most of all though were the reactions that he experienced from people who he tried to correct. All too often he found himself at the sharp end of some or other nasty commentary whenever he pointed out to people that their information was inaccurate or simply wrong. This attempt to help didn’t seem to please most people and on a few occasions had brought him close to real physical danger from those who openly treated his well-intended interventions with disdain.

He simply couldn’t believe that people were so determined to defend their attachment to what was so obviously false or incorrect. Like the guy whose wife had died at the pool this morning, shortly after he’d rescued the damselfly.

He had been about to hop into the pool to cool off after saving the insect when a piecing cry tore through the cheerful holiday atmosphere. He only just managed to hold back from plunging into the pool and instead directed his gaze towards one of the shaded grassy embankments where a large-bellied man was screaming at a woman who, from where he stood at the poolside thirty metres away, appeared to be ignoring him. Instinctively wanting

to be of assistance, he had hurried over to where the big man stood and on arriving, immediately realised – judging from her grey skin tone – that the woman was dead.

The large man had calmed himself down with remarkable speed now that he had drawn attention to the woman and probably also because a small inquisitive crowd had assembled around them.

Thinking that there would be no harm in trying to resuscitate her, he sunk down over the woman, grasping her lower jaw, forcing her mouth open, squeezing her nose shut and pushing his own mouth over hers. It didn't take him too long to realise that the woman was indeed dead as he'd earlier surmised, and that she seemed to have a large obstruction jammed down her throat, as he found it impossible to force air into her lungs.

Then he noticed the apple next to her. It had a significant bite taken out of its side and he immediately concluded that the missing portion was lodged in her gullet. He looked up at the large-bellied man and said, 'I'm sorry. I don't think there's anything that we can do. She must have choked on the apple.'

The large-bellied man looked down at him with an expression that suggested that he needed a moment to assimilate this information and then he said, 'That should teach the bitch a lesson. The apple was mine and she thought she could spite me by eating it herself. That's what I call justice, huh? What do you say to that?'

He had nothing to say to that.

### **Less than perfect**

The doctor, nearing retirement and officially off duty while on holiday at the resort, was well into his second bottle of Merlot for the evening when news came of the incident. Committed to service and quite enjoying the status afforded to him as the only available doctor for miles around, he teetered off to his chalet to collect his instrument bag and then returned to the dining room where the boy was being consoled by his parents and concerned friends.

The boy – a teenager actually – was weeping and snivelling as he held a folded table napkin to the side of his head. His ear, which had been retrieved by one of the other kids, was on the table behind him resting on a clean dinner plate. Someone brought in a bottle of whiskey – a fine Scottish single malt, Glenlivet, the doctor noted – and offered it to the doctor for the purposes of cleaning both the wound and the detached ear. He thanked the person for her foresight and told the whimpering boy to 'man up' before removing the blood-soaked napkin from the boy's grip so as to expose and inspect the damage.

A few gasps went up from the surrounding audience and so, mustering a deliberately professional tone, the doctor asked that everyone – except the boy's parents – leave the room, which they all reluctantly did. Next he injected the site of the wound with a good dose of localised anaesthetic and after waiting for it to take effect, got to work on cleaning both ragged wound and matching ear with the donated whiskey.

Then he set to work reattaching the bitten-off ear to its stub. Once this was done he wound a large bandage around the boy's head to keep the dressing that he'd placed over the reattached ear in place.

Then he returned to the bar and his bottle of Merlot.

The boy's parents were most grateful but decided that it would be best if they cut their holiday short and returned home, which is what they did the following morning. Before this they had a private conversation with the resort owners and the parents of the girl who had bitten their son's ear off. By this time the resort was virtually split down the middle regarding the incident, half of the guests sympathising with the boy who claimed that the girl's assault on him had been unprovoked and half siding with the girl who claimed that she had been indecently groped by the boy.

As witnesses to the incident supported conflicting versions of the event, the parents of the two teenagers wisely agreed to not pursue the matter any further and that was that.

The boy's recovery was swift but he never quite regained his cocky disposition. The doctor had done a reasonable job although he'd missed the ear's alignment by a small margin, dooming the boy to forever thereafter contemplate in the mirror an ear that protruded at a sharper angle away from his head than its unharmed twin over on the other side. His school friends noticed it as well and so kept him well-reminded of his less than perfect appearance.

### **Second thoughts**

The awkwardness of the situation was not lost on anyone. From being a group of close friends, their relationships to each other changed over-night. By breakfast the following morning everyone knew what had happened. Suddenly, her secret affair with her best friend's husband was no longer a secret. Consequently, her own husband, who had long suspected that she was screwing her best friend's husband, declared himself relieved that everything was now out in the open, and loudly informed all within earshot of their table, that he had already placed a call to his lawyer with instructions to immediately draw up divorce papers. She seemed unperturbed by this public announcement and in fact welcomed it as she felt that her husband's honesty and acceptance of the situation would hasten the process, ensuring that she and her best friend's husband would be openly united sooner rather than later.

Her best friend, the one who'd invoked her remarkable hole-in-one by offering to make all her dreams come true, was feeling a bit stupid about it all. She'd had no idea that her friend had been fucking her husband for so long and was just as shocked that her husband would have preferred her friend to herself. Needless to say, she no longer regarded her friend as a true friend anymore, and regarding her husband, she'd told him the night before that she despised and hated him and wished that he was dead. Her husband had told her that he despised and hated her as well, but thought that it would be a better idea if she were the one who was dead.

Neither of them had emerged from their chalet the following morning, raising speculation that one of them had killed the other and was now trying to figure out how to explain that the deceased partner had actually taken his or her own life, despite the evidence of a pulped skull, which strongly suggested the involvement of the heavy blood-stained ashtray lying next to the bed.

Of course, this was all silly speculation, and nobody would have realised or even thought that the real reason for their non-appearance at breakfasts was that after the revelations of infidelity – and the crying and wailing that accompanied these, and the subsequent declarations of despise and hatred for each other, and the hoped for immediate

death of each other – they both had second thoughts about a whole range of things and had then rebooted their relationship. This was achieved by engaging in a mutually satisfying bout of sexual expression that had seen them fucking each other stupid all through the night and into the early hours of the morning, and to hell with breakfast, they both thought, as he went down on her yet again.

Excusing herself from the table, where her friends were trying to keep the conversation flowing as normally as possible while her husband made valiant attempts to show a manly, pragmatic approach to dealing with the revelation of his wife's love for another man, she hurried off in the direction of her best friend's chalet. She expected to find that her best friend had departed and that her lover – her best friend's now estranged husband – had overslept. She had already loosened the top three buttons of her blouse as she pushed open the chalet door.

### **Everyone had something to say about something**

'I'd be quite happy to never see him again,' Mr Davis said to Mrs Brown, referring to Mr Bancroft, on learning of Mrs Bancroft's sad passing that morning at the swimming pool. 'I never liked the man and I thought that he treated his wife abominably.'

There had been much to talk about that morning, both at the breakfast table and afterwards on the veranda where many of the guests gathered for a regular post-breakfast cup of tea or coffee.

Mrs Appleby was being treated for depression by Dr Wagner, although she had not yet been clinically diagnosed with the condition. Dr Wagner had seen a sufficient number of depressed patients over the years to feel qualified to make the diagnosis despite the fact that he was a General Practitioner and not a psychiatrist. Since the bizarre incidents of the previous afternoon's bridge game, Mrs Appleby had done nothing other than walk around in small, tight circles talking to herself. Mr Appleby had become concerned when his wife didn't come to bed at all the previous night, choosing rather to maintain her inscrutable monologue-driven circular motions at the foot of their bed the entire night.

Mr and Mrs Pearson and Mr and Mrs Ramsey had both suffered a traumatic evening following the incident between the Pearson's daughter and the Ramsey's son. Wisely, the two couples had agreed that it would be pointless to pursue issues beyond the privacy of the resort and they both considered the matter closed, each couple accepting a degree of culpability on behalf of their teenage children. In private, Mr and Mrs Pearson referred to the Ramsey boy as a disgusting little fuck who deserved everything that their daughter had dished out and more. In private, Mr and Mrs Ramsey referred to the Pearson's daughter as a disgusting little slut whose obvious psychosis would soon land her in real trouble.

Mr and Mrs Murray spent most of the morning scouring the horizon with a pair of powerful binoculars. When asked what they were looking at they both said that they weren't really sure, which had a few chins wagging for the rest of the morning.

Mr Robinson was in two minds. Either he could invent a reason to excuse himself from Mrs Robinson's presence which would afford him the opportunity to explore the possibility that Mrs Green hadn't been as drunk as he'd thought she was the previous evening. It had, after all, been a while since he'd been on the receiving end of a memorable

blowjob. Alternatively, he could diligently accompany his wife to the swimming pool where they would enjoy yet another morning of tanning, swimming and reading. It was not proving to be an easy decision to make.

Mr Cartwright was feeling a little miffed. He'd offered advice to Dr Wagner regarding the potential for septicaemia if a non-pure alcohol was used to clean the Ramsey boy's ear. Dr Wagner had shooed him away. Mr Cartwright had also tried to speak to the Murrays who he was sure could benefit from his knowledge of the surrounding bush, but they had ignored him. Then he'd offered his theories of card shuffling techniques to Mrs Appleby, but she had mumbled something unintelligible to him and then walked around him as if he were a lamppost and she a dog.

He damn well felt like packing up his travelling encyclopaedia collection and asking Mrs Cartwright if she wouldn't mind cutting their holiday short, there and then.

### **Shrugging off the unexplainable**

From what they considered the safety of the broad veranda, the couple took turns looking through their powerful binoculars at the distant horizon. Everything seemed absolutely normal. Their earlier walk through the veld had unsettled them quite considerably and despite being naturally inclined towards rational thought, the husband was unable to offer his wife a rational explanation.

What they had experienced earlier would only be explained by the confirmed discovery of a section of the veld whose natural elements were unusually enlarged. This is what they had now spent the better part of two hours after breakfast trying to find through the lenses of their binoculars. The husband had put this theory forward to his wife and she had trustingly accepted that her husband, logical and rational academic that he was, would know best. She would have preferred to simply forget about it all, but she knew that it was important to humour him who, unlike her, needed to understand everything.

The husband was only partially satisfied that his earlier deduction about an environmental anomaly had held up rather well. He was reasonably confident that evidence could be gathered of the unusually proportioned grasses, bushes, trees and rocks present in that section of the veld. However, his comfort with this theory was more than tested by the realization that he simply could not provide a rational argument for the appearance of what was unmistakably a field mouse of gargantuan proportions.

Significantly larger-than-normal aspects of the inanimate environment he could live with, but not a striped field mouse whose bulk would have dwarfed that of a sumo wrestler. He kept this worrying thought to himself, grateful that his wife appeared to have already found a way to block out the recent memory of their strange experience earlier that morning. She was now chatting to one of the other ladies about joining her and two others for a game of bridge in the afternoon now that Mrs Appleby had given up on the game.

The only other possibility that he could come up with, while trying to analyse all the known facts as he scanned the distant horizon, was that he and his wife had shrunk in size the further they'd walked away from the resort. That insane impossibility had seemed very real then, but sitting here on the resort's veranda with a normal sized cup of tea and surrounded by all manner of normally proportioned people and things, the impossible was made absurd.

The man eventually gave up his binocular search and decided that he would no longer worry about trying to fathom out what had actually transpired that morning on their hike. It was enough that they had returned to the resort unscathed, and considering that his wife seemed not in the least bit plagued by the incongruences that he was grappling with, he decided to accept that what had seemed real at the time was nothing more than a trick of the light, or a partial hallucinatory experience brought on by an aggressive but fortunately short-lived fever.

Shrugging off the unexplainable in this way felt liberating. Silently celebrating the novel experience of dispensing with the persistent need for rational explanations, the man decided to treat himself to a second cup of tea. As he poured the hot regenerative beverage into his cup he noticed that the kitchen staff had inadvertently placed tablespoons on the tea trolley instead of teaspoons. How silly of them, he thought.

### **A good sport**

Mr Appleby's earlier concern for his wife's strange condition was short-lived. For various reasons, he no longer loved her and so his quick acceptance of her sudden transition from an arrogantly confident bridge player to a mumbling wreck came as no surprise to either him or anyone who knew him well. In fact, her new condition suited Mr Appleby a lot better than even he could have imagined.

For example, he no longer had to endure her embarrassing self-aggrandizement at the bridge drives she regularly hosted and which he was expected to attend, not as a player, but as the server of tea and biscuits to those poor souls who were cajoled or manipulated into participating. All that fuss and bother evaporated when the news went out that Mrs Appleby was no longer in prime bridge-playing shape.

Even more heartening was the announcement by a slew of medical specialists, that Mrs Appleby's condition was irreversible and that she would, for the remainder of her life, be unable to speak coherently or comprehend anything. The doctors assured Mr Appleby that Mrs Appleby was perfectly happy just so long as she remained in the familiar surroundings of her own home and was allowed to shuffle about in small circles at her own pace. This took a bit of getting used to, but Mr Appleby moved some furniture to provide his wife with sufficient space in the living room for her to perform her tight rotations without the danger of her colliding with any obstacles.

Later, in a moment of pure inspiration, Mr Appleby had a stainless steel pole installed in the middle of the room. To this he attached a short light-weight steel chain that was free to rotate around the pole and, on the other end, a belt which he could simply buckle around his wife's slim waist. Mr Appleby reasoned that his wife's attachment to the pole would be both reassuring to her as well as providing him the opportunity to move around the house without having to worry about her veering off in the direction of a potential hazard while out of his sight.

Mr Appleby concluded that his wife was perfectly happy with this arrangement when he experimented by spending an entire evening in front of the TV watching a string of pornographic movies that had him gasping in a medley of disbelief, envy and arousal. Mrs

Appleby was unmoved and simply continued to circle the gleaming pole muttering softly to herself in her customary manner.

Encouraged by the tidy solution of his wife's attachment to the living room pole and emboldened by the sure signs of a late-life sexual reawakening, as evidenced by his response to the pornographic movies, Mr Appleby scheduled, through a newspaper advertisement, the delivery of a young call girl to spend an evening with him at home. What he hoped to achieve was to emulate the antics of a porn star in front of his enfeebled wife, the prospect of which he found quite stirring.

It took a bit of convincing, but the call girl proved to be a good sport and without too much effort soon had Mr Appleby's little wiener inserted snugly into her love pocket.

But, with one of his favourite porn movies setting the tone in the background and the naked girl bouncing on his lap, Mr Appleby's delightfully hedonistic world was given an unexpected impetus when Mrs Appleby stirred from her deep sub-conscious slumber and, in a voice reminiscent of their courting days, loudly exhorted, 'That's the way to deal a hand Tiger – give it to her in spades!'

### **A rare double wedding**

Years later, the man still wondered about the disappearance of his wife and two daughters. The police and other interested parties – like the man's insurance company – continued to wonder as well. A protracted and thorough investigation had not been successful in unravelling the mystery and the man eventually created a new life for himself. He continued to stay in their original family home, suffering many years of loneliness and longing.

Eventually, after the lapse of a long period of time, his wife and two daughters were officially declared dead. That moment heralded in both a traumatic reliving of his tragic losses and a final closure for the agonised man.

A few more years passed. One day the man met a very respectable widow and in time the two of them grew quite fond of each other and eventually decided to marry. They had a quiet ceremony with just a few friends and relatives present. Among these were the widow's two sons, both decent, well-mannered boys. They had become fond of the man and saw him as a suitable substitute for their deceased father. Most importantly to them was that the man made their mother very happy.

The woman and her two daughters were equally traumatised by the disappearance of their husband and father. Many theories were put forward but none could be proved and after months and months of investigations, no one was any closer to solving the mystery of the man's sudden vanishing. Ironically, the closest anyone came to understanding the riddle of the disappearances was when an off-duty junior police detective who had been assigned to the case, told some friends while having a few drinks in the local pub one evening that, 'There's always the possibility that someone fell down a rabbit hole.'

At the same time that the man decided to continue living in the family home, the woman decided that she couldn't bring herself to leave the home where she and her husband had raised their two daughters. So they continued to stay there too. In time her husband was also declared dead and, in similar fashion, the woman and her two daughters found both closure and a reliving of pain on arriving at this important milestone.

The woman never remarried.

The husband and his new wife and her two sons lived in the house in exactly the same way and at exactly the same time that the mother and her two daughters lived in the house, in and around – but unbeknown – to each other.

In time the two daughters went to University where they met two charming brothers who seemed like really fine young gentlemen. In fact, so impressed were they that the two daughters felt that the two boys reminded them, in an indefinable way, of their long-lost father. The boys felt drawn to the two girls in a way that they couldn't fully comprehend, but they just knew that these girls were special. Before long the younger boy and the younger girl fell in love and planned to marry while at the same time the older boy and the older girl also fell in love and they too planned to marry.

It was to be a rare double wedding, but before finalising arrangements, they thought it best to host a special dinner at a fancy restaurant where they planned to introduce their respective mothers – and in the case of the two boys, also their step-father – to each other.

## MISSING

I rise early – before the sun has bridged the horizon – to witness how the night begins its slow retreat. I get dressed and set the old kettle onto the gas hob so that coffee is available all day. I usually have my first mug outside on the wide veranda that runs the length of the front of the cottage. From the kitchen window at the rear of the building, the swept yard looks dark and still, the form of the low wall that separates me from the scrubby veld beyond is a neat line of packed stone which always evokes a sense of pride in me. I enjoy manual labour and the sense of achievement that it brings.

Pushing open the veranda doors I step outside. At this time of the day I can barely make out the long driveway that snakes out across the veld towards its junction with the service road that links me to the rest of the world. Beyond that, a low range of hills huddles far to the north, now just visible as dawn approaches. To the east – the direction that my bedroom window faces – is the outline of a nearby copse of white poplars, now silhouetted against the lightening sky. My living room faces both north towards the distant service road, and west towards the mountains. This is possibly my favourite view at this time of day, as the first light meets the high point of this small range, highlighting its outline in the soft orange and ochre of its rocky crown.

My bathroom and toilet occupy the southeast corner of the cottage, between the kitchen and my bedroom.

I bought this place about ten years ago, after my parents died in a fire that destroyed our home in the city where I was born and raised. Their passing was the catalyst for my move into the country. In the aftermath of their death I took stock of my life and decided that I wanted to be alone, and so set about making that a reality. I enjoy being by myself. With part of my inheritance, I bought this small, unworked farm and moved here. The old cottage that I now live in needed a great deal of attention, but I put the effort into restoring and altering it, so that today it is central to my being and is the one place that I can truly say feels like home. I'd never move from here – never. The balance of my inheritance is conservatively invested and is more than sufficient to provide me with everything that I need.

The nearest town is twelve kilometres away and has a pharmacy, two doctors and a dentist, a small well-stocked supermarket and a library. There's a post office, a police station, four bottles stores, three petrol stations, a few coffee shops and restaurants and the various other commercial enterprises that make up a small town. It also has a respectably refurbished hotel with a comfortable bar, and there are a number of guest houses to choose from as alternative accommodation. The town's success and survival are linked to its proximity to the extensive hiking paths, caves, kloofs and waterfalls of the nearby mountain range. These are the same mountains that I can see from my living room. People come from all over to explore the region. Teams of student geologists have been studying the unique formations of the range for many years, and the regular discovery of new caves and underground water courses has kept alive an interest in the area by outdoor adventure seekers.

Although I spent a great deal of time exploring the mountain and its attractions when I first moved here, I now prefer the tranquillity and sense of oneness with nature that I enjoy in the splendid isolation of my own remote property.

I amble along the length of my front veranda with coffee mug in hand, taking in the fresh early morning smells and sounds of the surrounding veld. This is home!

I have some tasks that I've set for myself today and maybe I'll write later. I can feel the energy that I need to spend a few hours in front of my journal, with the beginning seeds of a new chapter stirring just beneath my consciousness. That's what I do when I'm not tackling a house project – I write. I can't call myself a novelist or a poet because I'm not sure that I want to be published. I just want to write for the sheer pleasure of being able to do so and to make sense of the things I don't understand. I have no constraints on my time. I am free to do anything I want to. I answer to no one other than myself. If I feel like working on one of my house projects, I do so. If I feel like walking through the veld, I do so. If I feel like writing, I do so. I do anything I feel like doing because alone, I can.

My parents tried to bring me up differently. Modestly well-off, they both had an unflinching belief in the necessity of building social networks. That's how we get ahead, they'd say. Both of them had powerful work ethics and worked hard all their lives. They were like one person in two bodies, always supporting each other unconditionally. I could never play the one off against the other. Their awareness of each other's point of view, opinion, thoughts, was always irritatingly aligned. I learnt at a very young age that they would support each other without question. If my father said I couldn't swim for an hour after lunch, then my mother would echo that decision to the second. If my mother said that I had to make my bed before breakfast, then my father would say exactly the same. There was never any chance of driving even the smallest wedge between them.

As an only child I had no allies in the low intensity war that I was permanently engaged in with my parents. If my father said no to my request for an ice-cream on a Sunday afternoon, my mother would say the same. If my mother said it was lights out during the week at exactly ten minutes past eight, my father would not allow a minute beyond that. It was painful to observe and live with two people so obviously joined as one, and so set in their desire to control me.

I was always outnumbered and had no choice but to do exactly as I was told. They took turns to be rule-maker and rule-enforcer. My early childhood years were marked by the establishment and enforcement of rules for every conceivable occasion. And occasions, there were many – all involving friends, extended family and associates. It was suffocating, to say the least. So when my parents died – I was twenty-seven at the time and still living at home – I grasped the opportunity to break free from their grip. But even in death their hold on me felt as if I would never be truly free of it unless I completely changed direction and set my own course.

Through his connections, my father had arranged for me to work in the bank, insisting that the 'University of Life' was a better and more useful institution than any stuffy old academic hall. After I finished school, my father, with my mother's support, convinced me that earning from an early age was a better long-term strategy than wasting time on a tertiary education. He drew graphs of earnings versus age and showed me how a university graduate, despite his possible greater earning potential, would always lag behind the person who

entered the world of paid work directly on leaving school. Whether I agreed or not, it would have been hopeless to form a counter-argument with my mother nodding wisely while my father elaborated on his theories.

The direction I chose on learning that my inheritance would support my decision to change everything, was to resign from my job at the bank, leave the stifling city that I had been brought up in, and to seek out a place as far removed from my parent's world of rules, stability and order as could be imagined. And also, by choice – finally, my very own choice – I pledged to not be bound to the world of work. Instead, I made the decision to do precisely what my parents would have been horrified to know. I decided to write. If that would have horrified them, then the thought that I'd chosen to write without any desire or intention to make money out of my writing would have had them squirming in the joint eternity of their final resting place. I'd had their charred remains buried in the same casket. They deserved that – to be together forever.

So today would be a good day to write, I feel.

My writing now is in the form of an ongoing memoir. It didn't start like that. At first I wanted to write a novel, but I soon became bored with fiction. I realised that I wanted to write about myself in a way that affirmed my own control of my life. So in the beginning, after abandoning my first and probably last attempt to write fiction, I began to write about the differences that I felt and experienced as an independent, unconstrained individual. It was cathartic and liberating. But this too became tedious after a while. I mean, how often and in how many different ways can one really express the joy of self-realisation? Next I toyed with poetry and to some extent still find the form intoxicating. There is nothing quite like the distillation of an idea into its basic written harmonies. But still I needed something else and wasn't quite sure what that would be until about four years ago.

That's when I started writing my diary.

At the time I was still exploring the cave systems and complicated geography of the western mountain range roughly twelve kilometres away. Although popular, the mountain is notoriously dangerous, with unexplored caves, steep drops into the river system that snakes through the narrow valleys, and many a false path to lead the inexperienced hiker into serious difficulty. I'd already spent years exploring this wilderness and felt confident that I knew my way around.

After leaving my car at one of the many informal parking areas that dotted the area, I'd spend hours exploring the network of routes that criss-crossed the mountains and valleys, slowly developing a deep familiarity with this geographical labyrinth.

I wore good hiking shoes and lightweight hiking clothes. I was always prepared for sudden weather changes and carried sufficient water and compact high energy bars and fruit. I consider myself to be blessed with an above average amount of common sense – perhaps one of the few qualities derived from my parents – and I generally stayed on recognised pathways. Where I deviated from these, it was always done with a specific purpose in mind – to explore a new cave, a potential new route or an interesting outcrop of rocks. But these deviations were done with care and precision. I had an established method of positioning my whereabouts and this, coupled to a carefully observed referencing system to known pathways, kept me free from any danger of getting lost.

My one and only dangerous practice is to walk alone, but this is also my greatest joy. I simply cannot abide the presence of others when hiking, preferring always my own company above anything else. I say dangerous because it is commonly known – for good reason, I accept – that hiking alone is not ideal from a safety and emergency point of view. I agree whole-heartedly but still prefer this way to any other. Many are the days that I have spent walking those mountains in idyllic solitude. Such is my enjoyment of that solitude that when I do see that others are on the path behind me, I make a conscious effort to speed up to get away from them or, if ahead of me, I'll quickly find an alternative route, ensuring that I do not have to mingle or greet any other hikers.

It was on one of these walks about four years ago that I met Robyn, a post-graduate student and avid outdoor person.

I had been walking most of the day, following a favourite route that took me down to a small secluded pool that was not visible from the path – a place that I'd stumbled upon some months before when exploring the lower slopes of the valley through which the path meandered. I had spent a glorious hour lying on a flat rock adjacent to the pool, dipping into its cool waters whenever the heat became too much to bear. I had just finished dressing and was lacing up my hiking shoes when I thought I heard a faint cry emanating from a position somewhat higher up the river, above the small waterfall that fed the pool.

Slipping my daypack over my shoulders I listened again, not sure whether I'd imagined hearing someone or not. But then I heard it again above the gentle noise of the flowing water – a faint cry. It didn't take me too long to scramble up the side of the waterfall and to make my way further upstream where, fifty metres or so further on I came across a young woman in some distress. From the scratches and abrasions that were apparent on her arms and from the bad tear to her blouse, I gathered that she must have stumbled and fallen off the path above. Fighting back what I imagined to be tears of both pain and relief, she quickly confirmed my suspicions, adding that her ankle hurt really badly.

My assessment of this injury was that her ankle had probably received a nasty twist, but with no way of telling for sure, I suggested that she keep her boot on to protect her damaged foot and I would do my best to help her back up to the path. Fortunately the slope back up was a gentler incline at this point and the bushes that had helped cushion her fall on the way down now acted as useful handholds on the way back up. Still, progress was by no means easy as any weight on her ankle had her crying out in pain.

Once we had regained the path we stopped to rest and to reassess the situation. She told me that her name was Robyn and that she had been walking with a group of four other hikers who she'd met in town. She was travelling alone and had met the others at the hotel where they'd all been staying. The group had invited her to join them on their walk and she had accepted, but had not felt well halfway into the hike and had elected to return to their car to wait for them there. It was about an hour into her return trip that the accident had happened. She twisted her ankle on a loose rock, lost her balance and tumbled down the mountainside. She was extremely grateful that I had heard her and had come to her rescue.

The complication for both of us was that being unfamiliar with her surroundings she thought that she may have taken a wrong turn and was not sure where exactly the others had left their car. As there are a number of access points to the wilderness area and as she was unable to give me a reliable description of the one that they had used, the only solution was to

suggest to her that I take her back to the hotel in town. If her new friends returned to their car and found that she was not there, it seemed most likely that they would choose to return to the hotel themselves to figure out their next move. And once they realised that she was safely back as well, everything would be resolved. Robyn agreed that this was probably the best course of action. I fashioned a walking stick from a branch, shouldered her pack and, lending an arm, helped her to the place where my car was parked at the end of a little-used access road.

When we finally reached my vehicle Robyn was exhausted, and so was I. She was greatly relieved that she could take the weight off her injured ankle and virtually collapsed into the front passenger seat of my car. I didn't waste any time and soon we were on our way out of the mountains. We conversed on the way, revealing to each other more about ourselves. She spoke of her love of the outdoors and her aspirations as an environmental scientist. She was interested to hear that I had lived in the area for almost six years and wanted to know more about how I had come to be living out here and in particular about what I knew of the local mountains and their charms.

By the time that we got close to the turn-off to my property, it was all but decided that she would take a quick peek at my house and would stay for a drink before returning to the hotel in town. By now we had agreed that her ankle injury was likely to be nothing more serious than a bad twist. I mentioned that I had arnica tablets for the swelling and some over-the-counter painkillers at home – both of which she was unlikely to find at this late hour on a Sunday afternoon in town.

Although a live-alone bachelor, I was not concerned about showing her around my home. I am something of a stickler for tidiness – perhaps one of my parents' more positive influences – and so the cottage is always in immaculate condition – not because I expect guests, but because that's just how I like things to be. I sweep and wash floors regularly, I never have dirty dishes in the sink, my clothes are always folded and hung away and there are always fresh veld flowers in the bedroom and in the living room. Robyn was suitably impressed. She was full of compliments for the stone-walled cosiness of it, the cleanliness and neatness, the cool interior, the deep veranda and the views – particularly the views. Strange as it may seem – and I didn't tell her this – she was the first visitor to my home since I'd moved in six years before. It had taken me almost that long to get the old cottage to the condition that it was now in and it was pretty much finished in terms of all the structural and cosmetic changes that I had wished to make.

We agreed that we couldn't stay long as Robyn's hiking friends would be concerned at her disappearance and would need reassuring. I found the arnica tablets and the painkillers and gave these to her – full boxes of both – insisting that she take them with her as she would definitely need more later. I poured her a glass of fresh, cold well-water to take with the first of the tablets and then offered her a drink. She elected to have a whiskey and water and I joined her with one of my own. We agreed that we would only have one drink and so we settled into the comfort of my veranda chairs where we sat for a while, admiring the view of the far-flung veld and the distant rolling hills to the north, now bathed in the glow of the late afternoon sun.

One drink became two and two became three.

I must have nodded off for a while, because when I next noticed anything it was that the sun had set, leaving nothing but a soft orange glow in the west as the last of the day faded into night. I was still seated in my veranda chair but the chair that Robyn had occupied was empty. I also noticed that her water and whiskey glasses were missing. I assumed that she had gone inside to use the toilet and so I waited for a second or two before going inside to find her. The bathroom and toilet doors were open, as was my bedroom door. It didn't take too long to realise that she was not inside the cottage. I went back out to the veranda and called her name, softly at first and then louder. To my amazement there was no reply. I went back inside and saw that the glasses that she had used were washed, dried and returned to the shelf where they belonged. I went back outside and circled the house, calling for her into the growing darkness.

She had vanished. There was not a trace of her anywhere. Her backpack, which she had left in my car, was gone and so was she. I surmised that she must have suddenly taken the decision to make her own way back to town, immediately knowing as I thought this, that it would be unlikely. She knew that town was at least twelve kilometres away and her ankle was in no condition – despite the arnica and painkillers – to walk that distance. Besides which, she had scant idea of the direction to take, especially at night. Nonetheless, I got into my car and drove the eight hundred metres to the entrance gates to my farm, and then halfway to town before returning, scanning both sides of the road with the aid of a powerful torch as I slowly made my way back home.

Then I went carefully through my small cottage and, with my torch, I criss-crossed the area surrounding the house. I called her name over and over until it dawned on me that I may have imagined the whole episode of finding her in the mountains, rescuing her, bringing her home to have a few drinks and conversation on my veranda. Although this seemed as improbable as her sudden disappearance, I had no other explanation.

I was restless that night, and had difficulty sleeping, imagining her voice again and again, and seeing her in my half dream-like state as the real person who I was absolutely sure I'd met on the mountain that Sunday afternoon. At some stage in the night I woke with a start and remembered that I'd given her the arnica and painkilling tablets and thought that their discovery would provide the answer to whether I had imagined all of this or not. I rose quickly and padded to the bathroom and opened the mirrored medicine cabinet fixed to the wall above the basin. The arnica tablets, less one, and the painkillers, also less one, were exactly where they are normally kept. This confused me even more because I didn't recall using either of these for myself but I did remember giving them all to Robyn the previous afternoon when we'd first arrived at the cottage. She'd had one of each and placed the remaining blister packs in a shirt pocket. I was sure of it!

In the harsh daylight of Monday morning I re-examined the cottage, room by room, and then the veranda, and everywhere around the house for at least a hundred metres in every direction. I checked the car, twice – maybe three times – but of Robyn there was absolutely no sign whatsoever, anywhere. I eventually concluded that the whole episode had been a figment of my imagination and that perhaps I was suffering a form of hallucinogenic depression brought on by an unrealised loneliness. I didn't believe this for one moment, but then again, I had no other explanation.

A week later, with the whole incident still fresh in my mind, I drove into town to buy some provisions. After concluding my transactions I made my way over to the *Flock 'O Sheep*, the pub attached to the local hotel. I usually stop by for a beer or two when I'm in town, just to catch up on the local news. The topic on the tongues of the few who found it necessary to be in a pub at 11h30 on a week-day morning was startling. All were talking about the young woman who had disappeared while hiking after being separated from friends the previous week. Search parties had been combing the mountains for her since then, but not a trace of her had been found. I was astonished and listened with a renewed sense of disbelief at what I felt I knew about the woman's disappearance. I finished my two beers and left the pub, feeling quite ill.

I sat in my car for half an hour, trying to figure out what I should do. The obvious would be to approach the authorities with what I knew, or thought I knew. I pondered this for a while and finally concluded that my contribution would serve no purpose other than to create confusion. I had scoured my property and had found no trace or indication that Robyn had ever been at my cottage. To now declare that she had been there and to then try to explain how, why or where she'd disappeared to, would complicate matters beyond belief, and very likely bring scorn upon me.

With the decision made to say nothing, I headed back to my cottage.

The four hikers who she had set out with on the day of her disappearance were the ones who raised the alarm. They had made their way back to their car after a day in the mountains fully expecting to find Robyn waiting for them. But she wasn't there and nobody they spoke to had seen her. After a brief scouting search back along the trail they all assumed she would have followed, the four returned to town and reported the matter to the police. Nothing much happens in town on a Sunday, so other than have her hotel room opened by management to confirm that her possessions were still in the hotel – suggesting that she hadn't left town – the police only began to consider their options on the following day, probably at the same time that I was wandering about my property trying to make sense of her disappearance.

After search parties had been deployed, the four hikers were interviewed extensively by the police, both as a group and individually. It had very quickly become clear to the investigating officers that the four were not complicit in any wrong-doing and that their concern for Robyn's safety and their complete mystification as to her whereabouts was as genuine as one would expect from the innocent. The four hikers felt awful about her disappearance and rightly so. It had not been a good idea to allow her to return to the car by herself when she had felt ill. One of the four should have accompanied her. They all felt equally responsible.

She was never found.

So my writing has been both autobiographical and diary-like. I keep it to myself and I write for my own purposes, mostly – because of Robyn – to try to make sense of a life that I can no longer be sure really exists. I'm talking about my own as well, and not just hers. I have come to the conclusion that the mind has neural pathways that are not well-disposed to the maintenance of sanity. In much the same way that I prefer to hike alone, the mind takes itself for a walk from time to time – by itself, without any guidance or adherence to the maps

detailing the safest route. This is the only way that I have been able to make sense of my afternoon with her.

And the others.

Yes, since then there have been others. They bother me as much as I am bothered by Robyn. Since her disappearance four years ago, two more people have gone missing in the vicinity of the town and the nearby mountain wilderness area. Their separate disappearances have been as mystifying as Robyn's was. And in both instances, I met them shortly before they disappeared. That alone has kept me wondering about my state of mind – the fact that people who I have met have simply vanished off the face of the earth.

The first of the two to disappear after Robyn was Diane, an attractive woman of roughly my own age. I met her with the group of five others that she was travelling with on one of my periodic visits to town about two years ago. As usual I had my customary two beers at the *Flock* before heading home and ended up in conversation with the group of six outdoor enthusiasts. They all knew each other well and were planning a few day-trips into the mountains to explore some recently discovered caves. I got chatting to them and when they realised that I was a keen hiker who had regularly spent time in the mountains, they tried to persuade me to act as their guide. They were willing to pay but I have no interest in showing people around the mountains. To this day I still prefer my own company when out walking, and so gracefully declined their offer.

I was happy to say good-bye to the group of lively hikers after my two beers. They were all in high spirits when I left them and were planning to have a pub lunch at the *Flock* before heading back to their hotel rooms for an after-lunch nap. I had one more task to attend to before returning home and that was to collect a repaired tyre from a garage at the other end of town. The condition of the gravel roads that lead to and from town meant that this was a regular occurrence. I always made sure that I had my tyres repaired whenever I encountered a problem with one of them, never allowing the punctured tyres to accumulate, although I had extras back home, just in case.

Cruising back through town after collecting my repaired tyre I saw the woman who had earlier introduced herself as Diane, walking alone along the road in a direction that would lead her away from the hotel. She looked upset – as if she'd been crying – so I stopped and asked if she needed any help. She hesitated for a moment but then recognised me and said that she just needed some breathing space as her partner had become his usual obnoxious self after one too many beers. Then she asked if I wouldn't mind driving her to the town limits and back to the hotel, just for a change of scenery. She seemed a little sad and I could hardly say no, so I leaned over and opened the passenger door for her to climb in, which she quickly did.

We chatted as we drove and when she learnt that I lived a short way out of town and after hearing my proud description of my small home, she asked if I wouldn't mind showing her the place. I had a moment of crystal clear déjà vu as I recalled the fateful day that I'd taken Robyn home two years earlier. Also, this time I had the distinct impression that Diane was coming onto me. Her tone had changed and she was looking far too relaxed alongside me. I had no interest in having any sort of involvement with her and suggested that showing her the cottage wouldn't be opportune right now and besides which, what about her companion and the rest of her friends? She was insistent, assuring me that they would all be

sleeping by now and wouldn't wake up until much later. I relented and we drove south towards my property.

Diane chatted merrily along the way, commenting on the natural beauty of the surrounding veld, asking all manner of questions, and implying – I thought – how much she longed to escape from the city. She was certainly taken by what she saw when we arrived at my home, gushing about its perfect location, the wide vistas and the harmonious setting of my little stone cottage in the vast plains that surrounded it. If she was impressed by what she saw outside, she just about burst with excitement and flattery when she saw the neat, cool interior. Rudely I suppose, I decided not to offer her a drink, anxious as I was to get her back to town.

When my bladder reminded me of my earlier two beers at the *Flock*, I excused myself to go to the toilet. Diane said that she'd wait outside on the veranda. But when I came outside a short while later, she wasn't there. It was almost a carbon copy of the Robyn incident, but this time, Diane had literally disappeared into fresh, daylight air. It was still light and I could see for miles in all directions. Had she been walking anywhere in the veld I would have seen her. But she was nowhere to be seen. Again I found myself scouring the area around the cottage and beyond, and every corner inside the house. I walked across to the nearby grove of poplar trees, thinking that she might have gone there, but there was no trace of her. I called her name out loudly, but, with a sinking heart I realised that, impossibly, she had vanished.

I didn't return to town that afternoon. I was too gutted by the woman's disappearance and thought that I would wait for the inevitable search party to come to me. But I was mistaken. By the following day – after a night of almost no sleep – the horizon remained clear with no sign of any vehicles coming my way. I thought back to the previous day and realised that it was quite possible that no one had seen Diane getting into my car or seen her travelling with me through town. My chest felt tight and I realised that I had been literally holding my breath on and off through the morning as I waited for the inevitable investigation of Diane's disappearance to find its way to my front door.

Then it occurred to me – could she possibly be back in town, safe in the company of her companions? Had I imagined all of this – imagined bringing her back to the cottage? Eventually, my curiosity got the better of me. I had a good enough reason to return. I had an almost empty gas cylinder that I'd neglected to take with me on the previous day's excursion. Loading this into the boot of my car I drove the twelve kilometres back to town.

After having my gas bottle filled I ambled over to the *Flock* and, sure enough, the usual regulars were there, all arguing about the unexplained disappearance of one of the hiking group's women. Speculation was rife, but the general consensus was that she'd been mightily pissed off with her partner whose manners, everyone agreed, receded in direct proportion to the volume of alcohol he consumed. A few of the regulars had seen the two of them arguing and Diane then leaving in a huff and in tears. The rest of the group had carried on drinking for a while before all going off for an afternoon nap. No one had seemed particularly worried about Diane's whereabouts and no one had seen her since she stormed out of the pub. Some of the *Flock* regulars thought that she'd simply upped and left, grabbing a ride from a passing motorist – probably a passing truck driver.

I couldn't add anything to the speculation and after only one beer I left, heading homewards in deep confusion as to what to do next. In the end I did nothing. Later that week,

when it became apparent that she had vanished, the local authorities did their rounds taking statements from everyone who had seen her that day. My statement simply ended at the door to the *Flock*, which was – I told the investigator – the last place that I'd seen her as I left the pub to fetch my repaired spare tyre. I hadn't witnessed the flare-up between Diane and her friend and so my statement was hardly worth examining.

With similar reasoning to the incident with Robyn, I again decided that to volunteer that I'd driven her to my cottage, would complicate matters unnecessarily. So I said nothing about that.

And that was just about the end of it. After the investigation the official line was that Diane had probably hitched a lift out of town and had taken herself to some new location where she was probably happily keeping some or other Good Samaritan trucker happy in exchange for a roof over her head. I wasn't so sure about that, but I had no answers of my own.

The third incident happened less than a month ago.

I'd spent the day walking the mountain paths, taking in the fresh air and revelling in the wild and natural terrain. I'd seen a few other hikers in the distance but had managed to avoid making contact with any of them. This was a day spent solely in the presence of the wilderness, without any plans to seek out new routes or to explore new caves. I'd spent the previous week retiling the bathroom and repainting the kitchen cupboards. I felt that I needed a break and there was no better break than walking the old familiar mountain paths.

My writing slowed down considerably after the disappearance of Diane. That event served to switch off the need to understand things, to make sense of a world that I felt to be less in control of than I'd imagined. These thoughts had occupied my mind since the disappearance of Robyn, and when Diane vanished I realised that my finite understanding of reality needed to change. I could no longer explain everything from a position of logic and I needed to become comfortable with that idea. It hadn't been going well. I needed a distraction to keep me away from my attempts through writing to rationalise my world. Refurbishing the cottage was the remedy. I made a list of jobs whose completion I felt would serve as gratification sufficient to distract me from the mysteries of Robyn and Diane's disappearances. And I must admit that I hoped that these distractions would also serve to deaden the secret guilt that I felt about being the last person to have seen the two women before they vanished.

Driving home after a day in the mountains felt wonderful. I was about halfway to the turn-off to my home when I came across a young man with a weighty looking pack on his back walking in the direction that I was travelling, towards the intersection where I'd turn left to my cottage and where turning right would lead one back to town. I pulled up next to him and asked if he'd like a lift as far as the intersection. He seemed grateful and quickly accepted my offer. He was a good-looking fellow, probably a few years younger than me, and easily struck up conversation. He was travelling across the country on his own, seeking out the wild places and trying to do as much as possible on a very tight budget. He was planning to sleep rough on the outskirts of town that evening and would be very grateful to get a lift as far as the intersection.

I liked him immediately. He had a pleasant smile and was clearly interested in the wilderness. He was cheerful and engaging. I also liked the fact that he was polite and

genuinely grateful for the short ride that I'd offered him. On a whim I decided to offer him a place to stay for the night. I explained that I lived in the area in a small one-bedroom house, but if he was willing to sleep on the veranda, I could offer him a clean camping mattress on which to bed down for the night. I had planned to go into town early the next morning so it wouldn't be out of my way drop him off there the next day.

He was excited and very grateful, saying that he would certainly prefer to sleep on my veranda than in the veld outside town. That's how I met Steven.

We spent a pleasant evening together sharing stories about our adventures in the wilderness. He had travelled extensively and knew the bush well. Like me, he preferred traveling and hiking alone, settling comfortably for his own company above the company of others. He wasn't fussy about the fact that all I could offer him for dinner was spaghetti bolognaise – one of my standards – and in fact he tucked in wholeheartedly, not hesitating to accept when I offered him a second helping. We ate outside, on the veranda, enjoying the cool evening air and the bright wash of stars against the moonless night sky. The town lights glowed faintly towards the north but other than our own voices we were surrounded by silence.

I let Steven use the bathroom first to shower and while he was doing so I hauled the camping mattress out of the cupboard where it was kept and set it up on the veranda for his use. We had a mug of coffee together and then I left him on the veranda and headed off to shower and then bed.

I got up early, as I usually do. I used the bathroom, got dressed and fired up the gas hob to boil water for my regular first mug of coffee. I wasn't sure whether my guest was awake or not, but I assumed that he was an early riser like me and so I didn't worry too much about disturbing him. One of my favourite things is to sit outside with a mug of coffee first thing in the morning, watching the veld come alive in the soft light of dawn. It's the combination of the fresh air, the stillness, the half-light and the smell of the veld that I find so intoxicating. I felt certain that Steven would be similarly inclined and would also welcome an early morning coffee.

With two mugs of the hot brew in my hands, I nudged the unlocked doors to the veranda open with my hip and stepped outside. Steven was nowhere to be seen. I immediately assumed that he had gone around the corner of the house to relieve himself, and so, thinking nothing of his absence, I placed the two mugs on the veranda table and looked out across the veld, sucking in the cool early morning air and thinking for the umpteenth time, just what a privilege it was to wake up to this every morning.

Only then did it occur to me that Steven was taking a long time to relieve himself and almost simultaneously I had a flashback to the mysterious disappearance of Diane – and Robyn before her. I stepped down off the veranda, deliberately scuffing my boots against the three steps as I did so, hoping to alert Steven to my presence so as not to embarrass him, and took a walk around the house. Steven was nowhere in sight. I circled the house back to the front veranda and went inside, thinking that he may have been ahead of me, but he wasn't anywhere inside either.

Returning to the veranda, I noticed that his pack was gone and that there was absolutely no evidence of him having spent the night here. The camping mattress, incredibly it seemed, was also gone. I checked and found that it had been folded and returned to its

home inside the cupboard where all my other camping gear was stored. I sat down on the top step of the veranda, closed my eyes and tried to remember everything about the evening before, hoping against hope to find some clue buried in the recesses of my mind as to how this could be. I thought back to the disappearance of Robyn, the disappearance of Diane and wondered how this could have happened again, this time to a young travelling loner.

But my mind stayed locked against any explanation. As was the case with the others, there was nothing that I could do to find even the slightest clue as to the whereabouts of Steven.

I must have sat there for well over an hour, trying to figure this all out. Eventually I stood up, feeling leaden, and decided that I needed a fresh mug of coffee. I'd left the two mugs on the table when I'd first come outside and the coffee would be cold by now. Approaching the veranda table, I was halted in my tracks when I saw that there was only one mug.

One mug, where I was absolutely certain there should have been two.

Leaving it on the table I hurried inside, straight to the kitchen and sure enough the only other three mugs that I possess were standing neatly on the shelf where they belong. I felt each of them, searching for the one that would surely still have some retained heat from the coffee that I was sure it had been filled with earlier. They were all ice cold. I went back outside and retrieved the fourth mug. The coffee was cold, but the mug still held onto some residual warmth. I returned to the kitchen, tossed the cold coffee into the sink and heated water for a fresh mug. With one mug of fresh coffee in my hand I returned to the veranda, sat down and tried to think.

That was less than a month ago.

I've done a lot more thinking since then, but I haven't found any answers. Unlike Robyn and Diane, whose disappearances provoked searches and investigations, Steven's disappearance went unnoticed by any of the townsfolk that I've had contact with in the past month. There hasn't been a word spoken about the young traveller. It seems that I was the only one who knew about him. I learnt this both with an unexplained sense of relief and an increased confusion. Had I completely imagined him? The coffee mug clue, if that's what it was, had led me to looking for other clues. The plates and the cutlery that we had used that evening also seemed not to have been used. I found one plate, one knife and one fork on the drying rack that morning, and one glass. I was sure that we'd both had a couple of beers – two each. The evidence suggested that this was so – four empty beer bottles in my glass recycling box. I rarely have four beers alone.

So my thinking about Steven's disappearance, and naturally I suppose, that of Diane's and Robyn's, has occupied much of my waking time during the past few weeks. It hasn't been easy. The more I've thought about things, the more I realise that there are no absolutes in this world. We inhabit a universe of chance and conspiracy. I have no idea what happens next. I wish for nothing but to be left alone, to enjoy the vast veld around me and the distant mountains.

My parents never understood the urgency of my need for the comforting reassurance of solitude. They insisted on introducing me to their friends, hoping that I would strike up a friendship with one or more of their ghastly children. I never did and never wanted to.

Because I had no choice, I lived in their house, in their joined-together shadow, on the edge of their shallow social world, in their tiringly self-appointed image of me, and in their oppressively Tweedledum and Tweedledee twinhood, when all I wanted was to be me – and for them, to disappear. When they died in the fire that destroyed the home that I'd spent my entire life in up until then, I escaped unhurt and unmoved. It had been a dreadful accident, or so it was concluded at the time. I knew better but I wasn't going to tell. Chance and conspiracy – that's how the universe flipped them the bird.

I have a feeling that the universe is playing its own game with me. The strangers who have come into my life in recent years and then vanished are not strangers at all. They live with me and I live with them. That's how it feels. I'm not sure that I like this at all but what am I to do about it? The best that I can do is to stay here, far away from everyone else and hope, for their sakes, that as few of them as possible cross my path. That's about as much as I care to think about for now. In the meantime I have chores and a long list of jobs to attend to.

I keep myself occupied with work around the property. It helps to lessen the burden of thinking. My job list is endless and I am thankful for that. There are many tasks to choose from, but today I think that I'll roll up the living room carpet and start with the cellar beneath the cottage.

## A TRULY MEMORABLE DISH

Victor didn't mind standing in a short queue before being shown to his table. He knew that he'd taken a chance by not booking but had reasoned that a Thursday evening would not be a busy time for the restaurant. He was right about that, but the popularity of the Italian-styled *Pizza, Pasta, Perfect* or the 'Three Ps', as it was popularly known, was such that even on quiet nights, tables were at a premium.

As it happened the wait did not turn out to be too long and Victor was soon shown to a small table for two near a window that commanded a stunning view of the bay and its surrounds. The *maitre d'*, a good-looking dark-haired woman who fitted the role perfectly as the Manager of an Italian restaurant, smiled warmly as she presented the menu to him and explained that Andre, his waiter, would be with him in a short while to take his drinks order while he scrutinised their fabulous menu.

Since his short-lived, shambolic and ill-considered marriage to Roger had come to a dramatic end six months ago, Victor treated himself once a month to a meal out at a restaurant of his own choosing, freed finally from having to live with his biker ex's obscene predilection for hamburger and beer joints. Victor openly admitted to friends and family that his marriage to Roger had been all about the sex and nothing else. He'd been swept off his feet by a man two years younger than him who had a body that any of Michael Flatley's boys would have been proud of, and a cock the size of a baby's arm. The whole biker scene had also been quite appealing at first, but Roger's revelation, two weeks after they got married, that he wasn't about to stop chasing other men just because he'd hooked up with Victor, simply wasn't what Victor expected from a marriage.

Victor had lasted five frenetic months, during which time he'd twice found his new husband in bed with a couple of rent boys, once with an aged iron-pumping bad-ass biker everyone knew as Queenie and once with a young newbie the gang all thought to be more straight than queer. But when Victor came across the two of them in his and Roger's marriage bed, he was left with no doubt that the newbie was well and truly committed to cock.

Roger's licentiousness aside, although in and of itself a deal-breaker, Victor struggled to adapt to the pace of Roger's social life. Early on, when things were new and exciting, Victor had been swept up by it all, but after their marriage, he really did expect Roger to dial down on the social activities and to spend more time with him, setting up a home of their own. He'd got that badly wrong and rather than slow down, Roger had started to speed up, wanting to go out every night, and always to the same loud and tedious place, *The Boy's Bun and Banger Bar*, also known as the *Four Bs*.

Victor's escape from his marriage to Roger had not been without cost and in the end he'd been pressured into providing Roger with a lump sum payment in lieu of a monthly alimony. Victor was the breadwinner and so in the end, his attorney had advised him to make a deal to settle everything so that all ties could be cut. Both parties signed the agreement and

that was that, except that Victor's five-month marriage had cost him a small fortune and had left a sizable dent in his savings. But for all of that, the lesson had been learned and he was now thankfully free of Roger.

Roger's response to their divorce had been to launch a smear campaign against him, deliberately seeking to alienate all their friends from him. Before long the word was out that Victor was a delusional fuck-fairy who was so possessive of Roger that he would invent stories of Roger's supposed dalliances with a host of imagined bed partners – friends, family and blow-ins alike. 'Bizarre,' Victor said. 'Exactly!' said Roger. Their marriage did not end well and most of their mutual friends were eventually won over by Roger's brazen lies and fabrications. Victor was not averse to turning his back on all of them and starting again.

As a reward to himself and as a reminder of how horrible a life he'd escaped, Victor now made it a cleansing ritual to take himself out for a monthly meal, allowing himself the luxury of selecting a new restaurant each month, without interference from anyone. It was truly liberating!

He'd walked past the *Three Ps* on a number of occasions and colleagues at the accounting office where he worked had all said that it was a lovely restaurant with excellent food and superb service. So far he wasn't disappointed.

Soon enough Andre made his appearance and Victor ordered a carafe of Sauvignon Blanc from the handsome waiter and asked about the house specialities. Andre rattled off a list of recommended dishes which Victor only half listened to, preferring rather to bathe in the sexy tones of Andre's continental accent. Andre must have sensed Victor's indifference to the special items and so invited Victor to consider his choices from the menu while he saw to the wine.

When Andre returned Victor ordered the *Minestrone* soup as a starter and the *Spaghetti alle Vongole* as his main course. Andre commended him on his fine choice and after pouring Victor's wine, left him to gaze out of the window at the lights across the bay and to simply savour his time alone in the restaurant to the soft background sounds of Charles Aznavour – an unusual selection for an Italian restaurant Victor thought, but certainly not unpleasant.

The *Minestrone* soup was served just as Victor was nearing the end of his first glass of wine. Perfect timing, he thought as Andre refreshed his glass. The soup was piping hot and smelled delicious.

Feeling comfortable and warmed by the prospect of a good meal, Victor shrugged off his jacket and hung it over his chair. Since splitting from Roger he had moved into a small apartment which was conveniently located on the fringes of the restaurant and pub district of the city. A nearby bus route enabled him to make the journey to and from work in just less than half an hour. Since moving into the apartment, he found it a pleasurable activity to seek out a new restaurant from the many choices each month. There was a vast and varied selection in close proximity to his apartment and all within easy ambling distance. After the traumatic events of his brief marriage to Roger, he was in no mood to do anything other than spend time exploring these in his own company.

The soup was exceptional and boasted the perfect balance of pasta and vegetables. Victor didn't have to wait too long after finishing it before Andre removed his bowl, informing him that his *Vongole* would be served shortly as he topped up Victor's glass with a

little more Sauvignon Blanc. By now Victor had slipped into full relaxation mode and was feeling mightily content and at peace with the world, lapping up the sense of spoilt indulgence which he thought was owed to him.

The *Spaghetti alle Vongole* was served a short while later and Victor could not wait to taste the creamy freshness of the clam and spaghetti dish. He tucked in with exuberance and at the first taste of the classic dish, gave himself a virtual pat on the back for his excellent choice. The *Vongole* was perfect. The attractive *maitre d'* appeared on cue to ask if he was satisfied with the meal and he told her that it was outstanding.

Two or three mouthfuls later, Victor bit down hard on something that felt rubbery, not at all like the delicate softness of the clams that he'd been treated to up until now. Surprised, but also mindful of the fact that the tables close to his all had customers enjoying their own meals, he hesitated momentarily as he wondered what to do, having not yet swallowed the strangely different ingredient. He rolled his tongue over it and bit down on it again and concluded that in the making of his dish, a section of not entirely well-cooked, or perhaps over-cooked, octopus had found its way into his serving, an accident probably not uncommon in an Italian kitchen. Hardly thinking anything more of the matter, he swallowed it.

He scrutinised the next spoonful with care before popping it into his mouth. It all looked okay and indeed tasted and felt perfect in his mouth. Then he carefully checked the tables around his to make sure that nobody had noticed anything untoward in his hesitation with the previous mouthful. They hadn't.

At the very next spoonful of his main course, Victor experienced an exact repeat of the mouthful that had first unsettled him. Again he bit down onto something rubbery and tasteless, but now his reaction was one of annoyance. One piece of over-cooked octopus tentacle mistakenly added to his plate was excusable. Two were not. This time he simply wasn't going to swallow it. Trying to maintain an air of sophistication and good manners, he gently eased the tough lump into the pocket of his left cheek while he sifted, chewed and swallowed the more palatable clams, pasta and sauce that had been delivered – with the assumed lump of octopus – to his mouth. Then, as discretely as possible he expelled the offending piece into his serviette, pretending to mask a small cough as he did so, not wanting to draw attention to his actions from the surrounding tables. Again, no one seemed to have noticed his careful method.

They did however notice his reaction after he instinctively opened the serviette to examine the expelled piece of meat.

On opening the serviette Victor's reaction was delayed by no more than a second, just long enough for his brain to confirm exactly what it was that he was looking at. He screamed and leapt up out of his chair as if someone had suddenly stabbed him. And indeed, that's what it felt like in the region of his gut, as he instantly recalled his swallowing of the first piece of unidentified meat.

The piece that he'd seen on opening his serviette did not have the appearance of a piece of octopus at all. Instead it was unmistakably and immediately recognisable as the tip of a human finger. It was short, apparently cut off at the first joint below the end and was light grey in colour, as if softened or pickled in brine and as such, displayed no evidence of blood. Although the nail had been removed, the shape was unmistakable. It was a fingertip and it had been in Victor's mouth. Worse still, another of the same had not only been in his mouth,

but had also been sucked clean of its creamy sauce before being swallowed by him. Victor felt sick and found himself gagging uncontrollably as he stood bent over beside his table.

Surprisingly, nothing came out. But his forceful and loud retching did have an effect on those customers at tables in the immediate vicinity. They leapt up as one, aghast at the behaviour of the ordinary looking man initially seated close to them but now standing next to his table, doubled over, spluttering and retching loudly. One of the more caring of these observers rushed to his assistance and, making the reasonable assumption that Victor was choking on something, immediately started to hammer on his arched over back. All that this served to do was to infuriate Victor, who sprang upright and shouted at the man, 'Leave me alone!' The Good Samaritan backed off immediately.

By now the *maitre d'* and Andre had hurried over to Victor's table and were trying desperately to understand the nature of the problem and to pacify their distraught customer.

'Are you all right sir?' Andre asked, somewhat insensitively it seemed, because Victor's reply to this was loud and aggressive.

'No I'm not all right damn it. I swallowed a fucking finger!'

The *maitre d'* and Andre instinctively, and in tandem, looked at Victor's hands, noting simultaneously that all his fingers appeared to be intact.

'Not *my* finger, for fuck's sake... someone else's!'

'I am sorry sir, but I am a little confused. You swallowed someone else's finger?' the *maitre d'* asked, in as calm a voice as possible, acutely aware that her restaurant's air of dignified serenity had been shattered. All the tables immediately surrounding Victor's had been vacated, the customers backing off in horror at what had been observed and heard. Most thought that the man must be deranged. Elsewhere in the restaurant other patrons were looking decidedly uncomfortable and service had generally come to a standstill.

Victor, shaken by what he had just experienced, managed to calm himself sufficiently to say to the *maitre d'*, 'I just found the end of a human finger in my *Vongole*. I'm afraid something didn't taste right and I spat it out into my serviette. But worse than that, I think I swallowed the same thing only two or three mouthfuls earlier. I swallowed a finger that was cooked into my *Vongole*!'

By now all dining activity in the restaurant had come to a halt. Customers, those that were still seated and had cutlery in their hands, were fishing about in their various dishes, peering intently at everything that looked vaguely out of the ordinary. Other customers were cancelling their orders, asking for their bills and vacating their tables. The *maitre d'*, realising the full extent of the damage that was developing, faced the uneasy throng of customers and loudly proclaimed, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure that there has been some sort of misunderstanding here. Please try to enjoy your meals and let my staff deal with this unfortunate matter,' and as an afterthought, 'Oh, those of you staying for desert – and I hope you all will – it's on the house tonight.' That seemed to calm many of the customers other than those in the immediate vicinity of Victor's table, most of whom were still on their feet, ready to take whatever evasive action was necessary, depending on how the drama with the deranged man played out.

While the *maitre d'* had been busy with her announcement to the restaurant, Andre had been busy with Victor. 'Where's your serviette now? Is that it there?' he asked, pointing to a crumpled serviette under Victor's table.

Feeling embarrassed, nauseous and deflated, all at the same time, Victor looked down at the floor and said, 'I think so. When I saw what was in it, I threw it and the contents up in the air in horror. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry – for all of this.'

Sensing that the tide was turning in their favour, the *maître d'* immediately seized the opportunity to keep Victor on the back foot. 'Andre', she said in a commanding voice, 'Pick it up gently and let's see what's inside. And Andre, if there's nothing there,' fully expecting there to be nothing, 'then search the surrounding area; under every table, and on every table if necessary.' Turning to Victor she said, 'Sir, why don't you come with me?' and with that, turned and walked purposefully away between the tables of the still-startled customers towards her small office at the entrance to the restaurant. Still very embarrassed and now also a little unsure of himself, Victor followed her meekly and obediently across the restaurant floor, his eyes carefully averted from the gaze of the other clientele.

In her tiny office, the *maître d'* went on a charm offensive. 'Please have a seat,' she said, steering Victor towards a comfortable looking office chair facing her small, neat desk. 'And please call me Sonja. I very sorry about all of this and I'm sure that there's a logical explanation to everything. We pride ourselves on maintaining a spotless kitchen and we have strict food handling protocols in place. Once Andre returns with the results of his search and we have cleared up this matter and you are satisfied that whatever it was that you ate was not what you imagined – I'm sorry, what you surmised – I'd like to show you around our kitchen, just to put your mind at rest.'

By now real doubt had entered Victor's mind and he was feeling even more embarrassed than ever and also very, very tired. 'I really am sorry to have caused such a disturbance,' he said, looking at the woman and hoping that she didn't think too badly of him. 'All I'd like to do is settle my bill and go home, if that's all right.'

'There will be no bill for you tonight sir. It's on the house. Can I get you a coffee, or a cappuccino, perhaps – while we wait for Andre?'

'Thank you, no – I'm fine,' said Victor. 'And I'm happy to pay. Really, I am.'

At that moment, Andre knocked and entered the office. He had Victor's jacket over his arm. 'You left this at the table sir', he said, handing it to Victor. Then, directing himself to the *maître d'*, he said, 'Nothing – absolutely nothing – neither under the tables, nor on the tables.' And, as if to make a point, he turned to Victor and added with a faint smirk, 'Not a finger in sight – other than those attached to our customers' hands.'

Victor looked at the *maître d'*, feeling both confused, relieved and now, even more embarrassed. 'I'm sorry', he said, 'I'd really like to go now. Please let me pay for my meal and I'll be on my way, if you don't mind.'

The *maître d'* nodded in Andre's direction and said, 'Thank you Andre. That will be all. Please reassure our other guests,' and then waited until he'd left before saying to Victor, 'Really sir, the bill will be cancelled and I'll see you to the door, if you wish to leave now. I do hope that you'll dine with us again and that your next experience in our restaurant lives up to your expectations and our high standards.' She seemed slightly annoyed but remained composed as she stood and opened the door for Victor, gesturing for him to stand up. He heard himself mumble yet another apology and another half-hearted offer to pay for his meal, as the *maître d'* hurriedly, it seemed, ushered him through the front door and onto the

pavement, where she said, ‘Good night, sir. And thank you for dining at *Pizza, Pasta, Perfect*.’ Victor thought that she’d placed an undue emphasis on the word ‘*Perfect*’.

Feeling both exhausted and foolish, he slipped into his jacket and hurried off in the direction of his apartment.

The fresh evening air and the less than busy Thursday nightlife helped to clear Victor’s head and to distract him on his walk home as he oscillated between feeling foolish and feeling sick. He couldn’t make up his mind which of the two feelings was more palatable. In the end he decided that neither was and that trying to understand what had happened at the restaurant was not going to get him anywhere. Best to just forget the whole embarrassing, unsettling mess, he mused.

By the time he turned into his street he had all but convinced himself that there would be no permanent damage to either his self-esteem or his reputation. He hadn’t recognised anyone in the restaurant and he was unlikely to meet the *maitre d’* or Andre again, just so long as he stayed away from the ‘*Three Ps*’, which is exactly what he intended to do.

As he approached the front door to his apartment block, Victor reached into his jacket pocket for his keys and touched something that chilled him to his core – the familiar size and shape of the finger tip that he had all but convinced himself to have been an illusion. Fighting to remain calm, he removed his keys from his pocket and unlocked and entered his apartment. He locked and bolted the front door and made his way from room to room, turning on all the lights as he did. Returning to the kitchen where the apartment lights were the brightest, he poured himself a hefty glass of whiskey, removed his jacket, took two sizable sips of his drink and then tipped the contents of his jacket pocket onto the bright surface of the kitchen countertop.

Out tumbled the very same greyish fingertip that he’d expelled from his mouth into his serviette at the restaurant no more than an hour earlier. He looked at it with more intrigue than amazement and took another sip of whiskey. Trying to recollect the way he’d reacted when he’d first opened the serviette, he thought that the fingertip had somehow landed, by complete chance, in his jacket pocket when he’d spontaneously tossed it and the serviette into the air on first realising what he’d had in his mouth... and by God, on realising what he had swallowed only moments earlier. But then another thought crossed his mind.

He’d accompanied the *maitre d’* to her office but had left his jacket hanging over the back of his chair. Andre had brought it to him when he’d come to report that he had been unable to find anything resembling a finger either under or on a table. Could Andre have placed this thing in his jacket pocket? As concerned as he was by this thought, Victor was actually relieved to discover that he had not imagined the whole affair; that the *Vongole* really had been tainted. Tainted was putting it mildly, he thought as he refilled his whiskey glass and took another substantial sip.

After another whiskey, or two, and after carefully looking at the small nail-free fingertip for more time than he realised had passed, Victor took a fork from the nearby cutlery stand and gently pressed down on the fingertip to see how much give it had. To his surprise it gave a lot and flattened out quite easily but regained its shape when he released pressure by lifting the fork. A thin green-grey fluid escaped from the severed end and, leaning forward, Victor smelled this carefully. He detected a fusion of briny olive and rosemary scents and maybe a hint of basil – certainly garlic. Poking the soggy fingertip with

the fork he suddenly realised that it held no bone. It had had been deboned, which could mean only one thing – that this was a deliberate and carefully prepared piece of, well... meat. And of course, that would also explain the absence of the fingernail – carefully prepared!

By now Victor's immersion in the understanding of what he had discovered, or been exposed to, had taken over from any earlier instinctive aversion. With the aid of the whiskey, his fascination with the object in front of him outgrew any previously held inherent revulsion. Stretching over towards the cutlery stand, he selected a sharp knife. With care, he sliced a thin disc of flesh from the fingertip and without hesitation slid it into his mouth. He chewed down on it.

The rubbery texture that had earlier alerted him to the possibility that this was not a clam was still there, but a lot less so, now that he had taken a smaller portion into his mouth. He chewed through this quite easily and was amazed at the release of flavours. All of the delicacies of a well-prepared *Spaghetti alle Vongole* flooded his taste buds and he was immediately reminded of his initial enjoyment of the dish when he first tasted it earlier that evening.

Even the whiskey tasted bland against the barrage of flavours that he now experienced and so, without skipping a beat, Victor took another slice of the small oddity, eating it directly from the kitchen countertop. All too soon he had finished it, and other than a small puddle of remnant exuded fluid, the countertop was bare. He hardly thought twice before leaning forward to lap up the last of the thin sauce with his tongue.

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Two weeks passed and although he wasn't yet due for his monthly treat, Victor could not wait to return to the *Pizza, Pasta, Perfect* restaurant. He managed to hold out for one more week but finally, three weeks since his first visit, Victor returned.

He expected to be met with a certain amount of hostility from the restaurant staff, and so he was more than a little surprised when the same *maitre d'* greeted him at the door with a warm, 'Welcome back sir. What a pleasure it is to see you again. Your usual table, I assume?' Victor smiled weakly and nodded, and was shown to the same table that he'd occupied three weeks earlier. As he sat down, he thought that he noticed some familiar faces and then realised that most of the customers, if not all, were exactly the same as those who he'd seen previously. More extraordinary than that though, was that not one of them seemed in the least bit surprised or flustered by his presence. Nonetheless, Victor thought it best to not draw attention and so kept himself deeply engrossed in the menu until his waiter arrived. And of course, almost predictably, it was none other than the very same Andre from three weeks' ago.

Andre greeted him politely with absolutely no hint of the smirk that he'd last displayed and went through the same motions of service that Victor had first experienced. When it came to ordering, Andre seemed not at all taken aback by Victor's request to have the *Minestrone* soup starter and the *Spaghetti alle Vongole* as his main course again. This time however, Victor bravely asked if could have an extra helping of clams. Andre's response was immediate, 'By all means sir. The *Vongole* is a firm favourite of this establishment's and just about everyone asks for extra clams. It'll be my pleasure.'

The meal turned out to be everything that Victor had hoped for. The *Minestrone* was delicious and he simply couldn't wait for the *Vongole*. When it was served, the extra helping of clams was immediately apparent as the dish was awash with a rich and creamy sauce-covered topping. Victor couldn't wait to get stuck in, which he did with relish and with his first mouthful was rewarded with not one, but two easily identified fingertips. This time, he chewed them slowly and deliberately, and gradually they came apart in his mouth, filling it with the release of flavours that he had spent the better part of three weeks dreaming about. The meal was simply outstanding, and by the time that he had finished all that was on his plate, Victor felt completely satisfied. He finished his wine and ordered coffee.

Andre asked if he'd like to see the dessert menu, and when Victor said that he didn't think that he could manage anything more, Andre said that the house speciality, *Tiramisu*, was particularly fresh and flavoursome this evening and he'd strongly recommend that 'sir' try one. The portions were not large, he assured Victor, but were packed with flavour. Tempted beyond his stomach's capacity, Victor agreed to a portion of the well-known Italian dessert.

He wasn't disappointed. As Andre had promised, the flavours were outstanding and Victor took his time savouring each and every spoonful. About half way through the dessert he became more acutely aware of the combination of flavours and unusual textures on his palate and tongue – mild and sweet with a distinct creaminess, almost spongy; reminiscent of the softness of well-prepared calf brains – something that he'd eaten once with Roger, but not enjoyed very much at the time. Theirs' had been overdone. Nevertheless, this reminded him of that, but much, much richer and infused with hints of espresso, almond and chocolate.

It was a truly memorable dish.

## APRICOT

I met the Watsons when I was twenty-four. I was a part-time final-year student studying horticulture and needed a job of sorts to keep me fed and sheltered while I tried to figure out what I was going to do with my life once I'd graduated. I knew that I wanted to work in agriculture but I also knew that I wasn't cut out for large-scale commercial farming. At the time, I was recovering from a messy break-up with my girlfriend of the past three years. We'd been living together for two of those and I thought that everything was hunky-dory. That was until she surprised me with the double breaking news that she was pregnant and that I wasn't the father. This she apparently 'knew for one hundred percent certain', which left me with little option but to ask her to move out of my flat once a paternity test confirmed that her memory had indeed provided a reliable record of who she had fucked other than me.

When I saw the advertisement for a general live-in factotum on a small family-owned and operated farm located a mere eighty kilometres from the city, I thought that this would offer me the best of both worlds. I still had an established circle of loyal friends in the city but I needed something new, something different. If I could land the farm job, I'd have a roof over my head and probably, or hopefully, food as well, a chance to get some first-hand exposure to small-scale farming, and on top of that, I'd be only an hour away from my city roots. Hopefully the move would also provide a respite from the many questions that were still stirring up a lingering attachment to the memory of my ex-girlfriend.

So I applied for the job and was invited for an interview on the farm that Saturday.

I arrived on a wet winter's day, one of those where the sky remains veiled in grey all day and rain falls in uncertain bursts. The turn-off to the Watson farm was marked by a sign that simply stated, *Barry's Berry Farm – home of the Watsons*. What it lacked in originality was compensated for by its simple honesty – a virtue that resonated with my current distaste for pretension of any sort. A good omen, I thought. I turned off the tar and onto a muddy farm road that wound its way slightly downhill for about three kilometres through attractive farm lands. Eventually the road bent slightly leftwards before it took a wide right bend through a small copse of trees and then over a solid-looking concrete bridge spanning a narrow river swollen by days of steady rain. Beyond that, another two hundred metres slightly uphill, the road led towards an open gate. As I passed through what I assumed was the entrance to the farm I noticed that the gate was hardly necessary because the fence to either side of the white-painted gateposts was in a state of serious disrepair. My first thoughts were that I could see why the owners needed help around the place.

Beyond the gate, another kilometre on, were a few sheds to the left and right and directly ahead an old-looking farmhouse that boasted a deep, full-length veranda. The area in front of the house comprised a roughly rectangular-shaped large open yard flanked by two small barns to the left and a larger barn to the right. Another smaller barn, the furthest structure from the house, stood a short distance beyond the large barn. No two structures

lined up in any way with each other, making the whole collection of farm buildings look as if their siting had been random and added piece-meal as circumstances dictated. Despite that, the whole composition had the appearance of a quaint country farm.

Standing on the veranda was a fit-looking middle-aged man sporting a wild grey beard and a shaved head. He looked friendly enough and waved me towards a spot next to an old-model Toyota pick-up that could have spent a day in the car wash and not come out any cleaner. I parked my 10-year-old VW Jetta next to it and quickly made my way over to the veranda, dodging the muddy puddles that dotted the front yard.

Barry Watson met me with a broad smile and an extended arm. His grip was firm but not overpowering. Commenting on the lousy weather, he ushered me inside and into a large but cosy lounge where a wood fire crackled in the hearth. 'Sit, sit, sit,' he insisted, gesturing towards a comfortable looking armchair, one of four to accompany a sagging couch, all unmatched, which created a very comfortable and relaxed and somewhat bohemian feel to the room. 'Cath,' he called, 'Sean's here.'

A good-looking woman appeared at the door and introduced herself as Cath, Barry's wife, and asked if I'd like a cup of coffee or tea – or something stronger. I opted for the coffee and Barry said he'd like the same, please.

I have to say that I was made to feel welcome from the moment I set foot onto the veranda. Barry and Cath were warm and friendly. The interview was as informal as one could imagine with the two of them asking me all sorts of questions about myself and explaining what they wanted from the assistant who they were looking for. I felt as if the job was mine from the outset, so well did our conversation flow. We chatted comfortably to each other and I couldn't help but feel completely at home in the warmth of their hospitality. In between questions they explained that the farm had always been a dream of theirs' and that four years ago, they had finally decided to part ways with the city and move into the country.

Their daughter, their only child, had then just finished school and had been excited at the prospect of change. With no clear direction as to what she wished to do after finishing her schooling, she needed no convincing that a country sojourn might spark new ideas. The timing seemed right for all sorts of reasons so they had sold up in the city, bought this small, well-established but under-productive farm and moved in.

*Barry's Berry Farm* had taken off rather well and that was why Barry and Cath were looking for help. The farm was not a large one but it produced a substantial quantity of herbs and an increasingly large quantity of berries, all of which were in great demand from a well-established network of customers both in the district and in the city. The farming was not labour intensive and so they were able to manage alone initially, but extra hands had always been in their plans.

When I expressed surprise that they had managed without help for so long, I thought I noticed a split-second glance pass between the two of them before Barry explained. 'We've had others before, but none of them have stayed too long – for one reason or the other.'

While Barry went off to bring in a few more logs for the fire – he absolutely insisted that I stay inside, despite my offer to help – Cath returned to the subject of their daughter, explaining that she had an 'artistic temperament' and that she preferred her own company more than the company of others. The farm had been the perfect place to bring her to and she

was very happy for the freedom and abundant opportunities to self-express that living in the country afforded her.

Barry returned with three sizable logs just as Cath was finishing her brief description of their daughter. 'Her name, by the way,' he added, carefully placing a log onto the glowing embers, 'is Apricot.'

I had a sense of being carefully observed when the girl's name was revealed, but I kept my cool and didn't express surprise at the choice, treating their disclosure as if they'd named her Anne or Sharon or Claire. I think I passed that test easily.

My caring hosts – and prospective employers – then offered to show me the cottage where I would be staying if I was to secure the job. The rain had stopped and the three of us made our way around the back of the house and down a short path to a quaint-looking stone building situated not more than sixty metres away. Because of its position relative to the main house, I hadn't noticed it when I had driven into the front yard earlier.

On entering the cottage, I was immediately taken by the compact simplicity of it. It had no wasted spaces, no passages. It comprised three rooms – a cosy kitchen which included a table and four chairs, a comfortably furnished lounge leading off the kitchen, and leading off the lounge, a generously sized bedroom with a decent looking double bed. A small bathroom with a shower, toilet and basin led off the bedroom. The lounge had a fireplace to one side and double doors facing away from the main house, looking out over a tidy lawn and rows of berry bushes beyond. Access was through the kitchen and importantly, the cottage, like the main house, I was told, had its own Wi-Fi connection.

It was perfect and I would have eagerly exchanged my cramped, now lonely fourth storey flat in the city for this small gem. I said as much to Barry and Cath and they expressed their relief that I found their cottage so charming.

We made our way back to the main house and the warmth of the lounge where I was offered another cup of coffee and some of Cath's home-baked blueberry pie. I couldn't refuse the offer and so we spent another half hour chatting about the farm and Barry's farming principles and methods while enjoying a slice, and then a second slice of the best blueberry pie ever.

My interview, as relaxed as it was, had come to an end and Barry closed our conversation by telling me that it had been a pleasure to meet me and that he and Cath had two other interviews to conduct in the next couple of days before making their final decision. I could expect to hear from them in the course of next week. I thanked them and drove off feeling confident and excited. They waved a friendly goodbye and I waved back.

After crossing the concrete bridge I slowed down on the bend that lead through the copse of trees, and just as well that I did. Walking in the middle of the road towards me was a young woman who I guessed to be about my own age or younger. She was striking – tall and very slender and with auburn hair that hung straight down to her shoulders. She was dressed in a flimsy calf length white cotton skirt and a light blue blouse. She seemed to be in no hurry and completely unperturbed by the light rain that was now falling again. Her clothes were soaked through and this too seemed of little concern to her.

Unhurriedly she moved to the side of the road as I slowed down, moving towards the opposite side. Coming to a halt I lowered my window and asked if she needed assistance, or a lift back to the farm perhaps?

Without breaking her stride she turned her head slightly towards me, not actually looking at me and said, 'No thank you – it's not yet time for that,' and continued walking up the road.

I wasn't sure what to do – turn and follow her, try talking to her again? I really was at a loss and eventually did nothing, moving away slowly as I watched her in my rear-view mirror disappearing around the corner. And then she was gone, and I drove home, lost more in thought about the woman than the interview I had just had with Barry and Cath. The only thing that made sense to me of this brief encounter was the thought that I'd just met Apricot who, for some reason, thought it okay to walk around in the rain.

On Wednesday of the following week I received a call from Barry to tell me that if I was still interested, the job was mine. I was welcome to give it some more thought but please could I let him know by Friday at the latest, one way or the other. I told Barry that I didn't need to give it any thought at all and that I was thrilled to have made the grade and that I was ready to start work just as soon as they wanted me there. That proved to be immediately and so, a few days later – for the second weekend in as many weeks – I set out for the Watson's farm, this time on a Sunday morning. And this time, in perfect sunshine.

I have to admit that part of my haste and part of my readiness had to do with the woman on the road, who I still assumed was Apricot. Since seeing her I was entranced, so much so that on the Monday after my first visit to the farm, I set the ball in motion regarding the vacating of my flat and tying up loose ends. I'd convinced myself that I would get the job and so in preparation, started to get ready for a quick relocation. I had to find out more about the auburn-haired woman.

The farm looked good after the rain and although there were still some muddy patches, the road and the yard appeared to have been graded and tidied up since when I'd first seen it the week before. Barry and Cath greeted me enthusiastically and I was made to feel immediately comfortable as I settled into the cottage. Someone, Cath I presumed, had placed a large vase of fresh flowers on a side table in the lounge and the kitchen was stocked with an array of basics. I felt truly spoilt and couldn't believe my luck at finding such a decent and generous family. Working with Barry and Cath was going to be a pleasure.

In the days that followed I adapted to farm life quite easily. Both Barry and Cath were active but casual farming types and there was much to learn and much to do. I generally assisted where I could, Barry's intention being to have me become a jack of all trades as soon as possible. He wanted me to quickly understand the workings of the farm in all its complexity, which was, in truth, not all that complex. I followed instructions diligently, asking when I was uncertain and generally trying to make myself as useful as possible. I soon became familiar with the routine work that needed doing, as well as acquiring a detailed understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the irrigation system that fed the various sections of the farm from the river that formed one of its boundaries. Knowing this system and being able to quickly locate and tend to breakdowns was a particularly important responsibility. And of course there were a multitude of other day to day tasks that kept me busy from early morning through until the evening.

By the end of the first week I felt satisfied with my progress and was particularly chuffed when Barry told me that he and Cath were very impressed with my enthusiasm and my quick learning abilities. 'Keep it up!' he said. As pleased as I was with Barry's kind

affirmation of my work ethic, my thinking by now had become increasingly distracted by the non-appearance of Apricot for the entire week. I could no longer contain my curiosity and so as Barry and I sat on the front veranda of the main house, each with a small whiskey, to review and celebrate the achievements of the week and to plan for the next, I resolved to ask the question that had been on my lips since taking up residence a week earlier.

‘I hope you don’t mind me asking,’ I started hesitantly, ‘But when I came out here for the interview, you mentioned that you had a daughter...’ I let the sentence trail off, but Barry was ready with an answer, almost as if he had rehearsed it.

‘Apricot,’ he said. ‘You mean Apricot.’ It didn’t sound like a question so I kept quiet.

‘She lives in the barn – that one over there,’ he said, pointing towards the furthest structure from where we were sitting, a small neat box-like building with a steeply sloping corrugated iron roof beyond the farm’s large equipment and storage barn. I had an oblique view of one side and the front. I had already studied it carefully during the week, as I had all the buildings, and so knew that the wooden structure was completely closed at the back and that it had six high, small windows evenly spaced down each side. The large front door, typical of a barn, had a smaller normal sized door set into it, which I assumed was the only way in and out of the building.

‘She does her own thing,’ said Barry. ‘Cath and I realised early on that she was different. She’s an arty type and doesn’t mix easily. It’s one of the reasons we came here – to give her the space to be herself. She doesn’t need friends but she has a special way of being and seems happy and content on the farm. I renovated the barn because she wanted to be alone. So we let her do her own thing. We don’t place any pressure on her and she makes no demands on us. She’s a very private person and since moving into the barn has made it clear that nobody, other than Cath and I, may visit her there.’

Barry paused for a moment and then chuckled. ‘But we have to make an appointment if we want to visit her. Can you believe that? So for the most part we just leave her alone. That’s what she prefers.’

We sat in silence for a minute or two. I wasn’t sure how to respond to Barry’s revelations about his daughter so I just kept quiet and allowed the smooth evening air, rather than clumsy words, fill the space between us.

‘She’s mysterious,’ said Barry, breaking the silence. I had the impression that he wanted to talk more about her. ‘She collects provisions from Cath once a week at the back door to our house. She never comes inside. She drops off her washing for the week and collects it a week later. Cath sees and speaks to her more than I do, and then only about the food and washing. It’s hard actually. But that’s all she wants from us and we’ve learnt to let it be. Like the Beatles.’

He laughed a short, self-conscious laugh and leaned forward to top up my whiskey. ‘One for the road,’ he said, pouring us each a final splash of the good stuff.

I took the opportunity to mention and describe the woman that I’d seen walking in the rain as I’d left the farm after my interview a few weeks earlier.

‘That’s her,’ said Barry. ‘That’s our Apricot. She loves the rain.’ Nothing more was said about her after that.

That night I found it difficult to sleep. I was more than a little intrigued by the mysterious Apricot. Barry had shared a lot, but he hadn’t really filled in the details. Why was

she the way she was? Why had they indulged her strangeness to the extent that they had? What future did they see for her? Most of all, I lay wondering about the woman behind the mystery – the physical being who, in her flimsy sodden skirt and blouse, had looked so captivating as she'd strolled, unconcerned about the weather, up the road towards the farm. That she seemed now to not be firing on all cylinders simply added to the mystery. I wanted to meet her. Barry hadn't directly said that I couldn't, but still I sensed that arranging a chance encounter would require some careful planning. Certainly, any direct approach would not go down well with anyone, least of all my employers. I eventually slept, dreaming about my ex-girlfriend, except in the dream, she carried the name Apricot.

During the month that followed Barry's revelations to me about Apricot, I saw her only twice, from a distance. Once, while I was fixing a burst irrigation pipe that led water to the blueberry fields I saw her moving between her barn and her parent's house. She appeared to be carrying a large basket which I assumed contained clothes for her weekly washing cycle. On a second occasion, while Barry and I were loading boxes of freshly cut herbs onto the back of his old pickup, I saw Apricot moving along a distant fence-line until she crested a small rise and then quickly disappeared down into a small forested area bordering the river. I didn't say anything to Barry and even if he had noticed her he didn't say anything to me.

Trying to engineer a meeting with the elusive Apricot was proving to be problematic and as time progressed I began to question, sensibly I think, my youthful motivation for desiring such an encounter. Besides which, the work that needed to be carried out on the farm was never-ending. I was beginning to wonder how Barry and Cath had managed without help when they were between the various assistants who had apparently preceded me. Considering the relentlessness of the workload and how time-consuming it was, I had arrived at the point where I was ready to abandon any hope of ever meeting the young woman. I was relieved to find that this realisation didn't bother me at all and put that down to the immensity of my daily exhaustion.

And then, I finally met her, but under circumstances that left me reeling in surprise.

It was a Friday evening and Barry and I had enjoyed our by now customary end of week whiskey on the front veranda of the main house, or our 'office' as we referred to it. Cath had joined us and we spoke about the week's work and what we hoped to achieve the following week. By now I was feeling quite at home on the farm and felt that I had already more than proved my worth as a general assistant. I think that my employers felt much the same way as their interactions with me were as friendly as any employee could expect from his employer. Friday evenings on the veranda had become something of a ritual and Cath generally prepared a light supper which the three of us enjoyed together on our laps as we sat in the comfortable chairs of the veranda watching the sun set over the verdant fields of the farm. Since Barry's earlier revelations to me about Apricot, no mention had been made of her again. In fact, at that stage, I don't believe that I'd ever heard Cath so much as mention her since speaking of her at my interview.

It had been a good week of honest labour and I felt physically tired. I was grateful for these Friday evening round-ups, as we called them, but I was keen to return to the cottage, have a shower and collapse into bed. Fortunately Barry and Cath generally shared the same idea on a Friday night and so we wrapped up the evening and went our separate ways.

As planned, I had a long cooling shower, climbed into my sleep-shorts and went to bed, where I tried to read for a few minutes but soon gave up the idea as sleep overtook me.

I'm generally a light sleeper, but it seems that the week's work had exhausted me and I sunk into a deep dream-free sleep. I usually make it through the night without waking and so when I suddenly found myself awake at about two in the morning, I was literally wide awake, wondering why this was the case. As I lay there quietly, a chill of semi-conscious unease swept over me as I sensed that I was not alone in the cottage. I lay perfectly still, trying to maintain a pattern of shallow breathing as I allowed my eyes to adjust to the half-light spilling into my room from the cloudless sky outside, where a gibbous moon hung high above the western horizon. I tried to detect any sign of movement in the cottage, straining to hear the slightest noise. But there was absolutely nothing to confirm the peculiar feeling that someone else was in the house.

Trusting my instincts, I slid out of bed as silently as I could and padded slowly over to the open doorway leading to the lounge. I paused there and looked around. Nothing seemed out of place and clearly there was no one in the room. I normally leave my curtains open at night and so there was sufficient moonlight to for me to quickly confirm this. Next I padded, just as quietly I hoped, across the lounge rug and stopped when I reached the doorway leading into the kitchen. Actually, 'stopped' is not quite what I did. In fact, I came to a knee-locked standstill!

To my right, framed in the outside kitchen door, which stood wide open, was Apricot. She was motionless, her arms hanging loosely at her side. Her hair was up, tied in a loose knot above her head, leaving her long neck bare and fragile, I thought. She was wearing a flimsy ankle-length nightdress and unmistakably, nothing beneath it. The moonlit backlighting showed her to be a woman of beautiful proportions, tall and slender – just as I remembered her.

I was lost for words, but then managed a rather weak-sounding, 'Hello.' She remained motionless and said nothing. I had a sudden thought that I was experiencing a vivid dream and so consciously chose to clear my throat hoping, I don't know quite how, that this would either confirm or negate my dream theory. It negated it, I think ... because she was still there and I was still rooted to the ground not more than three metres away from her, about the closest I think I'd been to her.

Then she broke the silence that connected us. 'Are you the one?' she asked quietly.

'Huh?'

'Are you the one?' she repeated.

I didn't know what the hell she was getting at, but I answered her with a slightly ambitious and probably too cocky, 'I certainly hope so.'

She seemed unmoved by my attempt to inject humour into the moment. 'I think you are... but you'll have to be patient. I'll call you when I'm ready.' With that she turned and made to walk away.

'Hold on!' I said, moving quickly towards the door. 'I want to talk to you.'

She stopped, turned and in a tone that had me knee-locked again, said, 'Stop! Stay where you are. Don't follow me – don't ever follow me.' She turned and walked swiftly away, fading slowly into the darkness.

I stood there for a while, two paces outside my kitchen door, gazing in the direction of her disappearance, the stars and moon the only witnesses to my confusion and my simmering excitement. Did I understand her correctly? ‘Are you the one?’ she had said, and then, ‘I think you are.’ My youthful optimism had me convinced that this encounter had been some sort of a come-on from her, strangely put as it was. But then of course, her own father had virtually told me that the woman was strange.

I re-entered my cottage and locked the doors, both to the kitchen and the outside doors to the lounge. This was the first time since taking up residence on the farm that I’d done so. But I was suffering a mixture of confusion and excitement and needed time to synthesise all of what had just transpired. I needed to clear my mind of the quick assumption that I’d just made, and tried to recall everything that had happened, everything that she’d said. I made a cup of coffee and spent the next hour or so sitting at the kitchen table, trying to figure it all out and, more importantly, what I should do about it. By the time I was ready to return to bed, shortly before dawn – fortunately Saturday was a rest day on the farm – I had decided, wisely I thought, that my best option would be to do nothing. I surmised that Apricot’s visit could only have been triggered by some interest in me. That was cool. But to chase after her now would probably not be the best move to make. Keep it steady, I told myself. Let her come to me, which, I was sure, would now only be a matter of time. Besides which, she had made it quite clear that I was not to follow her, ever. So that’s what I decided to do – absolutely nothing.

The following two weeks went by quickly. Barry and Cath and I had a multitude of jobs and duties to perform and so we were kept more than a little busy. Of course, my mind kept drifting back to that Friday night when Apricot had come to my door but I tried not to dwell on it, reminding myself of my resolve to play it cool. And quite obviously I said nothing to Barry and Cath about the incident. But of Apricot there was no sign and, from her parents, no mention.

Another busy week went by and still there was no sign of Apricot. I had reverted to leaving the doors to my cottage unlocked at night, believing that it was only a matter of time before she returned and this time, I optimistically imagined, she would stay the night. But each night I went to bed alone, believing that this would be the night and yet woke to the same mundanities each morning, still alone. Maybe the monotonous grind of farm life was starting to wear me down, but ultimately it was the unbearable burden of not knowing when – and in fact, if ever – Apricot would return.

A new plan began to formulate in my mind, ably enhanced by the doubt-induced deduction that I had misunderstood her, or misheard her. Perhaps she had actually said, ‘Come to me when you’re ready’ and not ‘I’ll call you when I’m ready.’ The more I thought about it the more convinced I became that she was waiting for me and that I was busy making a fool of myself by not going to her. After all, I reasoned, she would never have said, ‘I’ll call you when I’m ready.’ How could she have? She didn’t have my cell number and she could hardly afford to be seen yelling for me across the farmyard. The more I mashed these thoughts around, the more convinced I became that I should make the next move. And the more desperate I became to do so as soon as possible. I decided that a Friday night would be best as Barry and Cath – and I – always made our way to bed early after the end of the working week.

And so it was that six weeks after Apricot had come to the cottage, I put my plan into action. After the customary end of week round-up – drinks and a light meal with Barry and Cath on the veranda – we said our goodnights and parted company. I headed straight for the cottage and my usual invigorating shower. But then, instead of getting ready for bed I dressed in dark denims and a dark shirt and light-weight shoes. I sat in the darkness and silence of my cottage for almost two hours, long enough to be absolutely certain that Barry and Cath were sleeping. Not that I intended to make any noise, but I just wanted to make absolutely sure that there was no chance that my actions would be observed by them.

Then I slipped out of the cottage, closing the kitchen door softly behind me and slowly headed off in the direction of Apricot's barn.

It was a dark night. Whatever moon and star-light was available was shrouded by a veil of low, thick cloud cover. But navigating my way towards Apricot's barn was not difficult. I had planned my route carefully and had spent the days before ensuring that I would not be surprised by any obstacles along my chosen path. I carefully avoided the main house, walking in a wide arc that at first had me moving away from it until I was at a point virtually out of site of the homestead but almost directly in full view of the far side of Apricot's barn, which I could now see as a distinct shape ahead of me. There was a very dull light illuminating the windows that faced me. Trying to move as noiselessly as possible, I slowly circled the barn until I was facing the front of it from a distance of not more than twenty metres away. I approached quietly and came to a stop directly in front of the ordinary looking door behind which, I was by now certain, Apricot waited impatiently for me.

I knocked lightly and listened. I heard nothing and so knocked again – still nothing. Trying to convince myself that entering her domain uninvited was no less intrusive than her entering mine – although she'd not actually stepped over my threshold – I reached forward, gripped the door handle, turned it and gently pushed. The door was unlocked. Fighting off the thought that I was making a terrible mistake, I gently pushed it open, stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

The first thing I noticed was that the interior was softly bathed in the light of a dozen candles – each on a low plinth beneath the small windows – six down either side of the undivided space, making it relatively easy to take in the detail of the barn's interior once my eyes had adjusted to the soft light.

Almost simultaneously, I also noticed that the interior of the barn was incredibly neat and very sparsely laid out, with no clutter of any sort present. The third thing I noticed was that the room was empty – that is, no Apricot – unless she was hiding under the bed, which was unlikely because it appeared to be a large mattress and solid base combination, standing in the centre of the room. This central feature held my gaze for a while as I tried to picture her lying there, on its black sheets. But the bed looked as if it had not been slept on tonight as it was perfectly made up and not creased by recent use. It was higher than normal – unusually so, I briefly thought, before examining the rest of the narrow spaces around it.

Then I realised that the ordinariness and sparse neatness that I'd first noticed, extended to a sparseness that was less than ordinary. There were no other furnishings or utilities – no furniture, no kitchen and no ablution area. It was hardly possible to live in a place like this, I thought. Against the back wall were an assembly of large portraits of the woman I'd come to know as Apricot. Rather self-indulgent, I immediately concluded. To

both sides of the door that I'd entered through, were shelves. Most of these contained a tidy array of books. I glanced briefly at a few titles – they were mostly to do with art, and a few with anatomy. On some of the shelves were various hand tools – hammers, saws and the like, and artist's brushes, palette knives, rolls of canvas and bottles of ink, paint and glue.

But then I noticed something else.

In the spaces between the six small windows on either side of the barn were large glass-fronted wooden box-like protrusions, approximately two metres tall, a metre wide and no more than twenty centimetres deep – five on either side. These were all raised off the floor and were either hanging or fixed in place against the walls – whichever was not immediately apparent. From where I stood, and because of the reflection of the light provided by the candles, it was not possible to see clearly into these protruding boxes.

I moved cautiously towards my left and slightly closer to the bed, turning as I did so to get a better view of the boxes on the opposite wall and at the same time, glancing at the one now closest to me on my left. Each box contained a dense collage of sorts. I remembered how Barry had described his daughter as an 'arty type' and immediately assumed that these were Apricot's own work. Turning again to the box – or framed mounting – now nearest to me, I stood back to study it in closer detail.

What I saw both fascinated and nauseated me. The composition was made up to resemble the figure of a person contorted in pain. What I could clearly make out was that the object's face looked as if it had been made by stretching a grey hardened skin-like substance over what must have been the shattered and slightly flattened remnants of a very realistic human-like skull. Pieces of the 'skin' were missing so that the face resembled that of an ancient, but damaged, mummified person. The object's mouth yawned open exposing an untidy array of splintered teeth-like stubs and shards. The body and limbs of the object were similarly obscure in that these were constructed from what appeared to be small and large bone fragments, bits of bark and some leaves, here and there a stone, patches of various fabrics, swathes of dried 'skin-like' material similar to that stretched across the 'face', strips of leather, barbed wire, rusted iron objects and various articles of unfamiliar origin. It made for a most peculiar and somewhat unsettling arrangement. Even more unsettling perhaps was the small brass plate nailed to the bottom edge of the frame. It simply said, 'Eric'.

I was barely conscious of the time I'd already spent in the barn, so fascinated was I by this grotesque collage. But I wanted to see more and so moved slowly around the room inspecting each of the ten glass-fronted boxes in turn. Their hideous contents were all similar in design and appearance, the most notable difference being that each of them included in their composition distinctly different fabrics, making for a series of nine frighteningly macabre figures representative of what, I could not imagine. And each of the nine was named in similar fashion. Nine glass-fronted boxes each with its own unique name tag – Eric, Steve, William, Trent, Gavin, Ronald, Terrance, Chuck and Don. The tenth box did not have a brass name plate. And it was empty.

I stared at it, thinking that its emptiness made it in some indefinable way even more ghastly than the other nine boxes. Then a chilling new thought prised its way into my brain and I turned back towards the box next to it, the one labelled Don, and stepped forward for a closer look.

The grey skin-like covering that was stretched over the flattened skull and used elsewhere to hold and tie things in place now took on a new meaning as I noted, on inspecting it closely, that here and there thin tufts of hair sprouted from its hardened surface. The more I stared into the box, looking specifically at the bone and teeth-like bits and in particular at the grey skin-like material, the more convinced I became that I was not looking at some crazy woman's innocent but bizarre artwork, but at the actual chopped up, reconfigured and embellished remains of a once living human being.

A small but squeaky, 'Oh my fuck!' slipped out of my mouth.

'Jesus... this stuff is for fucking real!' I gasped – the words catching in my mouth – as I took a startled step backwards, knocking my hip against the bed. It was hard – much harder than a mattress should be. I gently lifted the corner of the black sheet that covered it and stared at the surface of a heavy stainless steel table – not a bed! Then I noticed the drainage channel built into the floor around it.

Distressed by a dawning realisation, and terrified of being found out, I returned to the front door and quickly exited the horrific room. I paused momentarily outside, readjusting to the darker landscape of the cloud-covered night sky and listened for any sounds that might suggest Apricot's nearby presence. Hearing nothing but the reassuring sounds of crickets in the surrounding grasses, I made my way back to my cottage, following the same route that I had taken earlier to get to the barn.

Back at the cottage, I felt a surge of relief as I locked the kitchen door behind me. I switched on all the lights and closed all the curtains and walked purposefully through the cottage, half expecting to find Apricot somewhere inside. But of course she wasn't there, and it didn't appear as if she had been. Returning to the kitchen I made a cup of coffee and while it cooled down, had a double whiskey from the bottle I kept for the occasional quiet drink that I enjoyed on my own. This was one such moment, but not one contemplated when I'd bought the bottle. And I wasn't drinking for enjoyment either. I was simply trying to get a grip on things, because my world had just shifted frighteningly off its normally calm axis.

Taking stock of the situation, I realised that I was mad at myself for having made the dangerous excursion to Apricot's barn. I was also mad at myself for actually entering her domain without permission and thirdly I was madly distressed by what I'd seen there. That was the real crunch. 'Holy shit', I said quietly to myself, as if still not quite believing what I'd discovered. 'They are real, real, fucking bodies!'

I didn't know what to do. One thing was sure – I wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon. Not tonight and certainly not on this farm – not again, not ever. I had to get away and I had to do it soon. I drank my coffee, now lukewarm, and poured another whiskey and then sat at the kitchen table trying to figure out what to do next.

Sitting there, a few thoughts began to slip into focus. I put the whiskey away and made another cup of coffee. I needed a clear head to concentrate on what was starting to take shape in my mind. I was aware that Barry was due to drive into town the next morning – although by now it was as good as that already – to order parts for a back-up tractor that he had bought cheaply from a neighbouring farmer, and was busy restoring. He had asked if I wanted to go along for the ride but I had chosen to stay on the farm and so that was already decided – no problem there. I would use the opportunity to strike up a conversation with

Cath. I had one simple question that I desperately wanted an answer to. Her answer to that question would clarify everything.

Of course I could have left then, rather than sit up all night making crazy, unnecessary plans. I could have packed my stuff, packed my car and left. I would have been halfway to the main road by the time Barry and Cath realised that I had taken off. But I needed answers.

I sat at the table through the night, nodding off every now and then, but waking immediately as my head slumped forward or sideways each time sleep tried to claim me. I was okay with that – better that way than falling into a deep sleep in my bed, where I would have felt very uneasy and very vulnerable.

After daybreak I kept a low profile and waited until I heard Barry driving off in his pick-up. Then I got dressed, had another cup of coffee, had yoghurt and fruit for breakfast and then headed over to the main house. I hung around in the front for a while, wiping the dew off my car, making to look as if I was busy giving it a cursory clean up, something not unusual for me to be doing on a Saturday morning. I kept half an eye on Apricot's barn but if she was in there, she was having a slow start to her day.

It didn't take long before Cath emerged onto the veranda, waved and said, 'Hey Sean. Feel like a cup of coffee?'

'Thanks Cath. That would be great.'

Cath went back inside and emerged a few minutes later with two large mugs of steaming coffee and called out, 'Here you are – get it while it's hot.'

'On my way,' I said, ambling over to the veranda.

'Barry left already?' I asked, knowing full well that he had, but also wanting her to confirm it so that if the wheels came off after I asked what I wanted to ask, she wouldn't be able to pretend that he was still at home.

'He's been gone for a while – left about an hour ago.' She handed me one of the mugs and sat down, motioning for me to join her.

I sat in one of the 'office' chairs across from her and smiled, wanting to get this done with as quickly as possible. 'Cath, you never speak about Apricot. Why's that?'

She was remarkably calm, answering without hesitation, 'There's nothing to speak about. We've told you, she likes to be alone and so we respect her wishes and that's how it is. Why the sudden interest in Apricot?'

I ignored the question and asked what I really wanted to know. 'Before me – the guy who worked here before me – was his name Don? And before him, was there a Chuck? And a Terrence...?' I didn't have to go any further, which was good because I couldn't remember if Gavin or Ronald came next.

Cath put her coffee mug down with infinite care and stared out across the yard towards Apricot's barn for what felt like a long time. Then she took a deep breath, turned towards me and said in a controlled voice that seemed both hollow and distant, 'You went into her barn. Why the hell did you do that? You had no right.' And then, after a short hesitation, almost to herself she asked, 'How did you get in? Did Barry leave it open?'

Then, as the realisation of what I'd seen sunk in, Cath's eyes burned with an anger that I'd not encountered before. She glared at me and howled, 'You stupid, stupid boy! You fucking idiot!' She paused. 'Oh my god,' she wailed, 'what have you done?' Cath dropped her head into her hands and sat there convulsing in tears.

She knew! My god, she knew. And if she knew then so did Barry – they were in on it together! I'd heard all that I wanted to hear. All I needed to do now was to get the hell out of there. I stood up and made my way down off the veranda and headed straight back to the cottage to fetch my few things – clothes and toiletries basically. I left Cath sitting in her chair, rocking herself backwards and forwards, head in hands, crying and wailing incoherently.

Back at the cottage I literally threw everything that was mine into the two lightweight carryalls that I'd arrived with and, after casting a quick look around to make sure that I'd left nothing behind, I headed out the kitchen door and walked... straight into Cath.

She'd composed herself remarkably and – I guess knowing that she would not be strong enough to restrain me physically – launched into a monologue clearly conceived as a strategy to keep me from leaving until Barry returned.

'Sean, Sean – hold on. Hold on a second. Let's talk about this. Better still, let's have a fresh mug of coffee and let's wait until Barry gets home. We can sort this out. Really, it's not what you think. You'll see. Barry will explain it all. Let's just go back to the veranda and wait for him.'

Knowing what tasks Barry had planned to accomplish in town, I calculated that he wouldn't be back for at least another hour and a half to two hours. But I wanted to be well gone by then and I wasn't going to let Cath stand in my way. I pushed past her and without breaking my stride said firmly, 'Listen Cath – you're a good person and so is Barry, and I respect you guys a lot. But you've got stuff going on here that doesn't sit well with me and I'm leaving. That's that!'

She was at my side all the way to the car, imploring me to stay, assuring me that everything was 'okay', that Barry would answer all my questions, and to just trust her. I got to my car, opened the boot and tossed my bags inside and closed it. Then with Cath clutching at me and crying and pleading with me to stay, I opened my car door, climbed inside and started the engine. I backed away from where the car had been parked and turned the wheel to point the vehicle towards the open farm gates.

Cath just stood there crying. I felt really sorry for her, but she and Barry had allowed a monster to thrive and that monster was Apricot. She needed serious help. They all needed serious help! I lowered my window, looked at Cath and said, 'Cath, I'm sorry, I'm going.'

'Sean, listen carefully, please – please wait until I've finished.'

I sat there waiting, the car idling, ready to leave as soon as she'd had her say.

'We love Apricot. Please understand that. We love her with everything we have and with everything we are. She loves this farm as much as we do. And we want her to have it when we are ready to leave this world. But she needs someone to share it with. Barry and I think that you're that person. You're the one – please, please stay.'

'Good-bye Cath,' I said as gently as I could.

But Cath wasn't quite finished.

In what appeared to be a final effort to convince me to stay, she drew her shoulders back, took a deep breath and said, 'Apricot is dead, Sean. She died over three years ago. But for us she still lives – and I know that she lives for you as well. The others were wrong for her, but you – you are the one.'

A dark silence descended between us as the words she'd just uttered formed into meaning and implication. I had no words in reply, but felt the sensation of having had my insides knotted in disbelief, incomprehension and fear.

I looked at the woman who made the best blueberry pie in the world and thought, how crazy could one person be? But even as I thought this, I wasn't sure if I was referring to her, her husband or their daughter – or indeed, me. Slipping the car into gear, I drove away from *Barry's Berry Farm* as fast as my old Jetta could safely carry me.

## LONG FINGERS

### Gisbo and Mago

Gisbo took hold of Mago's left hand just below the wrist and sliced hard downwards between the thumb and the index finger until the blade ground up against the complicated arrangement of small bones at the base of the hand. Then he repeated the exercise, slicing down through flesh and tendons between the index finger and the middle finger, then between the middle finger and the ring finger, and finally between the ring finger and the pinky finger. The nett effect was that all five digits on Mago's left hand were now elongated by the length of the metacarpal bones that usually lay hidden just below the surface at the back of the hand.

Putting his antler-handled knife aside for a moment, Gisbo grasped each bloodied elongated finger in turn and bent it backwards until he heard it snap at the base where the metacarpals joined the bone-root of Mago's left hand. The long thumb was the most difficult because if he didn't get the angle exactly right, the digit was inclined to dislocate back towards Mago's wrist without snapping at the joint.

With all five artificially lengthened fingers now hanging loosely from what remained of Mago's left hand, it was an easy task to slide the blade into the joint between the metacarpals and the stem-bone cluster, and to cut each extended finger away from the stub of bone and gristle that was now all that remained of the hand. Then Gisbo set to work on Mago's right hand, repeating the procedure until he had all ten digits laid out roughly in the snow.

Gisbo dragged the back of his hand across his brow. Despite the fresh snow and the crisp air, his exertions had raised a slight sweat. He could feel his body prickling with dampness beneath the layers of leather and rough wool. It would soon wear off – as he well knew – as his sweat was absorbed by those layers closest to his body. Exertion was something one lived with every day, whether fighting for one's life, marching in rough order towards the next battle or just finding something to gnaw on. Sweat and dirt worked well together and there wasn't a man in his battle group that hadn't spent the better part of two weeks without peeling off their garments.

Death hovered as close as the lice and fleas they shared their clothes with. When it claimed Mago, who died from a gouged-out eye and a deep stomach wound gone septic after a recent skirmish at a Roman outpost, Gisbo had no hesitation claiming Mago's hands as his own. From his comrades there had been less interest in Mago's body parts than there had been in his clothes and his weapons. But Gisbo was a seasoned warrior who knew that footwear, clothing and weaponry were nothing but redundant additional weight if a man's energy was not strengthened when the opportunity presented itself. Besides, most of his fellow warriors were in awe of his penchant for human fingers. Cannibalism was not their way they argued, but not too intensely, because if that's what Gisbo wanted to do, then so be it. Mago certainly wasn't complaining, so why should they?

In truth, they were right because cannibalism was not a Carthaginian trait, nor was it a trait of any of the Iberian tribes that they'd either slaughtered or absorbed as conscripts along the way. But Gisbo didn't hold with tiresome definitions. He looked after his footwear, his feet and his hands, and kept his body smeared in animal fats and dirt, allowing it to build an insulating layer beneath his wool and leather over-garments. So, with his body and its extremities well insulated and cared for, his stomach came next.

Years before he'd learnt the finger reaping technique from a gnarly, old and infrequently washed warrior whom he'd latched onto during a short but deadly battle with a swarm of Gaul fighters. He and the older man had stood back to back, hacking and stabbing at wave after wave of the poorly equipped tribesmen who'd attacked them. Initially three, the old warrior's erstwhile companion had been part of their stand but had fallen to an unlikely arrow through the heart. In the end, with the help of reinforcements, the old warrior and Gisbo prevailed, having jointly dispatched at least a dozen opponents between them.

As they roamed among the dead, caked in the blood of the fallen, bringing to an end the crying of the wounded and dying, they formed a bond of professional friendship that would hold fast for another nine blood-drenched months, before the old warrior finally perished in battle.

At the time, immediately after their gory but successful introduction to each other, the old man had surprised Gisbo by dragging his fallen compatriot to one side, where he had proceeded to harvest his old friend's fingers. Gisbo had watched in amazement as the old warrior skilfully extracted fingers and attached metacarpals from the hands of his dead comrade while explaining the rationale to his new-found companion.

The fingers and attached tendons and bones were a rich source of protein and, once cooked and salted, were easily stored for later use when the marching became long and hard and the mind turned to thoughts of sustenance as the tired body struggled forward. At times like these, the old man explained, it was good to extract a long finger from one's stash and to chew on this as a distraction from the pain and discomfort of endless marching.

The additional meat of the segmented palm attached to the metacarpal bones was particularly wholesome. So it was certainly worth the effort of harvesting the fingers all the way down to the base of the hand.

The old man would work his way through a finger or two a day, depending on the distance covered, chewing his way through dried skin, flesh and tendons and finally through each joint of the appendage before sucking and rolling the individual bones around his mouth. In this way he would divert his attention away from the hardship of a day's arduous marching, periodically spitting out finger bones, from smallest to largest, as he worked his way down each chewy shaft.

Gisbo's only question had been why the fingers of a fallen comrade and not those of the enemy?

The old man's scornful answer had been immediate. 'I knew this man,' he said. 'I knew him well. We fought together as one for months. He would be pleased to know that in death his hands will aid my survival as they surely did in life.' The old man paused and then added, 'Besides which, I know where his fingers have been – which is a lot more than can be said for the fingers of those filthy bastards lying in a heap over there,' pointing to the pile of recently slain enemy warriors.

Since then, Gisbo's habit had become a well-known trademark of his survival regimen. Mago had provided the sixth set of fingers harvested by Gisbo in the past year and by now he had become deft at this handy survival craft.

### **Gisbo and Cathalo**

The march into the foothills of the northern Alps had taken days of hard slogging and endless exertion. Since leaving the plains a week earlier, the incidents of fighting had ceased entirely. One had the impression that the Romans were so certain of the foolhardiness of the plan to enter Italy from the north – through the impenetrable mountain range – that they were quite content to sit back while the Carthaginian army destroyed itself in the attempt.

But the respite from fighting had been replaced by an energy-sapping trapeze that took the battle-hardened army up ever steeper slopes and through ever deeper snow. Progress was slow and the number of casualties from hunger, exposure and accidents was mounting.

Gisbo was thankful for his stash of semi-cured, pre-cooked fingers, courtesy of Mago. He had already chewed his way through six of them. Finding more would not be difficult. Every morning a few less warriors made it to reveille as they succumbed to fatigue, hunger and the biting cold. Their bodies were quickly scavenged for articles of clothing, replacement footwear and weapons, but few, if any, looked towards them for sustenance. In this regard Gisbo was unique, although his new companion, Cathalo, had begun to show an awakening interest in Gisbo's survival methods.

Cathalo, like Gisbo, was a veteran of many campaigns under the leadership of Hannibal and had fought his way through the Iberian Peninsula and into the foothills of the Alps. The older, stronger, more skilful warriors were drawn to each other in the belief that a strong pairing would halve the chance of defeat in battle. So when Mago died, Gisbo had immediately sought a replacement. Cathalo, a wiry, energetic and fearless warrior, was also in search of a new comrade and so the two of them formed a loose association. Like most of the veterans, both were fiercely loyal to Hannibal.

Despite their loyalty, they and many of the old guard were starting to have doubts. Some of them had been away from their families for years and most had hacked and cleaved their way through enough human flesh and bone to make warring a far less attractive calling than they'd once imagined it to be. And now they faced this daunting push through the Alps, a mission that many felt was perhaps a little crazy.

But most serious of all was that food supplies were dwindling. Whether the replenishment troops had fallen behind schedule or whether someone had miscalculated the needs of an army as it climbed ever higher through thick snow, one didn't know, but certainly food was becoming a problem. Some of the more experienced warriors had begun to devise plans to counter the scarcities that the army now faced by dividing rations and keeping some food for later in the day, or the week, or even the month ahead.

That evening, as his weary army prepared to hunker down for the night, Hannibal summonsed his most senior warriors to a special meeting higher up the valley in which the army was setting up camp.

Gisbo and Cathalo were among those called to the meeting. They arrived to find a large gathering of their comrades already positioned as best they could, huddled among the

snow-covered boulders that lay scattered across a natural depression in the valley floor. At the far end of the depression Hannibal stood atop a huge battle elephant, flanked by two more elephants and an assortment of his most senior generals. Standing tall with hands on hips and making his voice as loud as was necessary for the gathered warriors to clearly hear, the great leader commended his troops for their loyalty and bravery and sought to reassure everyone that their true moment of glory was within their grasp. The crossing of the mountain was now almost done, he assured them.

Then Hannibal addressed the matter of provisions, telling everyone present that the shortages currently experienced would soon – within no more than a week – be resolved. He asked for their patience and their assistance in keeping the spirits of the rank and file soldiery as buoyant as possible. Referring to the impact that the shortages would have on meal plans for the week ahead, the mighty Hannibal closed off his speech with a disappointing announcement that: *Alas, we will not be providing lunch but we will be providing one delicious supper.*<sup>1</sup>

A drawn-out murmur of frustration and displeasure rose from the collected warriors' mouths, but each man knew better than to say anything that would single any one of them out as dissenters and so they allowed the murmur to settle into the cold Alpine air and made their way back to their overnight camp in silent acceptance.

Gisbo was irritated by Hannibal's announcement because of all the men present, he alone had concluded that the promise of *one delicious supper* was nothing more than a cheap attempt to soften the impact of the suspension of regular lunches. By the time they returned to their rough shelter, Gisbo had convinced Cathalo that a great injustice had been visited upon them and that Hannibal had taken them all for fools.

So deep into the pit of anger had Gisbo allowed himself to be lowered, that he became obsessed with the righting of what he now considered a grievous insult. Muttering and swearing in a fashion not often heard – not even among seasoned Carthaginian warriors – Gisbo convinced Cathalo to consider this: that while they starved, Hannibal sat on the back of a vast protein source. And what was worse, there were many more of these protein larders waiting to be exploited.

It took some additional explaining before Cathalo understood what Gisbo was referring to – Hannibal's prized elephants. This disgraceful hoarding of essential protein could not be tolerated, Gisbo insisted. Such a gross wrong-doing must be righted. Hannibal's warriors had sacrificed everything to follow him and he had a duty of accountability towards them. It was beyond belief that such an injustice could be heaped upon the already suffering army of loyal soldiers. Something had to be done... Gisbo rambled on and on – so much so that he eventually convinced both himself and Cathalo that it was their sacred duty to intervene on behalf of their comrades so as to make amends for this inconceivable iniquity. If they did nothing else with their miserable lives other than to be servants to the dire needs of their brother warriors, then so be it. They would rest with a clear conscience.

And so it was that Gisbo and Cathalo began to plot the killing, dismemberment and distribution of at least one elephant, and hopefully two, to Hannibal's army.

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<sup>1</sup> By astonishing coincidence, the words *Alas, we will not be providing lunch but we will be providing one delicious supper* were exactly the same words used in a missive to MACW students twenty-two centuries later, preparing them for the hardships of an upcoming 'contact week'.

### **Hannibal, Mintho and Gisbo, and some of Cathalo**

Hannibal endured a restless night. Although he was well insulated from the cold, wrapped in the softest of bearskins and protected from an icy breeze by his imperial tent, he had much on his mind. He was aware that the low growl of discontent that he'd heard on announcing the suspension of lunch for a week had meant that his troops were at their limits. The campaign had been long and hard, but their triumphs had been worth it all. And now that they were on the brink of a decisive victory over the Romans, their place in history was all but guaranteed.

But the replenishment plan had gone awry and so the menacing discontent that now permeated his army needed to be dealt with decisively and quickly. There was simply too much at stake. They were less than a week away from the upper reaches of this tough mountain pass and then they would be almost home and dry. But he needed to demonstrate his authority before then so as to put paid to any escalation of the resentment he had detected. All he needed was to make an example of one or two malcontents and order and discipline would be quickly restored.

His opportunity came less than two hours later, just as the faint light of dawn bathed the surrounding snow-covered Alpine peaks in an orange glow.

Hannibal was already up and dressed for the day's march and was doing his usual rounds to ensure that his lieutenants were kept on their toes and were making ready to rouse and marshal their troops. He had just finished an exchange of pleasantries with one of these lieutenants when his chief elephant warfare tactician, the trustworthy Mintho, approached him in a state of consternation. Mintho needed some calming down before he was allowed to proceed, but when he did finally explain what had transpired overnight in the elephant enclosure, Hannibal was understandably irritated.

Mintho explained that a small rogue element of disenchanting warriors... Hannibal immediately interrupted Mintho with an instinctive and abrupt, how small? Only two it seems, was Mintho's reply, before stating that this rogue element – these two disenchanting warriors – had attempted to kill a sleeping elephant.

Hannibal felt a mixed sense of relief – at the small number of warriors involved – and intrigue, as to what the purpose of such an assault could mean. He gestured his impatience to Mintho and told him to hurry up with his explanation as to the cause and outcome of the incident. Mintho continued, but tried to summarise the story so as not to further irritate his master.

These two warriors had overpowered and cut the throats of three elephant guards before selecting a lone cow that was sleeping a short distance away from the others of the forty-strong herd. Because the elephants were domesticated and trusting of humans, the two warriors had been able to approach the animal without startling it. Taking advantage of the beast's docile nature, they had contrived to deliver a sudden death-blow by targeting the animal's heart with their two spears. The attack had gone horribly wrong. The warriors, who would certainly be familiar with the necessary degree of force and direction to deliver a fatal stabbing blow to a human heart, were less experienced as elephant slayers and so had managed to merely wound and enrage the animal. They had completely miscalculated the thickness of an elephant's hide and likewise had miscalculated the position and depth of the

animal's heart beneath its covering of skin, bone and flesh. The outcome, Mintho said with glee, was that one of the warriors had been partially crushed by the angry elephant and the other had fled the scene.

Hannibal's fascination with the story was at its end but he was alarmed to hear that one of the assailants had escaped. Who are they, he demanded, and what had been done to detain the escaped traitor?

But Mintho had anticipated his leader's displeasure and so had saved the best for last, hoping to impress the mighty Hannibal with the final bit of good news. The elephant would be fine and would have no problem completing the campaign and could be relied on to do its best in the battles against the Romans once they had descended onto the northern Italian plains.

The partially crushed warrior had quickly identified himself as a certain Cathalo, a hardened and experienced campaigner whose savage battlefield skills were admired by his peers, most of whom thought him too stupid to be fearful – a useful attribute in soldiery, in Mintho's opinion. Cathalo's left leg and left arm had been flattened by the elephant and all that remained of these were a barely identifiable mash-up of bone, blood and flesh. His gut had suffered irreparable damage – he had a deep and nasty puncture wound that oozed ruptured intestines and other internal bits and pieces. Despite these fatal wounds, Cathalo had been found alive and conscious, although in extreme pain. He had begged Mintho to end his suffering, but Mintho had ordered that the best be done to stem his bleeding so as to prolong his existence for as long as possible. Mintho told Cathalo that he would consider hastening his demise only once he was satisfied that Cathalo had truthfully explained what had prompted the assault on the elephant and most importantly, who else was involved. Cathalo had demonstrated a profound eagerness to assist with the enquiry.

Mintho paused, happy with his reporting thus far, but soon realised that Hannibal did not have time to waste and so continued his story without delay.

Cathalo had identified a certain Gisbo, a well-known battle-hardened warrior whose reputation of prowess in the field of combat was eclipsed only by his widely-known penchant for harvesting the fingers of dead fellow warriors. He apparently used these as protein supplements and the resulting bared bones as 'sucking stones'.

Gisbo was the mastermind behind the attack that had involved only the two of them, Cathalo cried out, while Mintho rooted around in his abdominal cavity with the tip of a knife to keep Cathalo focused on telling the truth. It had been Gisbo's idea to slaughter an elephant and to then carve it up and serve its meat to the hungry troops, Cathalo revealed, pleading again to be set free from his excruciating pain.

Mintho had been satisfied that Cathalo had told him everything that he needed to know and so he had forced a fist-sized rock into Cathalo's mouth – breaking a few teeth in the process – to stifle his agonised crying. He then dragged the pitiful remains of Cathalo behind a bush – leaving most of his left arm and leg behind – where he would take as long as was needed to die.

Mintho had then immediately dispatched a sizable platoon of soldiers to find Gisbo and to bring him back to Hannibal's camp without harming him. The unrepentant Gisbo was at this very moment shackled to a large pine tree no more than fifty yards away, awaiting Hannibal's decision on his future.

Hannibal was well-pleased with Mintho's report and with the actions that he had taken. The warrior Gisbo was known to him not only as a loyal, steady and effective soldier, but also for his resourceful finger-hoarding habits. When news of this unusual practice had previously reached Hannibal's ears, it was considered to be nothing more than an oddity and if it kept one, or even a few soldiers happy, then he had seen no reason to intervene.

Now, as he was being led over to where Gisbo stood shackled to the tree, an idea formed in Hannibal's mind as to how best deal with the traitor while simultaneously sending out a message to his troops that their absolute loyalty to him was not negotiable. He aimed to ensure that every one of his men understood that their commitment to the cause was all that mattered. If this entailed a degree of hardship because of temporary inadequacies in the replenishment of provisions, then that was simply an unfortunate reality... like it or not. But one thing would be made clear – any dissent, any traitorous uprising, any subversive actions, would be treated with the harshest penalties imaginable.

Hannibal was sure that fate had sent Gisbo to him to be used as a vivid example of how malcontents would be dealt with.

On arriving at the tree to which Gisbo was bound, Hannibal asked him if he wished to comment on his foolish attempt to slaughter one of their army's prized elephants, or for that matter – as an afterthought – if he had any comment to make regarding the killing of three guards. Gisbo's only response was to turn his head and spit a gob of phlegm contemptuously past Hannibal's feet.

By now a large contingent of Hannibal's lieutenants had congregated, curious as to what was going on. Hannibal instructed Mintho to quickly summons the rest of the senior officers. He then addressed them briefly, explaining the crime committed by the traitor Gisbo and his crony, Cathalo. He instructed his officers to ensure that on their march up the valley this morning, the entire army was to be diverted past the tree to which Gisbo was tied, so that all could witness for themselves the profit which treason, insurrection, theft, and virtually all other crimes would attract. Just as a warning.

Hannibal then asked Mintho for a sharp blade and for the assistance of Mintho's platoon. The officers and lieutenants were released from the gathering and told to prepare their troops for the morning march.

Gisbo's screams of agony reverberated around the valley, as word spread of his indiscretions. The troops were directed up the valley, past the overnight encampment of Hannibal, who was by now at the head of the column, atop his favourite battle elephant, leading his warriors to their historic destiny over the Alpine pass.

The sight that greeted the eyes of every warrior who filed past the tree to which Gisbo remained bound was one that few would forget. Gisbo's face was contorted with pain, his howling unabated. The only damage that had been done to his body appeared to be to his hands, which were now grotesque in the extreme. They hung uselessly at Gisbo's side, his body and arms bound securely to the tree. What had once been fingers and palms were now merely fingers, but of an awful and unnatural length.

## THE GROOVE

### Two months and one day later

Rachel stretched languorously, rolled over and checked her bedside clock – 11:09 am. She'd slept for almost seven hours and felt wonderful. She loved Sundays and especially Sunday mornings when all she had to do was look forward to a day of rest and relaxation, and a chilled evening, before getting back to work on Monday night. Eddie had left just before 4:00 am. They'd had a wild time. Rachel surveyed her bed and smiled at the disarray that was evidence of their hour-and-half-long bonk-fest. Love-making was a nicer word, but Rachel was under no illusions as to the nature of their relationship. Eddie had a wife to go home to and Rachel saw that as her safety net – it's what kept them both sure that their relationship wouldn't go further than what they both wished for, which was no more than what they already had. Rachel knew that they were both in it for the sex and nothing else. That's all she wanted and that's all Eddie wanted – no false hopes, no silly promises, no confusion.

However, two months ago, Eddie had been out of sorts in a big way. He had suffered an anxiety attack in her flat that was so severe that Rachel thought that it would force his heart into reverse gear. She had been really worried. It was probably to do with the club, Rachel surmised. But whatever it was, he had now put it to one side. Their more recent early morning trysts had provided sure evidence that whatever it was that was bothering him had at least for now been put to bed. The man was all energy and passion! And she wasn't complaining. Rachel was sure that not many women of her age were still getting as much action as she was.

She rolled off the bed and looked around the room for her bathrobe. Finding it roughly bundled into a corner behind the one chair that graced her bedroom she quickly enveloped herself in its soft folds. She'd get the kettle boiling for that all-too-important first cup of coffee before tidying her flat – not a big job on account that it was generally kept neat and tidy. But that was the gist of her Sunday morning routine – sleep late, drink coffee and tidy her flat.

Rachel padded across the hallway to her small kitchen where she wiped down the counter tops and returned an open bottle of wine to the fridge while the kettle boiled. She turned on the radio and was gratified to hear the familiar sound of Bob Dylan fill the flat with his one-of-a-kind voice, singing *She Belongs to Me*. She poured the hot water into a mug, stirring in a teaspoon of Nescafé, and paused to listen to the words...

*'She never stumbles  
She's got no place to fall  
She never stumbles  
She's got no place to fall  
She's nobody's child  
The Law can't touch her at all'*

Humming the tune – it would be an earworm for the rest of the day, she was certain – Rachel returned to her bedroom with the mug of coffee in one hand and a rusk in the other. She barely registered the presence of the discarded coat that lay in her path before it was too late. All she had time for was to think how puzzling this was – she was sure that the coat had been hanging over the back of the bedroom chair, well out of the way of the doorway. In that split-second of confusion, Rachel tripped over the garment, releasing the mug of hot coffee and the rusk as she instinctively reached out to break her fall. As if watching a slow motion movie she saw the coffee separating from the mug in mid-air, the rusk already heading for the floor, and felt her body twisting as her feet became entangled in the folds of the bloody coat.

Rachel's final thought, as an anguished squawk escaped her mouth, was that this couldn't be real, the coat couldn't have moved, she shouldn't be falling... and then her neck struck the hard edge of the dressing table as her body pitched forward, her middle-aged, puzzled, bottle-blond head trailing at a fatal angle.

### **Henry, Rachel and the coat**

Rachel noticed the coat immediately when she returned from the bathroom just before midnight. It was hard not to. It had not been there earlier and must have belonged to someone who had entered the club while she was temporarily absent from her post. The coat was damp and beneath it a few drops of water had accumulated on the floor next to the hatch that one had to lift when entering or exiting the cubicle. Rachel slipped on the wet floor, almost losing her balance, but the fact that the coat had been left haphazardly draped over the counter irritated her more than her near tumble.

She'd worked as the coat check-in person at the *Groove* for almost three years and prided herself on the neatness of the check-in area. On the odd occasion that she needed to leave her post she usually asked one of the club's two doormen to stand in for her for a few minutes. Least approachable, and in her view the thicker of the two, was Henry, but it was he who she had asked to stand in when she had needed to excuse herself to go to the bathroom. She would have preferred to ask Greg but he was busy flirting with a young woman who was trying to make her way through the door without having to provide proof of her age. Greg wasn't one to let an opportunity like that escape him so she hadn't bothered asking him.

With intermittent rain falling it had been a quieter than usual Wednesday night. As it was approaching midnight when she asked Henry to hold the fort, it should not have been a difficult task to ensure that the few late-comers who might still wish to deposit their coats for safekeeping, would have been able to do so without any fuss. It simply meant issuing a ticket to the owner and slipping a duplicate into the coat or jacket's breast pocket before hanging it up on one of the rails. Not too much to expect, not even from the likes of Henry, Rachel had reasoned. But no, even that was too difficult for the fat-ass simpleton, it seemed.

'For fuck sakes, Henry... the coat belongs on a rail – not on the counter! I almost broke my fucking neck.'

Henry looked startled. 'Hang on girlie – slow down. I didn't put it there.' Henry's irritating habit of calling her 'girlie' didn't distract Rachel. She had learnt to mostly ignore his thinly disguised chauvinism.

‘What do you mean, you didn’t put it there? It wasn’t there five minutes ago!’

‘I didn’t say it was. I just said I didn’t put it there.’

‘Well, whose is it – who the fuck left it there?’ Rachel went onto the offensive, ‘Jesus, Henry! All I asked is for you to look after things for five minutes and now we’ve got a coat on the counter with no ticket. What’s your problem?’

Henry looked perplexed, not certain which of his problems Rachel was referring to, but remained adamant. ‘I don’t know where it comes from and I don’t know who it belongs to. It wasn’t there a moment ago,’ he said, lifting the kiosk flap.

Rachel felt exasperated but didn’t want to debate the matter any further. She didn’t see the point. Henry was a dimwit arsehole who couldn’t be relied on to cover for her when all she needed was to take a pee down the hall.

‘Yeah... okay, thanks for nothing anyway,’ she said dismissively as he pushed past her on his way back to the front door of the club.

### The Groove

Greg loved teasing and toying with the young women who tried to bluff their way into the club if they couldn’t prove their age. Often they would arrive in pairs, a little drunk and looking for someplace relaxed to end their evening. But he preferred it when they came alone.

The club was nothing more than a glorified watering hole, with a bar down one side and tables and booths gathered in a rough horseshoe shape around a low stage on the opposite side. Dancers took turns to perform slow, sexy moves to music provided by Barry, the aging house DJ, who kept the mood easy-going and laid back. The dancers wore short, slinky dresses, but there was no stripping. Eddie, the club owner, long in the game, had outgrown noise and outgrown sleaze, or so he said. He wanted to provide a unique late-night venue that started early and maintained the same chilled vibe throughout the evening – a lounge lizard’s haven is what most of the staff referred to it as.

The dancers were there to keep things laid-back and languid. The place could hardly be called classy, but it was unique for the times. Through Eddie’s insistence, it maintained the profile of a groovy seventies-type lounge and bar – the perfect place to get into the mood. That’s why it was called *The Move & Groove Lounge and Revue Bar* – a name that Eddie said perfectly captured the atmosphere that he wanted to create. It was his baby and so no one argued about his chosen theme.

Because Eddie thought it would create the right impression for his intended clientele, the club had a no persons under the age of twenty-one policy. But it wasn’t strictly enforced, notably by Greg. Henry, on the other hand, was less accommodating and generally took a hard-line approach to anyone, male or female, who didn’t look like they made the age limit. Greg openly called him Handbrake Henry, often telling him that he needed to get a life. Henry didn’t need the advice and so ignored Greg most of the time.

Despite their differences, they got the job done, projecting the tough, no-nonsense doorman style that Eddie believed essential for the club’s credibility.

## Greg and Grace

The young woman who had approached the entrance to the club was forced to crowd in under the awning over the front door to escape the rain and was now uncomfortably closer to the bulky doorman than she'd have liked to have been. It had been a long night and she was keen for a quiet drink by herself before heading home.

Walking in on one's boyfriend in bed with another woman seemed like such a clichéd scenario, but there it was, the real thing, and it had happened to her. She was simply exhausted by the ranting that had followed and felt that her boyfriend's – that is, her ex-boyfriend's – blame-game performance had been ludicrous. And to top it all, in her haste to get out of his flat, she'd left her umbrella behind and despite the wet weather, had no intention of returning to his sordid rat hole to collect it. It was easier to simply write it off – that was the least of her worries now. He could stick it up his arse, for all she cared. Anyway, she'd wasted a good evening extricating herself from the mess and wanted nothing more than some time to herself, without hassle, before calling a taxi to take her home.

And now this arse-hole doorman was grinning at her and asking for ID or anything else – his disgusting leer said it all – that she could show him to prove that she was older than twenty-one. Rummaging around in her bag she found her purse and opened it to show the wanker her ID card.

She doubted that he could read, but he had a long look at it anyway and then made a big thing of staring at her intently, and then back at the ID photograph before saying, 'Hey, that's amazing – you're Grace and I'm Greg... the same first two letters. How's that for a coincidence?'

The woman, Grace, had heard it all before, but needed to get inside, out of the rain, fast, and realised that she had to make nice with the dickhead so as to get past him and into the club, and the drink that she so dearly needed.

'Yeah, that's really amazing. Anyway Greg, as you can see, I'm a big girl now – almost twenty-eight and I'm dying for a drink. Do you think I can go inside, please?' Grace looked into his eyes, challenging him to hold her gaze, quietly betting that they would drop to her chest. They did.

Greg liked it when they asked nicely and so he stood back and opened the door, allowing Grace to slide past him, but only just.

Eddie had been a good mentor and when Greg joined the business he had explained to him that the doorman's job didn't have to be boring. So, at Eddie's suggestion, Greg usually made a point of filling the doorway for the lady guests, politely holding the door open. That way, they were forced to squeeze past him, and if they turned away from him, he'd make sure that they felt his dick sliding across their arses, accidentally of course. If they faced him, he'd always make sure that their tits brushed across his chest. The Grace woman chose the arse-dick route.

By Greg's reckoning, that made it pretty much even for the night. He liked to keep tally – another of Eddie's suggestions for making the job more exciting.

## Daphne

Daphne was ready to quit. The routine was just so ordinary, so every-day-the-same. She liked the other two girls, Roxanne and Bev, but she was getting tired of the dull, repetitive nature of the job. They each had two half hour routines to perform between 8:30pm and 12:45am every night except Sunday, when the club was closed. In between dance routines they doubled as cocktail waitresses, encouraging the clientele to have another drink or two.

Eddie had set things up so that the six nightly ‘performances’ were presented as low-key accompaniments to Barry’s soothing background music. Between sets there was a fifteen minute break to allow the girls to swap places, the guests to take a leak, top up drinks and talk to each other. Eddie enjoyed the idea of a place where people could gather, have a few drinks, chill and get into the mood for romance.

But Daphne was bored. The routines that she and the other girls danced varied only slightly from one set to the next. Eddie’s idea was that they should be there to add ‘silky sexiness’ to the evening, encouraging people to stay for just one more drink, and then another. They were expected to mingle with the guests and to serve drinks between sets but not to get stuck in conversation with them. And they had to move pretty smartly to get out of their cocktail waitress dresses and into their dance routine outfits during the fifteen minute breaks.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Eddie had assumed the right to come into their dressing room at what was always a critical moment – between costume changes – when it was most likely that at least one of them would be virtually naked. Eddie made like it was normal for him to be there – to hand out the same tiring instructions – while they were dressed in nothing but G-strings. The way Eddie moved around the confined room, touching them in an overly friendly way, pretending that their near nakedness went unnoticed by him, was sickening. And of course, his eyes told a different story – nothing went unnoticed. That was typical of the sleaze-ball – taking everyone for granted like he owned them. And, as if the measly wages he paid them bought him a season ticket to his own private peep-and-feel show.

Daphne thought that Eddie was a creep and couldn’t understand what Rachel saw in him. Besides that, the work was just so fucking boring! She’d far rather re-join one of the mainstream clubs that offered strip shows and encouraged their dancers to socialise with the customers and allowed them to make private arrangements for a bit of extra cash. That’s what Daphne wanted.

The problem was that Daphne and her two colleagues had come down the line from the bigger, more popular clubs and strip joints, and were now nearing the end of their entertainment value as strippers and dancers. It was a bitch of a job and everyone knew that a dancer’s season of success with supplementary extras was short-lived. There were always newer, younger, firmer, more energetic dancers ready to take over from the veterans. And their clients knew it too.

And Eddie knew it. He was no fool. He knew that ‘his girls’ were no longer in demand as dancers and strippers in the larger clubs but still needed to work. And he knew that they were prepared to do just about anything for a lot less than what they’d been paid in their heyday. But he thought of himself as generous and, although they were a little ragged,

he still found them attractive in a late night kind of way, and he was sure that his clients did as well. After all, they kept coming back for more.

### Neil and the coat

The bearer of the coat left at the Groove's coat check-in cubicle wouldn't have attracted too many glances wherever he went. He was of average height and ordinary looking, with no distinguishing features. He could have been an accountant, an engineer, a dentist or a librarian – anything really – simply an ordinary looking guy out for a late-night drink.

Neil had not come to *The Move & Groove Lounge and Revue Bar* to watch the girls dancing. He just needed a quiet place to settle his nerves before going home to Laura, his wife of twenty-one years. The reason his nerves were shot was because of the coat.

In his mid-forties, there was no doubt about his admission credentials and so the tough looking doorman had barely glanced at him as he made his way into the club. In any event the doorman had been distracted by a young woman and so Neil had slipped past the two of them without any problem, almost unnoticed, the coat draped over his arm.

Once inside, Neil had immediately disposed of the damn coat by dropping it on the counter of the check-in cubicle where another tough-looking guy – this one with his back to him – was so engrossed in sifting through the pockets of coats and jackets already hanging on the rails at the back of the cubicle, that he hadn't noticed Neil at all. That suited him perfectly.

The coat had been in Neil's possession for less than a week, but it was not something that he wanted to hang onto any longer. Returning it to the small shop where he'd bought it was not an option. He'd tried that earlier in the evening but found that the shop had either moved or closed down, unless he'd gone looking for it in the wrong street. That was equally confusing because Neil was almost certain that the shop had been next to the post office across the road from the bakery. He'd asked around but no-one – not even the baker himself or the postmistress – had any idea of what he was talking about. Neither of them recalled there ever being a clothing shop in the location that Neil described.

The coat itself had proved to be everything that the person who had sold it to him had claimed. And then some!

Making his way past the club's bar, Neil ordered and paid for a double Scotch on the rocks and headed for an unoccupied table near the back wall of the club, away from the low stage. The club was not full and most of the clientele were people of his age and older, some in pairs, some single and a few in small quiet groups. The atmosphere was restrained and calming, the music appropriately soft and mellow – he immediately recognised the Nina Simone number playing in the background – and the single dancer in her soft satin-like dress, seemed well-suited to the general ambiance of the place.

Neil felt the tension of the past six hours draining from his body as he settled into the comfortable chair at his table. One drink and he'd be ready to face Laura.

### Henry and the rest of the crew

Henry had just about had enough of Rachel's attitude. Ever since she and Eddie had been screwing each other – it was easy to tell, and everyone knew anyway – she made out like she owned the place. It was damn irritating. The only reason he helped her out whenever she needed a break was because it gave him a chance to have a quick feel around in the coat pockets. He usually found a few coins and sometimes a few notes. Once he'd found a smart looking ladies watch which he'd given to his mum as a birthday present. The old girl had been so impressed that for months afterwards he'd been able to squeeze her for the occasional loan when he needed it, without the usual dumb questions she always asked.

As for Greg... well, he was just another asshole whose balls were bigger than his brains. He always tried it on with the single girls and bragged to Henry that he could screw any of them any time he wanted. Henry knew that Greg was all talk and no bite, like a dog chasing a hubcap – he wouldn't know what to do if one of those girls actually said yes to him. To go for a prick like Greg, she'd have to be fucking blind and stupid anyway, Henry figured. Besides, who needed another Eddie around?

Henry had worked at *The Move & Groove Lounge & Revue Bar* for eight months and he was as bored with his job as Daphne was with hers. They'd had a few drinks together after work on occasion and were of the same opinion – Eddie was a seventies sleaze-ball, Rachel was a stuck-up bitch and Greg was a wanker. They also agreed that the other two dancers, Bev and Roxanne, were sweet, that Barry was okay but a bit behind the curve when it came to popular music, and that the two barmen, Oscar and Simon, knew their stuff – both could shake up a decent cocktail and had a way of making the customers feel special.

Daphne told Henry that without those two, the Groove could just as well close its doors – the barmen were the soul of the place. Henry couldn't argue against her logic – he was awed by their ability to remember exactly what went into each drink. He had enough difficulty remembering to pull up his fly after taking a leak – that others had memories exceeding that, was admirable.

The stupid coat that Rachel had got so excited about had appeared out of nowhere. Henry hadn't seen who left it on the counter and quite frankly, he didn't give a fuck either. He did feel a little peeved that he hadn't gotten to it before Rachel because it looked like an expensive garment and may have yielded some cash had he got his hands onto it first, but – too late now.

### Rachel

Rachel placed the unexplained coat on a hanger and hung it over a rail, making sure that it didn't come into contact with any of the other coats because it had come in late and was still a bit damp. She checked her watch – 12:13am. Just another thirty minutes or so and then either Oscar or Simon would announce the last round and by 1:30 most of the customers would be on their way out of the club.

Rachel was a forty-seven-year-old survivor of two failed marriages. She'd never had children and had worked all of her adult life, mostly on the fringes of the entertainment business. Her first husband had been a wannabe rock star and her second a wannabe record

producer. Both husbands' careers had been less than successful and so Rachel had needed to work constantly while her husbands had stumbled from one failed gig to the next. She didn't mind this and in fact welcomed the opportunity to become self-sufficient. But the money wasn't that good and so her working life looked as if it would be endless. She was twenty-two when she married her first husband and forty-two when she divorced the last one. Her rewards for surviving the matrimonial fallout of those twenty years were her own car and a small one bedroom flat. But the flat was fully furnished and with not a cent owed to the bank.

Since her last divorce, Rachel had stayed away from serious relationships and only during the past year had she allowed anyone into her life. Sometimes, when they both felt like it, Eddie would come home with her after locking up for the night. His wife either didn't know or didn't mind, but that wasn't something that he or Rachel wasted time discussing.

The coat looked top-end, Rachel thought – not the quality of garment that she was accustomed to seeing come into the club. She wondered who it belonged to, but knew that she'd find out when its owner claimed it in a short while.

### Eddie

Eddie was irritated by Barry's selection of music for the night. It wasn't all that different from the night before and the night before that, but Eddie was finding it irritating nonetheless. He was smart enough to know that it wasn't really the music bothering him – that was just an excuse. The truth was that he was worried.

*The Move & Groove Lounge & Revue Bar* was in trouble. The venue was barely half full, again. This had become a worrying trend and Eddie wasn't sure what to do about it. He knew enough to know that the low numbers couldn't be entirely blamed on the weather. He'd spoken privately to Barry, who he trusted, and to Rachel, well... because that's what happens in bed. He hadn't spoken to Gloria, his wife, because she wasn't interested and besides, she'd been telling him for years that the seventies were a thing of the past and that most people who remembered that far back were either babysitting their grandkids or feeding the worms.

Eddie didn't need her advice. All he needed was the security of her inheritance – a tidy sum that she had invested wisely and now used sparingly to ensure that the two of them had no financial worries.

But Eddie did need the advice of Barry and hopefully also Rachel. Barry was an old acquaintance and the two of them had worked together in the night club business for as long as Eddie could remember. Rachel was just a convenient shag, but also a nice enough woman and a little brighter than some of her co-workers. And she had lots of experience in the world of night clubs. But neither she nor Barry had been much help.

Barry's sole contribution was to express the view that more 'tits and bums' might help. Eddie didn't agree – that wasn't what his intended clientele were looking for. Rachel's contribution had been even less inspiring. She seemed unfazed by Eddie's predicament and simply said that she wasn't concerned about losing her job because she knew lots of people in the entertainment business and could find a job anywhere. She didn't get the point and so that hadn't helped Eddie either.

That meant he was on his own with the *Groove's* problems. As he saw it, he could hold out for another six months, try some advertising posters and some newspaper ads and

hope for the best. Alternatively, he could use the small reserves that he had in the bank to close the joint and pay everyone off at the end of next month. Gloria owned the building, having inherited it from her father, and still collected rent for the other sections that she rented out to a few small day-time businesses.

He would survive – that was certain. But it just seemed like a sad end to a long career as a night-club owner.

At fifty-eight, after forty years in the business, Eddie wasn't ready to swop his night-time work for a normal day-job or to just sit at home watching TV. That would kill him. He'd always been a night-timer and didn't plan to stop just yet. Maybe he'd close the *Groove* and open a small late-night coffee and light meal place, or a take-away joint – anything so long as he could stay plugged into the night-time action.

Flashing a smile at Oscar and Simon as he passed the bar counter, Eddie made his way towards the heavy velvet curtains that separated the club activities from the entrance lobby and guest toilets. He'd go see how Rachel was doing – shoot the breeze with her for ten minutes or so, take his mind off the club's problems, figure out if she was in the mood, and if she was, warm her up a little behind the counter. That would be cool.

### The coat

Neil tossed back the remains of his first whiskey and said, 'Yeah, thanks... I'll have one more – double Scotch on the rocks. Thanks.'

The woman who took his order said, 'See you in a minute,' and swayed over to the bar. Neil watched as she walked away and wondered what her life was like, if she was married, happy, kids – all of that. Her name was Roxanne – or so the little name tag on her very tight blouse declared. She was okay looking – maybe a little tired – and probably about the same age as him, Neil guessed. He shuddered back to reality as he reminded himself of the conversation that lay ahead with Laura, once he got home.

The coat had caught his attention as he was walking past a shopfront last week. It was fitted over a mannequin and was the centrepiece of a winter-themed display that included beanies, scarves and cardigans. The emphasis on winter was enhanced by a profusion of oversized, glitter-encrusted, white cardboard cut-outs of snow-flake look-alikes suspended on nylon line, and a generous covering of polystyrene chips on the display floor. All very wintry, Neil had thought as he eyed the coat and imagined how good he'd look wearing it.

He had entered the shop and was greeted by a small elderly man who must have spent his entire life selling garments, so smooth was the old guy's sales pitch.

Neil was showered with comments like, 'it'll be a perfect fit, will make you look years younger and very distinguished; it could have been made especially for you; what a bargain, and the fabric, the fabric...' well yes, the fabric. The old man had paused in his sales routine and then said, 'It's from a country not well-known to me and the fabric is unlike anything I have ever come across before. It feels alive – here, feel it for yourself.'

When Neil touched the fabric he experienced a moment of strange headiness. The old man, the shop, and the road outside – all receded from his immediate consciousness and he was left with the sense that only the fabric of the coat was real and that nothing else existed beyond it. Just for a moment, for a very brief moment, Neil felt as if he was falling, through

the earth, through the nothingness of space – like the feeling one gets when standing up too quickly, except a hundred times more intense.

Although unsettled by this strange experience, Neil had been mesmerised by the old man's sales pitch and was more than a little intrigued when the old geezer ensured him that 'This is the coat of all coats – it's been waiting for you and will reward you with the truth that you seek. Take it. It belongs to you.'

He later remembered telling the old man that yes, he'd take it and that the old man had said in reply, 'I knew you would.' But he couldn't remember much more than that. One moment he had been walking past the shop, the next moment he was being encouraged to buy a coat he hardly needed, and then he was two city blocks away, striding purposefully back to his office, an expensive coat in a plastic cover over his arm. He couldn't remember how expensive, but he knew that it had been expensive. He couldn't even remember trying it on in the shop.

Back at work, Neil had left the coat in its plastic covering, hanging it in the small cupboard that graced his office, a symbol of his managerial status. It was almost a week later, on leaving work and noticing that the weather had turned, that he decided to wear it for the first time. But as he eased into it, his world came to a halt. At first Neil knew that he was still standing in his office, although it felt as if he and the office had detached from everywhere else. Then his vision faltered, because instead of his familiar office surroundings, he found himself staring at an unfamiliar bed on which Laura lay, naked. She was with a strange man and he too was naked. They appeared to be in a state of post-coital contentment and obviously very relaxed in each other's company.

Neil had shrugged his way out of the coat as quickly as possible and the vision had disappeared immediately. Standing next to his desk, gripping its solid walnut top for stability, he shook his head as if to clear it, trying to understand what had just transpired and how this could be connected to the coat. Cautiously, he put the coat back on and experienced almost exactly the same sensation and a similar hallucination. But now Laura and the stranger, both still naked, were embracing each other intimately as they stood next to the bed. Neil watched in disbelief as they moved apart, reluctantly it seemed, and his wife made her way through a doorway into a bathroom as the naked man returned to lie back on the bed with a smug look on his face.

Most disturbing of all was that the vision, in Neil's mind, was absolutely real – he had no doubt at all that what he'd been shown was happening somewhere, at that very moment. Laura was cheating on him!

That was enough! Neil removed the coat as quickly as possible and, hastily leaving his office with the offensive article over his arm, set off to return it to the shop from which he purchased it less than a week earlier.

### Grace

Grace made her way towards the back of the club where there were a number of empty tables. She felt tired and drained by the discovery of her ex-boyfriend's infidelity. But she was also relieved to have uncovered his deceit and felt secretly pleased that she'd done so in such

emphatic fashion, leaving no room for uncertainty. He hadn't expected her to drop by and had been caught completely by surprise – literally with his pants down.

Grace had told him earlier that she would only see him again on Friday night because she had arranged to meet an old school-friend that evening. But when the friend called to say that she was not feeling well, Grace had decided on a surprise visit to her boyfriend. Some surprise. Bastard!

She'd walked in to find him lying naked on his bed and some woman – also naked – who she didn't know, tidying herself up in his bathroom. The ensuing commotion had been noisy, embarrassing and very unsettling. The bitch in the bathroom had looked as guilty as all hell – damn it, she was naked in Grace's boyfriend's flat! And she'd had nothing to say for herself as she hastily dressed and then fled from the scene. Grace's boyfriend had gone on the offensive and had blamed Grace for being 'frigid' and 'too conservative' and a host of other ugly, untrue accusations. She had finally told him that he was a disgusting little douchebag and that their relationship was over and that she never wanted to see him again, not ever!

And then she'd left, gone home, stalked around her flat trying to get a grip on things and then, hours later, decided that she simply needed to get out, to get some air away from everything. So now here she sat with a glass of wine in front of her and time to just come down from the emotion of it all before heading home again. She'd be okay – she knew that. She had a circle of good, supportive friends and she would be okay. She just needed time to digest what had happened and then to move on.

Sitting alone at her table, recalling the startling events of the evening, with the gentle tones of Sade filling the background of the softly lit club, Grace hardly noticed the languid movements of the dancer shifting beneath a spotlight some distance from where she sat. Nor did she notice the ordinary looking man sitting alone at a table nearby. She would have been amazed to have learnt that he was busy processing similar thoughts, and that his mind was on the same two people that Grace was trying to block from hers.

### **Eddie and Rachel**

Eddie quietly approached the kiosk hoping to catch Rachel off-guard. He was feeling ruttish and hoped that she was in a receptive mood. He liked the idea of sneaking up on her – made it feel more like he was the hunter and she the prey. Their love language aptly accommodated Eddie's desire to control and Rachel's to submit.

Rachel saw him coming and smiled, baring the small gold filling that she'd opted for when she'd had a chipped tooth repaired years before after losing a fight with her second husband. She'd gone for the gold repair job to deliberately irk him. He was always complaining that she spent too much money and when he shoved her face against the fridge during one of their squabbles, breaking a tooth in the process, she'd got even by spending more on having it repaired than strictly necessary. But that was in the past. More importantly now, Eddie thought the gold filling quite sexy and so she liked to flash it when flirting with him.

'How's it going babe?' Eddie asked.

'All good, thanks. How's it been tonight?' Rachel replied.

‘No, not so good... quiet, really quiet again,’ Eddie leaned across the hatch, angling his right hand towards Rachel’s breasts. She moved closer, making it easier for him. ‘You want some fun?’ he asked.

‘Maybe,’ she said coyly.

Playing along, Eddie whined, ‘Come on babe. Don’t be a tease – don’t make it hard for me.’ Then, in what he considered a stroke of brilliance, Eddie added, ‘Actually – please make it hard for me.’

‘Yeah, okay – let’s do it.’ Rachel flashed him her gold-edged smile and Eddie knew that she was definitely in the mood.

‘I’ll head home to freshen up once the peeps have collected their stuff. You’d better get yourself and big old mister hammerhead over to my place as quick as you can,’ she said, invitingly.

Eddie loved it when Rachel talked like that, and knew that it meant that he was in for a wild time.

‘Cool,’ he said. ‘I’m going to get the boys to call last round and then we’ll shut it down for the night. I’ll catch you later...’ Eddie’s voice trailed off as his eyes were drawn to an unusually elegant coat hanging to one side on the rail behind Rachel. ‘Hey, that’s nice,’ he said, removing his hand from Rachel’s breasts and pointing towards the garment.

Rachel half turned and said, ‘Yeah, it came in a short while ago. Henry was on the desk and says he didn’t see who brought it in – it was just left on the counter. Nothing but shit for brains.’

‘Nice, anyway,’ said Eddie, ignoring the comment about Henry. ‘Don’t often see anything as smart as that in here. Looks like it might fit me.’ He laughed. ‘See you just now.’

With that he gave Rachel what he thought was his sexiest wink while pointedly grabbing at his crotch, and then headed back into the club. He calculated that he still had enough time to make a final visit to the dressing room where he hoped to catch one or two of the girls with their tits exposed, before telling the boys to call it for the night.

### **Grace and Neil**

Greg looked at his watch and then at Henry, making sure that his colleague was ready for action – meaning that he had remembered to alter the usually mean look on his face to something more closely resembling a smile. Their instructions were to make sure that when the club emptied out they were both on hand to say ‘good bye’ to the guests, to remind those who had forgotten to fetch their coats and scarves, to wish them good night and safe travels and to encourage them to ‘please come again soon’.

Once all the guests had departed they were to quickly move through the club to make sure that no-one had passed out on the floor behind a table or in the toilets. That done, they then had to hang around until the girls and the barmen had left and to then stand guard while Eddie and Barry did the final lock-up for the night.

Last rounds had been called and so the first customers started to leave as the two hefty doormen took up position on either side of the front door. As the guests filed out both Greg and Henry did their best to look likable, friendly and sincere. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits as they made off towards their cars. Some of those who were regulars exchanged a few

banal words with the two doormen. Others hailed the circling taxis and some set off into the night on foot.

Neil exited the club and hailed a slow-cruising taxi over to the side of the road not far from the entrance. As he did so, an attractive young woman came up beside him and gestured towards the same taxi. Neil was in no hurry and politely indicated to the young woman that he would be happy to wait for the next ride.

Grace felt a little guilty and somewhat awkward. The man was very polite and in truth she felt that he had perhaps signalled the taxi moments before she had. Feeling as if she could afford to be generous, especially after the unsavoury events of the earlier part of the evening, she suggested to the man that they share the taxi if they were both going in much the same direction. Neil expressed appreciation for the woman's generosity and after confirming with the driver that the two stops that would have to be made were not inconveniently too distant from each other, they got into the taxi together and headed off towards their respective destinations.

As strangers, adrift in their own private worlds, Grace and Neil maintained a respectful silence between themselves for the duration of the journey. But as the taxi drew closer to their homes, their thoughts, unbeknown to each other and for the second time in such close proximity, were occupied by two identical characters – in both cases, one well-known and one completely unknown.

### The crew

The club emptied out quickly and the staff of the *Groove*, once they'd finished their duties, headed off into the night. All of them were seasoned veterans of the late night scene and because none of them had day jobs, it was normal for them to not be in a hurry to get home.

Oscar and Simon, the youngest members of Eddie's crew, had plans for the night. Friends of theirs were throwing a party and it promised to be an all-night affair and would only now be warming up. There were bound to be dozens of fresh young women hanging out there and so they headed off in Simon's car to catch up with the real world.

Bev and Roxanne had friends at a funky club two blocks away from the *Groove*. It only closed its doors at 3:00am and so they were quite happy to walk the short distance – the streets were busy and well-lit so there was no danger of being accosted along the way. Once they were there, and depending on who else was there, they'd figure out their next move before finally heading home to the flat they shared, where they'd probably sleep until well past midday.

Greg was in a hurry to get to an all-night poker game, so he wasted no time in getting onto the road on his slightly over the hill Triumph Bobber. The old classic still had some life in its oil-hungry engine despite surviving some rough treatment during its life. Greg believed that the bike fitted his image perfectly and was a sure-fire chick-magnet. But although he'd had it for almost three years, if he was honest with himself, he'd have to admit that no-one had yet fallen for its charms – or his, for that matter.

Henry had managed to bum a lift off Daphne – again, and so the two of them left in her old VW Passat. They'd sort of made Wednesdays – Thursday mornings, more precisely – their time for having a quiet cup of coffee together somewhere, before Daphne dropped

Henry off at his mom's house where he still lived. Daphne had half hoped that something might come of their friendship but Henry seemed oblivious to her interest. Besides which, she wasn't quite sure that they would have a future anyway, what with Henry's apparently unbreakable attachment to his mother. Nonetheless, their weekly coffee 'date' was a pleasant enough routine – Daphne always had an Irish coffee and Henry, who didn't drink alcohol, had a flat white with three sugars.

Barry kept to himself most of the time. The other staff members of the *Groove* knew him to be a decent enough guy who loved music and could spin songs all night, just so long as they were tunes from the sixties and seventies. They also knew that he and Eddie went a long way back and that Eddie saw Barry as something of a special lieutenant and so treated him with greater respect than he treated any of them. Barry always arrived at the *Groove* on time in his well-maintained but ancient E-type Jaguar and left, by himself, at the same time that Eddie left. He had never married and lived alone with two cats. Nobody knew much more about him than that.

### **Rachel, Eddie and the coat**

Rachel entered her flat and looked around. The place looked reasonable enough and she didn't feel that she needed to make an effort to make it any tidier than it already was. After a year of seeing Eddie three or four times a month, she knew that he wasn't interested in whether or not her flat had been swept clean, or whether there were dirty dishes in the sink.

She and Eddie had found common ground in the matter of sexual proclivities and when they were both in the mood they normally didn't waste too much time on the subtleties of drawn-out foreplay. Rachel knew that Eddie wouldn't be more than ten to fifteen minutes behind her, but she wanted to have a quick shower before he got there, so she dumped her stuff on the couch and headed for the bathroom.

She had just finished drying her hair and was already wrapped in a voluminous robe – with nothing on underneath, the way Eddie liked it – when she heard him entering the flat. Since getting together she'd had a key cut for him. Rachel came through from the bedroom and Eddie stepped forward to embrace her, saying as he did, 'Hey babe. You smell terrific. What you got hiding under the robe for Uncle Eddie... huh?'

'Hold your horses, big boy,' Rachel said, backing off towards the couch. 'Look what I brought you.'

Rachel lifted the fancy looking coat that Henry had not been able to explain and said, 'No one collected it. Weird I know, but seems like it's been abandoned.' She held the coat up to the light. 'It's kind of beautiful and this material has such a strange feel to it... must be very expensive. Do you want to try it on?'

Eddie thought that it was a fine looking coat for sure and guessed that he'd look pretty damn smart in it, if it fitted him, but he was doubtful about assuming that the owner had simply abandoned it. He looked at Rachel and said, 'Hey, that's really nice of you, but what if the owner pitches up tomorrow and asks for it?'

Rachel had an answer for that. 'Just try it on – I'll take it back to the club tomorrow anyway and if someone comes looking for it then fine, I'll give it back to them. But if they don't – say after a week – and if it fits you, then I guess you get to keep it. So let's try it on.'

Eddie reached for the coat, feeling its luxurious weight in his hands and also its strange softness – a softness that seemed to be accompanied by a faint electrical charge, creating an almost imperceptible sense that the garment had an unusual energy of its own, like the low purring of a cat. It gave him a heady sensation, but it certainly was a beautiful coat.

He slipped first his left arm and then his right into the sleeves, instinctively knowing that it would fit him perfectly, and then hefted the garment onto his body and pulled it closed over his chest and belly. Immediately, Eddie felt a sensation of intense dislocation – Rachel disappeared, as did the whole interior of her small flat. In their place, in terrifying clarity, Eddie found himself in his own bedroom, staring at his wife Gloria, bare-arse naked and bucking furiously upon the body of a man on his back on their bed – their marital bed, for fuck's sake! – riding him like she'd never ridden Eddie before – certainly not during any of the twenty four years of marriage that he could remember.

Eddie was horrified. He grabbed at the coat, trying to wrest it from his body as if it were on fire, shouting incoherently as he struggled with the garment. His mind grappled with the thought of Gloria with a clandestine lover and what this could mean for his future security. Into that awful equation he couldn't avoid factoring in the face of the man upon whose cock he'd seen her riding with such unbridled vigour, a man who apparently had no trouble matching her own ardour – his friend of God knows how many years and long-time DJ at the *Groove* – Barry!

Eddie teetered as the truth of his trusted lieutenant's duplicity and Gloria's infidelity struck home. He had no doubt that what he'd just witnessed was happening right now, at this very moment. Barry always locked up with him at the *Groove* and always left with him, and so knew when Eddie wasn't planning to go straight home – like tonight. 'Fucking devious slime-ball bastard,' Eddie groaned.

Puzzled, Rachel wondered who the hell he was referring to.

### **Two months later**

Standing to one side of the *Groove*'s recently refurbished bar, Eddie scanned the floor and smiled. It was a good turnout – the joint was nearly full. The crowd seemed younger and more enthusiastic of late. He was sure that the new girls were partly responsible. Daphne had resigned and left a few weeks before, and Eddie was not sorry to see her go – she'd been a disruptive force, he felt. He had renegotiated Roxanne and Bev's contracts and they now only served drinks and attended to tables. Both seemed happy with the arrangement. In truth, both were even happier that they no longer had to deal with Eddie's attentions in the dressing room.

Eddie had finally taken Barry's advice and hired more 'tits and bums' in Francine and Ashley – two bright young bodies with all the right dimensions and with a youthful willingness to spread the love. The two dancer-cum-strippers were energetic and sure crowd-pullers. And they didn't appear to mind Eddie's close surveillance of their preparations and costume changes – an added bonus.

Spirits were high at the *Groove*. The two barmen, Oscar and Simon, were invigorated by the presence of Francine and Ashley whose saucy dance routines added a boost to the

boys' cocktail-shaking exertions. Greg and Henry seemed more relaxed in each other's company and Eddie noted that Henry's attitude had improved since the departure of Daphne. Naturally, Greg was especially pleased with the growing number of young women who now made the club their favourite late night spot. Henry still found opportunities to search the pockets of the coats that Rachel kept stored for customers and Rachel did her best to keep things tidy behind the check-in counter. She had to admit that the improvements to the *Groove* had brought a welcome rejuvenation to the crew's spirit.

But the most exciting rejuvenation had been in her bedroom, where she and Eddie had picked up the pace since the strange night of Eddie's coat episode. That night, after Eddie had given her some crazy explanation about what had sparked his wild rant, and after donning the coat herself and experiencing nothing more than a mild tingling, she had concluded that the man had developed a taste for mind-altering drugs. It had taken some ingenuity to calm him down, and for the duration of the following week he had been strangely reserved.

The coat went back to the *Groove*. After a week and no one had claimed it, Eddie broke his silence and told Rachel emphatically that he wanted to keep it. But he also wanted her to house it at her flat – with no explanation as to why. She complied and took the coat home where it was given hanging space in her bedroom cupboard.

Then Eddie called Rachel and Barry to a meeting at a nearby coffee shop and told them that he'd given much thought to the *Move & Groove's* future. For the sake of its loyal crew he had decided to implement Barry's ideas to modernise the club. He would make its offering sexier, more in line with what was successfully on offer elsewhere in the area. Rachel, still a bit miffed by Eddie's recent offish behaviour was 'whatever', but Barry was clearly ecstatic, declaring the decision a 'triumph of nightclub rationality' and Eddie 'a genius.'

But Eddie's plans were not exclusively altruistic.

After a week of agonising calculations he had decided to turn a blind eye to Barry and Gloria's deceit, gambling on his conviction that Gloria wouldn't divorce him, precisely because she held all the purse strings. She was likely to end up forfeiting half of what they had in the event of a split, and he doubted that she would want to lose that much. Rachel was a better fuck anyway and Barry would still be a useful sidekick if he was kept interested in his job by making it more enjoyable and by letting him believe that his opinion mattered. That meant reconsidering his advice and giving in to it.

Four birds with one stone, Eddie reasoned – Gloria would be kept happy in her secret world, Barry's ego would get a boost, thereby keeping him in line, the *Groove's* precarious future would be shored up and he would get more guilt-free fuck-time with Rachel.

He even had a plan for that infernal coat.

Eddie's rejuvenated ardour in bed both thrilled and fascinated Rachel. Since coming out of his temporary emotional slump and after putting the *Move & Groove* back on a stable footing, Eddie's performance in the bedroom had jumped a few levels. Previously, Rachel had tolerated his rote approach to sex because he was still a horny bastard whose enthusiasm, although predictable, made up for a lack of inventiveness. But his new-found technique had an edgy aggressiveness that Rachel found quite exhilarating, although his warm-up routine was a little puzzling.

Now, before getting down to business, Eddie spent at least ten minutes pacing around her flat, attired in nothing but the mysterious coat, muttering to himself and generally working up a head of steam. Then he'd toss the coat aside and with some vigour, go at her like a wild dog in a poodle parlour. Rachel had her work cut out keeping him focused, but it was generally worth the effort as both of them would end up well and truly sated. She tolerated the coat's involvement in his start-up drill as Eddie had made it clear to her that she was to ask no questions about his motivation for its use.

But she put her foot down when he asked if he could wear it to bed.

## COUSIN KIRSTIN

I was raised by my grandparents after my parents and my twin sisters died in a car accident when I was about five years old. I remember nothing of the accident and very little of my parents and sisters. My uncle Ronnie, my father's older brother, once told me that the reason why I had survived the accident was because I had been wedged in between my two sisters on the back seat. He had added that they were not only older than me, which made them bigger, but also that they were chubby little bitches who ate too many biscuits, which made them even bigger and much softer. Uncle Ronnie explained that their air-bag like qualities are what saved me from harm.

Uncle Ronnie had a mean streak in him, and he and my dad had never gotten on as kids, my grandparents once told me. I don't think Uncle Ronnie liked me very much and, although she was less obvious about her likes and dislikes, neither did his wife, Aunty Thelma. Uncle Ronnie was a tall wiry man with a shifty look and greased back hair. He sold used cars for a living and apparently did quite well. Aunty Thelma was an attractive woman who wore her hair tied up and whose lips always shone with the brightest lipstick. I don't recall ever seeing her without a cigarette in her hand. She was a stay-at-home mom.

They had three children – cousin Kirstin who was two years older than me and twin boys, cousins James and Jesse who were my age. I only ever got to see them all when they'd come to visit my grandparents – Uncle Ronnie's mom and dad – every second month or so.

My grandmother was one of twin girls and so twins ran in our family. My dad and Uncle Ronnie were not twins but they were the only two children that my grandparents had. Cousin Kirstin and I weren't twins either, but we each had twinned siblings – that is until mine died in the car accident.

I ended up staying with my grandparents and not with Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma because they didn't want the responsibility of having another mouth to feed, and besides, Uncle Ronnie felt that he owed his brother nothing. That's what my grandparents told me. They seemed sad about that. Not sad that Uncle Ronnie didn't want to care for me but that he felt that he owed his brother nothing. I was only five at the time of the accident and so didn't really know much about any of it. All I knew was that I was in hospital with bandages all over my body and that my grandparents would look after me. They were good to me and the blurred memories of my early years and the accident were gradually replaced with fond memories of a happy childhood in the care of Gran and Gramps.

Gran was a sweet and kind lady of slight proportions. She always had a ready-to-go smile, no matter the circumstances. She would never leave her bedroom in the morning after dressing and 'putting on her face' without making sure that every grey hair on her tiny head was neatly installed in its allotted place. Women of a certain age get like that, patting and poking their hair until it regains the form that they'd last seen it in before going to bed the previous evening. My Gran was no different. Baking was her favourite past-time and her pantry was always stocked with large glass containers of homemade shortbread, chocolate

chip cookies, vanilla biscuits, cheese straws and many other delights. These would be put to good use whenever we had visitors and my cousins loved coming over, for this reason alone I surmised.

Gramps was Gramps – a tall, thin, slightly stooped and grey-haired man of few words. When he did choose to say something, it was usually to advance his special brand of wisdom. I think it would be fair to say that he was a little eccentric, living mostly in a cloudy world of his own, emerging into the light every now and then to dispense an authoritative gem of sorts, the meaning of which was generally lost on those not fully present to the moment. But he was a kind man and I loved both him and my Gran greatly.

Uncle Ronnie and Auntie Thelma's occasional family visits to Gran and Gramps generally ran the same course. They'd arrive in whatever car Uncle Ronnie had chosen to commandeer from the auto dealership where he was working at the time – one of the perks of the job, he explained. Usually these were big and flashy American vehicles that would glide up the short driveway of Gran and Gramps' modest home before coming to rest beneath a vine-covered pergola that provided shade for either of their cars if they happened not to be parked in the double garage.

Though a modestly sized three bedroom house, the property was deceptively large. From the front, with its small garden, the appearance was of a cramped residence. In fact, the house had been built well forward on the property so that at the back of the house, a family room and dining room led open-plan into the kitchen creating a generous living space which opened onto a substantial back garden that comprised mainly a well-kept lawn. As much as Gran loved baking, Gramps loved tinkering about in his garden, both front and back, always finding something to do that he felt would improve the place. 'A good house without a decent garden is as useful as a good shoe without a decent sole,' is how Gramps explained it.

After admiring and commenting on the latest mode of transport, everyone would traipse inside and my cousins and I would have cool drinks and a plate of Gran's freshest cookies to share while the adults had a cup of tea or, as in the case of Uncle Ronnie, something with a little more kick to it. Kirstin, James, Jesse and I would drift around shyly until we'd re-established our connection and then we'd hang out in the back garden and maybe play hide and seek for a while or some other game, until one or all of us got bored.

Lunch would come out next, usually cold meat and salads and then Gramps would head off to his bedroom for a snooze and Gran would get busy in the kitchen, Auntie Thelma would assist her or stand outside having a smoke while Uncle Ronnie tried to get me and my cousins interested in kicking a ball around the back garden. From an early age it was quite obvious that Kirstin had no interest in ball games and equally obvious that I had no aptitude for such activities. It wouldn't take too long before I'd sneak off to my room to find solace in a comic or a book or my stamp collection, and Kirstin would hang around in the kitchen with her mom and Gran. That left Uncle Ronnie to impress his two sons with his deft footballing skills and for the boys to run circles around him. The three of them were quite happy to carry on like this for a good while and didn't seem to miss the non-talents of either Kirstin or myself.

Sometime around mid-afternoon Gramps would reappear and after more tea or a splash more alcohol for Uncle Ronnie, they'd all go home and our lives would return to

normal. This was the standard format of those family visits for years, until I was about eleven and Kirstin thirteen. That's when it all changed.

I'd left the back garden football silliness earlier than usual, saying that I had some school homework to finish. Neither Uncle Ronnie nor James and Jesse seemed to even notice my departure from the lawn. Kirstin hadn't even bothered to get involved to start with and was in the kitchen talking to Gran. Aunty Thelma was lounging on a garden chair in the shade of a guava tree with a cigarette in her mouth and a magazine on her lap and her hair piled high. She seemed equally oblivious to what was going on around her. Gramps was having his customary snooze and I simply retreated unobserved into the cool refuge of my bedroom.

I hadn't been there for very long and was paging through a comic book, when Kirstin appeared at my bedroom door and asked if she could come in. I must have said yes because she entered and half closed the door behind her.

Next thing she's sitting on my bed next to me and says, 'What are you reading?' I really can't remember now exactly what it was, but it was a Marvel comic I'm sure, either Superman or Spiderman or Batman I guess, because those were my favourites. But the next five words that came out of my thirteen-year-old cousin's beautiful mouth, I'll never forget. She asked, 'Can I look at it?' and I said, 'Yes, of course.'

And I thought she meant the comic book.

Gently, very gently, she placed her hand over my crotch, coming down ever so softly on my jeans-covered virgin cock, her dark brown eyes looking directly into mine, unblinking, defying me to resist this unexpected invasion. I didn't move. I didn't know how to. Very slowly and still very, very gently, she began to stroke me, moving her hand carefully over my jeans. Up and down. Up and down, very, very slowly and very, very gently.

As I briefly looked away from her, instinctively, towards the door, she said reassuringly, 'It's okay – it's okay.' Well it was and it wasn't. I admit that her attentions felt positively 'okay', but the prospect of Gran or Gramps, or Uncle Ronnie or Aunty Thelma, or James and Jesse bursting through that door was definitely not 'okay'. But there was something in Kirstin's voice that sounded so reassuring that I believed her implicitly. Also, I was just starting to overcome my initial astonishment and was becoming acutely aware of a growing sensation in the region of my groin that was not entirely unpleasant.

So when Kirstin took hold of my zipper and started to drag it downwards with the same degree of gentleness and slowness that she'd employed up to this moment, I abandoned my earlier worries about who might come charging through my bedroom door and simply looked down in amazement as she slipped her hand into my jeans, pulled at the elastic of my briefs and guided my very, very erect young cock into the soft afternoon light bathing my childhood bedroom.

Kirstin let out a small sigh and said, 'It's beautiful.'

I wasn't quite sure what to say, but I didn't want to disagree with her. Although 'beautiful' was not the word that I'd have chosen to describe its appearance, I was more than happy to accept her assessment. I was dumbfounded and couldn't – didn't – want to move. Looking down at it, my cock looked enormous and even more so as Kirstin gently wrapped her delicate thirteen-year-old hand around it. I had little idea what to expect next, but I sensed that something inside me was welling up and it felt scary, heady and good.

But then she abruptly let go, stood up and again said, 'It's beautiful,' adding, 'and I can't wait for next time,' then quickly pulled open the door and left.

I sat on the edge of my bed wondering what the hell had just happened. My cock stared up at me expectantly, as straight and firm as a lighthouse. The scary, heady, welling up feeling that had filled my body moments earlier began to subside and with its departure I felt an unusual sense of disappointment. I tried to replay in my mind just how this had all come about but found that at that moment all I could focus on were Kirstin's parting words to me. I don't know how long I sat like that, zipper open, my cock slowly shrinking back into my briefs, my mouth slack-jawed and my brain befuddled. Then I heard Gramps calling out, 'Buddy, your cousins are heading for the frontier, so best you come wave them goodbye in case you don't see them again.'

That got me moving.

As it happened, I did see them again, many times after that first astonishing bedroom encounter with Kirstin. The regular family visits continued for another three years before coming to a dramatic end.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. So let me first tell you what happened the next time they came to visit, which was about two agonising months later.

I had no idea what to expect, but by the time Uncle Ronnie, Aunty Thelma, Kirstin and Jesse and James came around for another family visit, I had come to the conclusion that I'd imagined all of it – that Kirstin had never come into my room, had never sat down beside me on my bed, didn't put her hand into my crotch to stroke me through my jeans, didn't slip my cock out of my briefs, didn't hold it and didn't say – couldn't have said – 'It's beautiful,' and definitely, without a doubt, didn't say, 'I can't wait for next time.'

When the next time did finally arrive, things followed the usual pattern, up to a point. Everyone admired Uncle Ronnie's latest borrowed car, a slightly out-dated red Mustang, if I recall correctly. The adults had tea, except for Uncle Ronnie who had a Scotch and soda. The four of us kids had cool drinks and Gran's freshly baked cookies. The adults chatted and laughed, although Aunty Thelma choked briefly on cigarette smoke when Gramps observed that, 'Smokers always die with empty thoughts in their heads because nicotine acts like glue in the brain, sticking the wrong memories to each other, until all one can remember is where one had one's last cigarette. Very sad,' he concluded. I stood around shyly – perhaps more so than usual – and Kirstin and Jesse and James did the same until Gramps took us to look for chameleons in the front garden. We had lunch – the usual cold meats and salads. Uncle Ronnie brought out an old soccer ball that he kept in a cupboard in Gran and Gramps' garage and roped us kids into a game of football on the back lawn. Gramps went off for a snooze and Gran headed for the kitchen to ice a cake. Aunty Thelma followed her, sticking long pins into her hair as she went.

I stood around for a short while trying to avoid the soccer ball as much as I could and then ambled off towards my bedroom. When I left the game, Kirstin was still kicking the ball back to her father and her brothers, but looked set to give it up quite soon too. I hoped that she wasn't planning to spend the rest of the afternoon with Gran.

She wasn't.

This time I didn't even bother with the Marvel comic. I just waited on the edge my bed, watching my open bedroom doorway and tried to breathe normally. I didn't have to wait too long.

Kirstin didn't pause to ask if she could enter. Instead she simply walked straight into my room, leaving the door wide open behind her, stood in front of me and asked, 'Have you missed me?' Before I could answer she came and sat down next to me and said, 'I want to show you something.' My mind reeled. My mouth must have gaped open, wanting to make a noise, but my brain wasn't feeding it any words. I just looked at her in amazement and then she said, 'Come with me,' stood up, turned and walked out of the room.

I was right behind her.

We walked down the passage to Gramps and Gran's bedroom and before I could stop her she walked straight in. I followed and looked around. Gramps was nowhere to be seen. There was an indentation on his side of the bed where he should have been snoozing, but no Gramps. We went into their bathroom. Fortunately I suppose, he wasn't there either. We backtracked to the kitchen where there was no sign of Gran or Auntie Thelma or anyone else. We went through the whole house and found no-one. Outside in the back garden all was quiet and deserted. There was no sign of Uncle Ronnie or Jesse or James. The soccer ball sat idly in the middle of the lawn. The front garden was equally devoid of Grandparents, Uncle, Auntie, and boy cousins. The red Mustang was still in the driveway. Peeping through a window into the garage I saw that both Gran and Gramps's cars were parked in their normal places.

Without a doubt Kirstin and I were alone on the property. It didn't make sense. 'Where are they I asked?' She didn't say, but led me back to my bedroom and then said this to me, 'I made them disappear.'

'You did what?'

'I made them disappear,' she repeated.

I was confused and didn't know what she was talking about. I was also a bit scared, but before I could say anything more Kirstin said, 'Okay, just chill. Let me explain. Some time ago I realised that if I concentrated really hard I could make people disappear for a short time. Not actually disappear, but send them into like a time warp or something so it seems like they've disappeared. They don't know that they're gone and they won't realise that they've been missing when they return. It's kind of weird I know, but it really works. They're gone and won't be back until I let them come back. They'll be fine and won't skip a beat once they return. So, chill, don't worry. We're on our own and we can do whatever we want. Okay?'

'No, no, not okay!' I may have shouted.

'Hey Buddy, what do think happened last time? Don't you remember? I sent them away. Come on, you must remember – I told you not to worry. Nothing happened then. Everything went back to normal and nobody had any idea of what I'd done. It really works, so relax.'

Only one part of my body took that advice to heart and despite her best efforts, cousin Kirstin wasn't able to change that. But I did manage to focus my attention when she lifted her skirt and allowed me to touch her cute little pussy. We played around for a bit and then she

got bored – I suppose – because she suddenly rearranged her clothing and left my room saying, ‘Maybe next time, when you’re a little more chilled. Okay?’

I was left in a jumble of dismay, excitement and perplexity. How was this possible? I quickly rearranged my clothing, zipping and buttoning up as quickly as possible and then shot out of my room. I looked in on Gramps and sure enough he was fast asleep on his side of the bed. Gran was in the kitchen talking to Aunty Thelma who was trying to tuck a stray lock of hair back into the pile atop her head with one hand, while fidgeting with an unlit cigarette in the other. Outside Uncle Ronnie was making a big show of dribbling a ball past Jesse or James while the other twin was calling for his dad to pass to him. I found Kirstin in the front garden looking for chameleons. She smiled at me and said, ‘See, I told you?’

There was no more normal after that. The family visits carried on two or three months apart and after lunch on every one of those visits the family disappeared for an hour or so while Kirstin and I grew bolder and more experimental in the exploration of our budding sexuality. I quickly learnt to accept that Kirstin had a special gift – well, several special gifts, as it turned out. But the one I’m referring to here had to do with her ability to selectively make time stand still. It wasn’t just that she could make the family disappear. In the time that they were away, she and I would spend an hour or two, sometimes more, satisfying our youthful hunger for each other. But the moment we finished and she had left my room, time was immediately reset to the moment that she had entered my room. So when the family disappeared at 2 o’clock, for instance, and Kirstin and I spent an hour or two alone with each other, it was still 2 o’clock when they all returned.

Kirstin insisted on three rules only. The first was obviously to never, never tell anyone what we were doing and secondly to never, never tell anyone about the temporary disappearance of the family. These were easy rules to follow as none of my school friends, or hers, would have believed us anyway – neither about our regular sexual adventures, nor about the family’s temporary absence from, I don’t know, the universe maybe?

Kirstin’s third rule was the hardest not to break – for both of us. Right up front, two or three visits into our special times – as we called them – Kirstin told me this, ‘Anything goes, but there’s no way that you are going to put that big, beautiful cock of yours into my little pussy until I turn sixteen. Got it?’ I got it. There were a couple of close calls with the third rule but we managed – only just – to hold back, and so none of the rules were ever broken.

Three glorious years went by. We were kids, I know, but my God, did we learn a lot from each other, and mostly me from her!

When Kirstin turned sixteen, Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma took her, Jesse and James away on a special holiday to celebrate Kirstin’s big birthday. They went to some resort or the other where Jesse and James both got ear infections which meant they were housebound for a while after the holiday. Then Uncle Ronnie changed jobs and that meant that he had to spend extra time at the new showroom establishing himself as the supremo car salesman. That took time. Also, Aunty Thelma’s mother died about a month later and so, for various reasons, the gap between our special times together stretched out to almost five months. I was desperate to see Kirstin again, having not seen her since two months before she turned sixteen.

When the family did eventually return for the usual gathering, the first thing I noticed was how grown-up Kirstin looked. She’d literally blossomed during the months that had

passed since last we'd seen each other. Jesse and James were more sullen and spotty than I'd remembered them and neither seemed interested in playing soccer any more. That suited Uncle Ronnie who had strained a back muscle getting out of a particularly low-slung Alfa Romeo that he'd been showing to a new customer. Auntie Thelma looked older and said that she missed her mother. The hair hadn't dropped down from its impossible heights, but now there were tinges of grey showing through.

After the usual inspection of Uncle Ronnie's latest ride, a bulky looking Dodge, we all traipsed inside and tea was served. For the first time ever we all had a cup, kids and adults alike. Even Uncle Ronnie accepted a cup saying that he might have a little Scotch a bit later. After lunch, the predictable cold meats and salads, Gran asked Auntie Thelma and Kirstin to join her in the kitchen to inspect her new waffle maker, Gramps headed off for his usual post-lunch snooze, Uncle Ronnie and Jesse and James settled down in front of the TV in the family room to watch motor racing – their latest sporting interest – and I hurried off to my bedroom, hot and randy and set to burst!

Kirstin joined me in seconds and we simply fell into each other's arms, just like in the movies. 'They've all disappeared,' she said, breathlessly. And with that we tore at each other's clothes, desperate for the intimacy that we'd both been starved of.

What followed was the perfect, the absolutely perfect culmination of all that we had experienced together and all that we had waited for. Rule number three went straight out the window. Three years of hard practising by both of us meant that we could delay things almost indefinitely. We were unstoppable in the presence of our pent up, blazing desire, trying all the different positions that we'd practised so fervently. And both of us had yet to orgasm. I think we'd already been close to the edge twice, but suddenly I was on my back again with Kirstin astride me riding hard and fast. And then, and then, and then, and then... together we came in one mighty, roof-lifting, frenzied, galactic climax!

Seconds later – above the sound of my galloping heart – I heard Kirstin say, 'Oops.'

'What?' said me, on my back with Kirstin's perfect breasts pressed onto my chest and both of us saturated in sweat and in a state of ecstatic, delirious exhaustion.

'I think I may have lost it.'

'What?' I repeated, thinking an ear-ring, her virginity, self-control... I was puzzled.

'The connection, the force that keeps them away, that makes them disappear – wait! Keep quiet,' she whispered sharply.

I wasn't going to wait for anything. Not a chance. But just as I began to struggle out from under her I heard a shriek from my bedroom doorway, the likes of which I'd never heard before. It was Gran, and she was in a state of apoplexy, screaming, crying and shouting in an uncontrollable cacophony of noise.

Naked, Kirstin rolled to one side off the bed and I, just as naked, to the other. By then Auntie Thelma was at the door and then Jesse and James appeared too, with Uncle Ronnie leaning over the lot of them, shouting his own brand of disgust and dismay, tinged as it was with a dazzling array of obscenities. Auntie Thelma's knees buckled and Jesse and James seemed torn between laughter and tears, although the tears were apparently winning. All four of them were shouting at the same time and then Gramps shouldered his way through the crowd and tried to restore order.

By now Kirstin and I were half dressed and aghast at the commotion.

Gramps sent Uncle Ronnie, Aunty Thelma and Gran to the family room with instructions to Uncle Ronnie to make a glass of strong sugar water for the two ladies and to pour a whiskey for himself. Uncle Ronnie started to argue but Gramps stood firm and said that Uncle Ronnie would get a chance to deal with Kirstin once he'd calmed down, pointing out, in true Gramps fashion, that, 'It doesn't help getting into the pool when the sharks are angry!' Then he instructed Jesse and James to stop gaping and to go out into the garden for a walk. He told me to stay put in my bedroom and he told Kirstin to go to the spare room. Once everyone had done as they were told Gramps went to the family room to consult with Gran, Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma.

The interrogations didn't last long. I heard angry voices coming from the spare bedroom down the passage. They sounded like those of Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma and occasionally the surprisingly firm and defiant voice of Kirstin. I couldn't hear what was being said. Gramps conducted my interrogation by himself because Gran was still recovering from the shock of discovering the entangled naked bodies of two of her young grandchildren in joyful post-coital exhaustion. I felt really bad about that. Honestly, I did.

Gramps was brief and not entirely to the point. He closed the door and told me to sit down on the edge of my bed, which I did. He probably felt it unnecessary to ask any questions about what we had been doing as this had been patently obvious to everyone. Fortunately he also spared me the question of duration – how long had Kirstin and I been involved in such acts of depravity? That was the first question that I expected. But perhaps he didn't want to know. Instead, Gramps chose to adopt the sermonising approach. 'Stupid is the boy who thinks that he can screw his older cousin and not feel regret. And regret will be your cross, you mark my words. We have given our lives to you – and this is the reward? Not that we want one, but you know what I mean.'

He looked downcast, it must be said, and I think also for once he was struggling to find the words that he needed to adequately voice his anger and his disappointment. But Gramps was known for the swift recovery and the final word, and so I knew that his speech would not take up too much more time and would end with a flourish. I just wanted to see Kirstin, to make sure she was okay and to reassure her that I was okay, and that I had no regrets. And couldn't she please just make them all disappear again, for good?

But it didn't work out like that. I was right about one thing though. Gramps quickly concluded his sermon with a final, 'What's done is done. The horse has flown the coop. I've nothing more to say.' With that he left my room, pausing briefly at the door for a final curt, authoritative flourish, 'Stay here!' He closed the door and I was left to reflect on the best and worst day of my young life.

And that was the end of it.

Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma and Kirstin and Jesse and James never visited us again as a family. On the few occasions that Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma came around, they did so by themselves and never stayed long. I was always instructed by Gramps to go to my room before they arrived and to close the door, and to stay there until they'd left, which I always did. I never saw them again.

All of that happened more than twenty years ago.

I finished school with sufficiently good grades to enter university where I eventually graduated as an accountant. I left home after graduating to share a flat with two university

class-mates, both of whom had graduated with me. We had a great friendship and followed each other's careers with interest. We worked for different accounting firms in the city and together we developed a wide network of friends and social acquaintances.

I often thought about Kirstin and wondered what had become of her and her family. If Gran and Gramps knew, which I was sure they did, they never shared anything about any of them with me. I had been told in no uncertain terms in the days that followed the disaster of that day that I was never to make contact with Kirstin again – ever! I obeyed this instruction until the age of nineteen, my second year of university. Then I made a concerted effort to find her. It was a mistake to do so. Uncle Ronnie or Auntie Thelma must have caught wind of my efforts and the next thing I knew I had a very angry Gramps to deal with. He made it clear that if I was to ever attempt such 'defiant foolishness' again, I would find that I had no roof over my head, no food to eat, and no-one to pay for my studies. I backed off.

After leaving home and securing my first job, new and exciting possibilities opened up. With my flatmates and our wide circle of friends, I was kept busy on a roundabout of work, parties, weekends away, more parties, new friends and more parties. But I made a point of visiting Gran and Gramps once a month for some good old-fashioned home cooking and baking, and just to stay in touch.

I met Abby when I was twenty-seven and we were engaged two years later. We've been married now for five glorious years. Abby's my soul-mate and my best friend. We are so alike in so many ways that our friends comment regularly on what a great match we are. We agree! We bought our first house two years ago and have enjoyed setting up home. We are absolutely sure that we do not want to have children and that's that! Abby's also an accountant, working for a different firm to the one I work for but we plan to start our own accounting practice within the next two years. We've been working on this plan for a while and it seems that we are on schedule. All is good!

Gramps passed away the year after Abby and I were married. Gran stepped out of her kitchen one afternoon to find him sitting lifeless in his favourite chair on the back veranda, eyes open, as if admiring the expansive lawn and well-kept flower beds that he had been so proud of. He was a month shy of his eighty-ninth birthday.

Gran went downhill pretty fast after that. She and Gramps had been married for almost sixty-two years and were stronger together than alone. We had to move her to an old-age home that caters specifically for those who suffer dementia in their old age. I maintained my monthly visits, but now of course to the old-age home and not to the home that I grew up in. We sold that to finance the best possible care that we could find for Gran.

Of course, Abby always wanted to accompany me on my visits but I told her that it was kind of her to want to do so but not necessary. But she insisted. This caused me some concerns as Gran's dementia seemed to be of a confused regressive nature. The doctors explained to me that as her grip on current reality loosened, her mind would grasp at old memories to maintain stability. Unfortunately, these were usually the memories that had caused the most traumas in her life and so she lived in a shadowy world suspended between current day confusion and the nightmare world of relived old wounds.

Gran's traumas were fairly easy to identify, at least for me they were. The death, in a car accident, of her youngest son and his family – my father, my mother and my two sisters – was one of these. Finding Gramps dead on the back veranda was another, and worryingly

obvious to me, stumbling into my bedroom to find Kirstin and me *in flagrante delicto*, naked and spent after a marathon teenage fuckfest, was the other. Fortunately, she got these events sufficiently confused in her mind to make it almost impossible for anyone not in the know to make sense of her ramblings. Mercifully, she also lost the capacity for remembering names. But still, those were worrying times and I had to do some fairly nimble footwork when trying to satisfy Abby's curiosity regarding Gran's fantasy world.

During our last visit to her I sat listening, with as vacant an expression as I could muster, while Gran told Abby and me that, 'Young children should not be having sex with each other while driving. It could lead to serious accidents. People should read more. Did you know that my husband... can't remember his name now... he might even be dead for all I know... told them to stop making such a damn mess of everything – their lives, the bedding and the garden. The eyes are always looking for something in the garden, be it chameleons or dead bodies. God knows what dead bodies can do to one, especially one's own. Do you know... the food in this place is terrible? But those children should be banished to the four corners of the earth I say, even if there are only two of them. Children, I mean.'

In the car on the way home, I feigned as perplexed an understanding of Gran's ravings as Abby had expressed, matching her curiosity and questioning, with my own curiosity and questions in response to all that she threw at me... tricky. She knew about the death of my parents and sisters in a car accident, and of course she knew Gramps and so also knew the circumstances of his death. But I'd never told her about Kirstin and me, and had no intention of ever doing so. Rules one and two would be held sacred forever.

Gran died two months ago. As with Gramps's funeral, hers was a small private affair with just Abby and me, and Gran's few still-mobile friends present. Her passing felt like the end of an era – the closing of an important chapter in my life.

And it was, because then Kirstin came back.

I was just about ready to leave the office on Monday afternoon last week when the switchboard put the call through to me, 'Hello Buddy – it's Kirstin.'

Four words and my life was turned upside down.

I was dumbstruck. I think I managed to clumsily say, 'Who? Kirstin? Are you sure?' After getting over the initial shock and realising that this was indeed her, I didn't know what to say next. But she was obviously better prepared, and said that she'd like to meet me and could we have coffee somewhere, sometime, please? Without hesitation, I said, 'Yes, of course,' realising as I did just how desperate I was to know what had happened after we had been separated by Gramps all those years ago. What punishments had she faced at the hands of her family? Why had she never made contact until now? What had happened since then? We agreed to meet at a quiet coffee shop the following morning, between the early morning and lunchtime rushes. How I managed to contain my excitement, my anxiety and a myriad other emotions from Abby that night, I do not know.

I was there at ten-thirty the following morning as agreed. Kirstin was already at a table in the back. I'd last seen her when she was sixteen and I was fourteen. She was now thirty-seven and I was thirty-five. It seems that neither of our appearances had changed much, because we recognised each other immediately and without hesitation walked into a hug that suggested to me that she was as glad to see me as I was to see her.

We spent the next two hours explaining what had happened to each other after we'd been caught by Gran and the rest of the family. Kirstin insisted that I talk first. I told her of my being confined to my room by Gramps, who only allowed me out once her family had left our home. I told her how I'd been banned from seeing them again and how, when on the few occasions that Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma did visit I'd been banished to my room for the duration of their short stay. I told her of my efforts to contact her once I'd finished school and how when this was discovered, I'd been threatened with eviction and the withdrawal of all financial support. I told her about my life as student, as a young graduate and my marriage to Abby. I told her everything.

Then it was her turn.

Kirstin leaned forward over the small table that separated us, moved the coffee mugs out of the way, took my hands in hers, looked me in the eye and said, 'Buddy, you have a son – a son of almost twenty-one years.'

I have been wholly speechless four times in my life. The first was when my thirteen-year-old cousin demonstrated her ability to make people temporarily disappear. That time my amazement was tempered by her urgent appetite for carnal pleasure. The second was three years later when my Gran shrieked uncontrollably from the doorway to my bedroom after walking in on Kirstin and me recovering from an epic exploration of those very same carnal pleasures. The third was when, after an absence of twenty-one years, Kirstin phoned me yesterday afternoon. And I had now just heard the reason for the fourth.

I had a son.

My mouth must have been hanging open or something because Kirstin lent forward and gently touched me under my chin. Then she told me her story.

After being sent to the spare bedroom in Gran and Gramps's house she'd been set upon by her parents whose recriminations had rung in her ears for years. She too had been banned from ever seeing me again. During the weeks that followed, Aunty Thelma had bravely stood between Kirstin and her father on many occasions when all Uncle Ronnie could do was to threaten his daughter with violence. Uncle Ronnie saw Aunty Thelma's intervention as an assault on his authority as head of the home and worse than that, as a demonstration that Aunty Thelma condoned Kirstin's scandalous behaviour. This served to drive a massive wedge between her parents and soon Uncle Ronnie and Aunty Thelma moved into separate rooms and thereafter barely spoke to each other.

Many were the nights that Kirstin tried to make her father disappear, but the ability to do so escaped her. She surmised that the mood or the underlying reasons weren't right.

Then she discovered that she was pregnant with our child. Kirstin confided in her mother who tried to get her to agree to a clandestine abortion. But Kirstin was adamant – she would not abort the child under any circumstances. Eventually Uncle Ronnie had to be told. He flew into a wild rage and offered one and only one solution. Kirstin was to have the abortion or he would leave. She stood her ground and so he left. And no one really missed him, not even Jesse and James who both elected to stay with their mother, telling their father that they quite looked forward to being uncles themselves. Uncle Ronnie left his family, left his job, left town and found himself an aging honey-blonde widower with a big inheritance a thousand kilometres away. He had a heart-attack, died and left the world two years later.

Gran and Gramps were informed of his death, but by then they were already estranged from Uncle Ronnie, who had also seen fit to accuse them of harbouring a criminal – me – and of being party to everything that had gone wrong in his life. He had made it quite clear that he was not interested in being their son and although he wished them no harm, he hoped they both burnt in Hell. It seems like he'd inherited his father's strange logic and wisdom. But Gran and Gramps did well to not reveal to me their estrangement from Uncle Ronnie or his passing.

Kirstin was forced into a situation of indebtedness to her mother. She realised this and didn't put up too much of a fight when Aunty Thelma laid down the rules and conditions that would govern all their futures. All three children were sworn to secrecy regarding the father of their new family member. All three were banned from attempting to make contact with me – although that rule had been in place since that fateful day at Gran and Gramps's house, anyway. Aunty Thelma agreed to support Kirstin and the baby for as long as it took for Kirstin to find a job and a home of her own. Very, very importantly, was the understanding that for as long as Aunty Thelma was alive, neither Jesse and James nor Kirstin was to make any attempt to contact me in any way whatsoever. If any one of them broke this rule, all three of their inheritances – Aunty Thelma had inherited a tidy sum from her mother a few years earlier which had been wisely invested – would be forfeited to the SPCA.

Aunty Thelma had succumbed to cancer of the throat a month to the day after Gran died. Kirstin's first action after attending to her mother's funeral was to find me. She had never married. My son's name was Joshua and he wanted to meet me.

I sat back in my chair and looked at her. She looked at me. Neither of us said anything for a moment and then I asked her, 'Do you want money?' and regretted my callous assumption the moment the words left my mouth. Kirstin was unfazed. She said, 'I can understand that you had to ask that question. It's okay. No, I don't want money. The simple truth, cousin Buddy, is that I want you.' She paused. 'And I want our son to know his father. I had a duty to tell you that you have a son. I have not brought him here today because I did not know what your reaction would be to this revelation. I did not want you to feel pressurised or entrapped. If you were to tell me now that you want nothing to do with either Joshua, or me, I will accept that unconditionally and I will leave this table immediately. If that is what you want, say the word and you will never hear from me again. I promise you that. And one more thing – as you should know – our promises have always held.'

I looked at her and the memories came flooding back. She was still irresistible. I could not ignore that, and I could not ignore the fact that I had a son. In the weakest of voices I heard myself saying to her, 'But I am married to a wonderful woman. We love each other.'

Kirstin looked at me and smiled, and then she said, 'But you know that I can make her disappear, if that's what you want.'

**PORTFOLIO**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

**GRAHAM DUKAS**

November 2019

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MACW – Portfolio  
November 2019

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## INTRODUCTION

The MACW Portfolio comprises five parts.

The first of these is THE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL. This document aims to track my trajectory as a writer on the Course – what I have learnt, how I've been influenced and how this has contributed to the writing of my thesis.

As a Course requirement I maintained a fortnightly Reflective Journal wherein I reflected on the previous two weeks' Seminars, Assignments, my reading and my writing. The combined word count of these journals is in excess of 50,000 words. For the purposes of the Portfolio, I sifted through the RJs, reducing the overall number of words to roughly 10,000 words. I have assembled these in the form of selected extracts (*in italics*) from the original journals and linked them together with a brief narrative.

The second part of the Portfolio is my POETICS & NARRATIVITY Assignment. This was written in May 2018 as a record of the exploration of the writing of other writers, as I attempted to map the components of a structure that would serve to inform my own writing. The Assignment includes a list of the works that were referenced in its composition.

The third part is a summary of my WRITING IN THE COMMUNITY project. This was an Assignment that was done in collaboration with a fellow student. We designed and ran a two-part writing workshop for a small group of volunteer attendees.

The fourth part of the Portfolio is a short list of BOOK REVIEWS that were done in response to an Assignment set in the early days of the Course. By then I had begun to seek out and read books that seemed at the time relevant to my interest. It has been useful to look back at this short list and to reassess the impact of these books in light of my learning trajectory. These first few book reviews were a foretaste of what was to come as I sustained my reading throughout the Course. The RJ summary that forms the first part of this Portfolio will show – I hope – that this discipline was invaluable to my development as a writer. It contains references to the many books and writers who have inspired me.

The fifth part of the Portfolio is a REFLECTIVE ESSAY written in response to the Reader Report on my draft thesis submission. This essay serves as a reflection on that report, and the impact that it has had on my final thesis submission and my development as a writer at the Course end.

## THE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

The Reflective Journal (RJ) served to track my development as a writer over the duration of the Course. In this condensed document I have used selected extracts from each RJ (*in italics*) to illustrate my learning trajectory, and have linked these to each other with an explanatory narrative thread.

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2018

I commented on the the first contact week, the purpose of which had been to quickly immerse us in a contemplation of creative writing – of our own and of others.

*... I have enjoyed the readings – both those from the ‘reader’ that was provided and also the readings by the group of their own work... Some learnings that I have drawn from these have been that no two people will necessarily read the same book in the same way, nor will they necessarily find the same inspiration in that writing...*

*The selection of reading material... gave me the opportunity to explore authors and writing styles that were new and inspiring.*

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018

I gave thought to what I wanted to achieve on the MACW. It would become routine for me to pose questions for myself in these RJs as I moved deeper into the Course.

*...what do I want to take away from the MACW? My first response to this question... has been that I want to be ‘a better writer’. I’m now thinking that that’s too vague and that I need to imagine myself as... someone who’s writing others would look forward to reading, because the writing is worth reading!*

*The next question... is what makes something worth reading? ...some writing is generally better received than other writing. Why is this? Is it only about style, content and competence or are there other moving parts..?*

The first Seminar explored the taken-for-granted matter of punctuation – everything about writing was up for debate and exploration.

*Punctuation is something that I have always taken for granted – it has its place and is there to regulate and enhance grammar... I now realise that the MACW Course is not bound to a highway code of regulations and in fact encourages diversions and detours.*

A key component of the RJ was to write about what I’d been reading during the preceding fortnight, and what I’d learnt from these writers.

*I finished reading 'The Physics of Imaginary Objects' by Tina May Hall and 'Blood and Guts in High School' by Kathy Acker... Hall's writing is beautiful. She does a remarkable job of holding her rhythm without becoming tedious... Her stories are delivered in a manner that doesn't rely on emotional swings or sudden shifts in pace... This feels to me like poetic prose of incredible strength...*

*By contrast, the late Kathy Acker's writing is raw, deliberately shocking in content and language, and violently provocative...*

*I have started reading 'The Woman in the Dunes' by Kobo Abe... the entire story is centred on only two characters who share the fate of their joint detention in an unlikely place, under unlikely circumstances... My interest lies in understanding how it is possible to write a novel-length piece using such a narrowly focused idea.*

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018

Lessons came from unexpected sources. Readings from Samuel Beckett and the Assignment that accompanied these exposed a range of emotions and preferences in the class.

*Despite the apparent absurdity of the 'sucking stones' monologue in 'Molloy', I felt that there was something remarkable... in the way that it charmed and entertained through its looping, minimalistic, arbitrary approach... I found that staying conscious to this style in my own writing in the Assignment was quite liberating... the writing flowed fairly easily and didn't... raise any anxiousness about being overly repetitive or irrelevant.*

By this stage I was into a good reading rhythm, finishing a book a week.

*I finished reading 'The Woman in the Dunes' by Kobo Abe... as well as Alissa Nutting's 'Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls'.*

*What I found really interesting about Abe's novel was the way in which he developed such a credible story out of a highly unlikely and yet very simple premise...*

*Although worlds apart in time and culture, I was reminded of Stephen King who has mastered this skill. 'Misery' and 'Gerald's Game' have extraordinarily simple premises and are dramatic accounts by the protagonist in a singular setting where only one other character is involved.*

*Alissa Nutting's collection of short stories and essays is a satisfyingly bizarre collection of (apparently) effortless writing, where the often absurdly over-the-top premise rolls down the page without any difficulty at all... Her story-telling has reminded me that a confident simplicity can be an alluring attribute to one's writing.*

I was paying careful attention to these authors, hoping to learn something from each of them. The combination of regular Seminars, the accompanying Assignments, our class reading nights, the feedback sessions on one's Assignments and individual reading choices, made for a rich mix of literary nourishment.

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018

By now I had started to develop a confidence in my own writing and was ready to challenge myself by writing in a way that I'd never done before. I had taken to heart the idea that even if I missed the point of an Assignment, I still had the freedom to exercise my writing muscles by responding in a way that I thought would work best for me. I was also quickly developing an opinion as to the kind of writing I liked... and didn't like.

*... I enjoyed 'The Blue Girl' by Laurie Foos, although I'm trying to figure out why. The only explanation that I can come up with is that the writing is strangely similar to that of Alissa Nutting and Tina May Hall. All three of these writers have the ability to keep me interested by forcing me to stay slightly off-balance as I read them...*

*My reading group piece was 'New York/LA Whirlwind Romance' by Karen Lillis. I found this to be a remarkable piece of writing. Lillis's explanation of 'writing as listening... the Heart as a Giant Ear', where snippets of conversation overheard here and there can spark the idea of a story that relies entirely on that format, is very clever.*

*My own reading during the past two weeks has yielded contrasting discoveries. I started and only just managed to finish Flannery O'Conner's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find'... O'Conner's short stories are well-crafted and surprisingly raw, even brutal at times. ...but by the time I was two thirds of the way through the book I was ready to try something else. I think that I had been spoiled by Nutting's light-hearted carefree quirkiness. O'Conner was just too ordinary!*

*Also, and very importantly, I had picked up on the suggestion... to try Sheila Heti's 'Middle Stories' and had found a copy at a local bookstore...*

*Like Alissa Nutting and like Tina May Hall, Heti's writing is addictive – I love the more than occasional absurdity, the wry humour... the carefreeness, the gentle pattern of words and paragraphs, the absolute confidence of the writing, the arbitrariness and mostly, the lightness.*

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> April 2018

If a Seminar felt less relevant to me, I realised that this still presented a learning opportunity. The Seminar readings always left me with new questions about what I enjoyed, what inspired me and what didn't... and why.

*Stacey Levine's piece was remarkably well-crafted... where the normal is thrown out of proportion to ghastly extremes... the nett result being a work of exaggeration done to a genuinely macabre degree...*

*I wonder... if it is possible to write so vividly without having the experience of what is being written about... If possible, then imagination plays an even more crucial role than I have previously thought... the aim would therefore be to write so imaginatively that the imagination becomes a believable reality.*

By now I had established a growing list of writers whose writing I enjoyed.

*For the reading I chose Kim Addonizio's 'A Brief History of Condoms' because I find her method/voice inspiring. Also, I love her sense of humour...*

*I wasn't able to finish reading Mongo Beti's 'Mission to Kala'. I found it laborious and tedious... I've said before that I want to be entertained and inspired when reading... I then started and trudged my way through... Helen Oyeyemi's 'What is not yours is not yours'. ...her writing, while occasionally entertaining, wandered off in odd directions, making it difficult for me to maintain an interest...*

*I then found Charles Bukowski's 'Ham on Rye'... I love the raw honesty of his poetry but have never read any of his novels. Bukowski's no-holds barred honesty about himself, his early life, is remarkable. ... I had a bonus epiphany when I read the character Chiniski describing his first encounter with library books: "They were very dull. There were pages and pages of words that didn't say anything. Or if they did say something they took too long to say it and by the time they said it you were already too tired to have it matter at all."*

Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2018

The Poetics and Narrativity Assignment dominated the Course for a few weeks. The reading material linked to the Seminar was extensive. In my RJ of this fortnight I elaborated on my approach to the Assignment.

*I wanted to respond to this Assignment in a way that took me on a journey of discovery so that I could end up with a synthesis of what was most inspiring and most useful, ideally as a blueprint for my own writing. I was searching for a personal architecture of writing.*

And I continued my own exploration of authors who I had selected to read outside of the Seminars...

*I bought and started reading 'The Sellout' by Paul Beatty... I'm finding it heavy-going although unquestionably funny...*

*...a very pleasant distraction arrived at my doorstep in the form of 'Frances Johnson' by Stacey Levine. This was a great read and particularly so after hearing Levine's 'Sweethearts' at a previous Thursday evening reading. That short piece was disturbingly powerful and very deliberate in its over-the-top shock tactics. ... 'Frances Johnson' is constructed with an entirely different set of Levine skills – that of crafting a story... in a way that is as mesmerising as much as it is unsettling.*

*The writing is sparse, definitely off-beat, but sufficiently light enough to easily hold the reader's attention throughout. It's this light off-beat writing that I am drawn to.*

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2018

Every book I read offered something that I could use to define myself as a writer. This was a journey towards understanding myself – not just likes and dislikes, but also the drivers and

motivators that informed those decisions. My aim was to use the RJ to better understand my strengths and limitations, and how this knowledge could serve my writing.

*...not everyone will feel the same way about any particular piece of writing... outside the acceptance of general critique in a learning environment, no other opinions matter. Perhaps that's not true... the opinions do matter – it's what I do with them that's important.*

*I am guided by Virginia Woolf, who is quoted on one of the front pages of 'Wreckage of Reason' (Ed. Nava Renek), as having said, 'It is the nature of the artist to mind excessively what is said about him. Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinion of others.'*

*I'm busy reading Kate Bernheimer's anthology, 'My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me'... Not surprisingly, some of the stories collected in this volume are inspiring and enthralling, while others are less so. But common to all of them is the confidence one senses in the writing – these are writers who are at home within themselves and are prepared to take risks.*

*... I read Alissa Nutting's 'Tampa'... I am reminded again of the 'aha' moment I had during the Narrative/Poetics readings when I encountered Brian Evenson and his advice that, 'Life is something fiction can use as a catalyst to get elsewhere. Fiction is not a question of trying to depict what really happened... in other words, using life as a provocation.'*

*I think that Alissa Nutting's 'Tampa' provides a vividly robust proof to Evenson's maxim. So, here I am, thinking about how I can use 'life as a provocation' to propel my writing into a place where it is seen to be exciting, provocative, enthralling and courageous...*

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2018

During the next two weeks I came to a very useful conclusion about my writing, and fiction writing in general.

*I suppose that the question that I am grappling with has to do with honesty – how necessary is it to be honest as a writer? Right now, in answer to my own question, I'd say... not at all.*

My reading was helping to fortify my approach to convention. The authors that I was busy with – Evenson, Yuknavitch and Heti – have stayed with me, and have probably been the most influential – not from a stylistic point of view, but because I was able to identify with their personal 'outsider' narratives.

*I then read Lidia Yuknavitch's 'The Misfit's Manifesto'... I enjoyed this writing thoroughly, finding in it a resonance to my own sense of being a misfit in many respects. I have never felt a need to be part of the herd, preferring my own company above that of others. I can't claim to have had as profoundly a disruptive and difficult life to the one that Yuknavitch has had, but I get what she is saying. I really get it.*

*How does any of this affect my writing..? The answer... embrace an approach that is unaffected by criticism, unaffected by what may be considered 'the norm', that shocks, that gives the finger to what is considered decent, that says 'fuck you' to anything that wants to stereotype or define me in any way... and to be as dishonest as I want to be...*

*I also read Sheila Heti's 'How Should A Person Be?' ... a delicious blend of fact and fiction... Heti mixes it up, never allowing the reader to fully understand what is autobiographical and what is absolute fiction. This is a marvellous technique which simply allows the writer incredible scope and anonymity – by hiding in plain sight...*

*That is the beauty of this writing – of the understanding that life is 'a provocation'.*

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2018

I read – with some difficulty – both Zinzi Clemons's 'What We Lose' and the anthology of woman writers' experimental prose collection, 'Wreckage of Reason' edited by Nava Renek. Both books provided useful lessons.

*I found Clemmons's method very clever. The short, short chapters suggest a method of creating a novel by using small slices of content... to assemble, through the collection of smaller components, a piece of work that would literally be the sum of its parts.*

(I had yet to discover Diane Williams!)

*Working my way through 'Wreckage of Reason'... has made me realise just how diverse the approach to experimentation can be... Lidia Yuknavitch's 'Daguerreotype of a Girl' is the stand-out performer, while pieces by Laurie Foos, Karen Lillis, Nina Shope, Tsipi Keller and Aimee Parkinson were also inspiring.*

*I'm trying to fathom out what exactly makes each of these pieces so interesting to read. ...all of them... are written in a way that is unique to each author. None of them attempts to emulate or imitate any other writer. Each piece seems to represent the authentic voice of the writer. ...each writer, in creating her 'story', has not ventured too far away from home – home being the acceptance of, and faith in, self as an inspirational source.*

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2018

The Seminar introduced me to Samuel R Delany's 'Hogg', which the lecturer recommended with a strong advisory warning! Despite the sordid content, a powerful lesson was learnt.

*The decision to write is the only permission that one needs... and that permission comes from no government, no critic, no publisher, no set of rules and no constitution... Delany offered no excuse for what and how he chose to write 'Hogg'. All that he was doing was to exercise his right as a writer to express himself in any way that he saw fit...*

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2018

*... Brian Evenson's 'Immobility'... written in a style that makes it an easy reading experience... The premise... is uncomplicated... provides a valuable lesson – complexity is not the key to a convincing story. Ease of understanding provides a better anchor for the reader's engagement.*

I also read Lidia Yuknavitch's 'Book of Joan'...

*... some important lessons, not least of which is the idea that as a writer I should learn to 'trust the reader'. Also, editing is as important as writing and 'showing' is generally better than 'telling'. ...Yuknavitch comes up short in all of these principles... I guess that the added lesson is to remember that one successful piece of writing does not guarantee... that all successive writing will be equally successful.*

Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2018

'Synchronous writing', presented the exciting prospect – (paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze) – of 'action floating in a situation rather than determining it.' Noy Holland's 'Rooster, Pollard, Cricket, Goose' was superb.

*I thought that the writing was incredibly powerful in the way that it allows the reader to make sense of a situation not so much by the 'telling of the story' but by dropping the action into the reader's field of perception in a fragmented and evocative piecemeal-like manner.*

Although I found Holland's piece mesmerising, I was sufficiently grounded to know that the quest was not to find someone to mimic, but to find myself.

*I can't be Sam Beckett and Kate Bernheimer and Noy Holland and Brian Evenson and Lydia Davis and, and, and... all at the same time, or even individually. I can only be me and I think that the 'me' that I want to be is someone who writes expressively but not necessarily conventionally.*

*The writers who I have encountered are not there to be imitated. They are there to provoke a response in my writing that gives me the freedom to be expressive in a way that liberates me from the confines of convention.*

*'In the Time of the Blue Ball' by Manuela Draeger (translated by Brian Evenson) is another great example of convention-breaking writing. What I discovered... was a fabulously inventive three-part story that absolutely defies not only convention but also reality.*

*I also read Barbara Comyns's 'Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead'. Comyns uses language in a deadpan manner, whether describing cows in a field or the last convulsions of a dying character. ...everything is treated as if it was absolutely normal, irrespective of the situation... I find this flat style of writing to be very effective.*

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018

The word ‘intention’ came up in this fortnight’s Seminar and it elicited a strong response from me. From the perspective of a writer, the word feels like a restrictive imposition on the writer’s freedom to create a fiction.

*I have just finished reading Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water*. In it she says this: ‘The more you describe a memory, the more likely it is that you are making a story that fits your life, resolves the past, creates a fiction you can live with. It’s what writers do.’*

*I don’t think that’s a bad idea.*

*Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Chronology of Water* may be one of the best books that I have read this year... I was absolutely blown away (again, remembering ‘*The Misfit’s Manifesto*’) by her raw honesty and courage... The writing itself is done so effortlessly... and her ability to describe events, places, people is done with an ease that belies her injuries. And she surely has injuries!*

*I also finally got around to reading ‘Senselessness’ by Horacio Castellanos Moya (translated by Katherine Silver)... The narration is crisp and fast-moving. I was intrigued, if not initially a little put off, by the use of extraordinarily long sentences.*

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018

The Seminar raised important questions for me – where does inspiration come from? Where do ideas (for stories) come from and how do these find their way onto the page? In what later proved to be a useful reminder when writing the stories that were to form the body of my thesis, I used the Assignment as a testing ground to answer these questions.

*The narrative grew onto the page the way photographs of old were developed in the darkroom. I was probably more than three quarters of the way through the piece before I started thinking about how it might resolve itself.*

*If you want to write then write! I’ve noticed this before with other Assignments. The writing starts when I start writing. It doesn’t get mapped out in my head or on a mind-map, or rise from brief plot notes. It happens as it happens.*

A second valuable lesson derived from this Seminar was through the exposure to Bruno Schulz’s writing. By now I knew that I wanted to write short fiction that blurred the edges of reality and that carried within it an unapologetic ‘weird’ factor. I’d already allowed myself to be carried down this road by some of my earlier Assignments and I was progressively looking more and more for authors whose writing embodied this quality. Schulz was one such author.

*This weirdness is also at play in Bruno Schulz’s ‘Collected Stories’ and is evidenced by the example that was provided in... ‘*The Sanatorium under the Hourglass*’. I found this piece to be both riveting and obscure.... It messes with the reader’s mind, challenging the constructs of a reality that is otherwise simply too comfortable.*

I had also been reading ‘*The Collected Stories*’ of Lydia Davis and was captivated by her uniqueness.

*She seems both conventional and experimental at the same time. There’s no mistaking the intellect behind these pieces... The more conventional stories seem to be the longer pieces and these are mostly characterised by her ‘flatness’ of tone and her exquisite use of language. Nothing seems to be out of place and the narratives flow with an ease that should be the envy of any writer.*

*I also read ‘A Bestiary’ by Lily Hoang... I found it to be a clever and absorbing piece of personal revelation, both in terms of memoir-like writing and in terms of philosophical-like musings.*

I was starting to think about what I would be attempting to write for my thesis. At least I was certain that whatever it was going to be, it would not try to imitate the style of any of those writers who I had admired. Of all that I’d learnt from them, the most important was to first find, and then trust, my own voice.

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018

My focus was on preparations for the Community Writing Project which I was to do with a fellow student at a local book shop. Other than this I was mulling over my thesis topic and the nature and tone of the writing that I was to do...

*... I think also that the narrative should be slightly off-beat, something fairy-tale like or stranger... my voice must assert its dominance and this means that things may also be tinged with irreverent humour.*

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018

The final Assignment resulted in a short story that had at its root a real event that was buried in my memory. I trusted my instincts as a writer – to allow the recesses of memory to come forward in the guise of a fictional story.

*I am amazed at what lurks in the archive of memory... I had a sudden ‘flashback’ to an actual event that I had attended many years ago... I had completely forgotten the event and only in thinking about self-archives and the Assignment brief, was this memory unlocked.*

I had also just finished reading Bruno Schulz’s ‘*Collected Stories*’ and was wondering about the motivation of writers. I’d also finished Angela Carter’s ‘*The Bloody Chamber*’ and had just started Lidia Yuknavich’s ‘*Dora: a Headcase*’.

*I wonder about Bruno Schulz and the conditions under which he lived and wrote... I have enjoyed reading his ‘Collected Stories’. I love the weirdness and peculiarities that he brings into his writing. Here comes another question to self – was he weird in himself or did*

*he simply respond to the 'provocations' of life in a deliberately or subconsciously weird way?*

*I've also been reading Angela Carter... I'm in the middle of a collection of hers titled 'The Bloody Chamber', the title of the first story. I admire her writing, but find it a bit over-blown, perhaps characteristic of the time when she was at her writing peak.*

*In deep contrast to Carter, I have just started reading Lidia Yuknavitch's 'Dora: a Headcase'. Her economy of words, her graphic and carefree approach and her hugely courageous ability to tell a story without any concern or inhibitions, is magnificent.*

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2018

During a brief hiatus I contemplated my thesis, but delayed actually sitting down to write. We concluded our Community Writing Project and then I took a break from writing, and instead just read for a while.

*I finished reading Lidia Yuknavitch's 'Dora: A Headcase'... Yet again I have been mesmerised by Yuknavitch's brazenness, her audacity and her tell-it-like-it-is approach...*

*I have also just finished reading Sheila Heti's 'Motherhood', her most recent book... an existential musing on the nature and way of personal being, in this case regarding the choices a woman faces when deciding on the pros and cons of bringing new life into the world...*

*Although disappointed that Heti hasn't yet returned to the impressive story-telling ingrained in 'The Middle Stories', I have learnt from her that a writer has the freedom to move about.*

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2018

*I got my hands on a copy of Brian Evenson's collection, 'Altman's Tongue'... I didn't realise what an impact this book had when it was first published, but I understand why.*

*I like what he has to say about... violence and the comparison between the conventional depictions of it as opposed to his approach – 'I became particularly interested in breaking through the clichés that are most frequently applied to violence, masks that make it palatable to movie or television viewers.' And later at the end of the same paragraph, he concludes – 'Not violence as glitzily evil and chic, but as neutral and blank and indifferent'. (from Afterword, Altman's Tongue)*

*I'm thinking now of one of the four pillars of fairy tales, 'flatness', and how Kate Bernheimer illustrated this in her 'Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale' essay when she references the micro fairy tale 'The Rosebud'. In it the death of a child is dealt with in an absolutely matter of fact way... Evenson would no doubt approve, but he takes it one step further by making this 'flatness' the inevitable consequence of blank and indifferent violent action.*

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018

And then I started writing the first story of my thesis.

*I've said this before – that the writing only starts when I start writing. ... as I started to put words down, as the ideas started to form, as I watched the word count beginning to tick up, I found that my thoughts about the stories to follow started to take form in my mind. All of this points to a way forward where I will feel more energised to write the more I write!*

Right through my thesis writing I tried to maintain my reading intensity.

*I started, and last week finished reading J.M. Coetzee's 'Dusklands' comprising 'The Vietnam Project' and 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' ... I found both parts of the book to be convincing in the development of not only character but also story...*

*Also, there is a depth to Coetzee's prose that I find difficult to describe, probably because my own imagination and vocabulary is hardly a match for his. I realise that to write like this one needs to be wholly invested.*

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018

After a good start to my thesis writing I found myself distracted by the craziness of the December rush as an upcoming holiday beckoned from behind the tinsel of Christmas freneticism.

*I cannot do what I did last week, which was to start writing... have all the thoughts and ideas streaming onto the page and now four or five days later, I need to return to it with a new rhythm, because the old one has dissipated. I must start and finish – not necessarily edit and revise – a short story without the interruption of a few days in between.*

I had yet to immerse myself in the short story collections that I'd lined up to read but Don DeLillo's 'White Noise' had been beckoning for a while so I needed to deal with that first!

*The rampant consumerism of the western world that finds its apex in the so-called spirit of Christmas is skilfully referenced in 'White Noise'. Not Christmas, but consumerism. The crazy doubts of the book's protagonist, Jack Gladney, whose dance with his own mortality is central to the story, and the jigsaw puzzle relationships of his glued together extended family remind me of the complexities of my own family...*

*... I found De Lillo to be an expert wordsmith whose ability to capture a moment, a mood, a scene, is refreshingly honest and entertaining. ...his ability to peel away the frailties of the self through the lens of satirical humour and downright good writing is extraordinary.*

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Taking stock early in December and refocusing my efforts to get words onto the page enabled me to set the tone for all the writing to come.

*The first story in my collection built up a real head of steam and I felt that it just dragged me along. It needs editing, particularly around its plot which... ended up not where I'd originally planned for it to go... The second story is about 80% written and... started life as an idea and then morphed into something unexpected.*

*I have to say that writing like this feels very instinctive, very chance driven.*

*In both stories so far... I don't really know what I want to write about until I start writing... In the first story there was a premise of sorts to begin with – just a faint idea about something and off it went, driving its own pace, plot and destiny.*

Once I'd settled into a writing process I felt sure that the writing would flow, that the ideas would come and that my rhythm would not be hindered by doubt. The extract below is indicative of just how important a moment this was in my evolution as a writer.

*One of my greatest concerns about embarking on a collection of short stories was that I'd get stuck in the washing machine cycle of writing, editing, writing, editing ad infinitum and that I'd never move past the first story because it wasn't completed to my satisfaction.*

*I'm not quite sure how it happened but somehow in the process of writing these first two stories I have allowed myself the luxury of not completing the first before moving onto the next. That is a massive evolvment in my own way of being. I don't quite know what the trigger for this was but I realise that by allowing myself this freedom I have opened pathways for new creativity to root itself. So, as an example, I know that the first story has some plot inconsistencies that will require some rewriting, but I haven't allowed myself to become bogged down in trying to remedy those flaws before starting something new. Instead, I had an inkling of what the next story would be about and so I let go of the imperfect first and got started on the second, grabbing onto the energy that I sensed there and rode with it.*

*Similarly, the second story is troubling me with regard to its ending. Normally I would stay with it until I felt that it was adequately resolved. Now I'm saying to myself, don't stress, it'll come in its own good time. In the meantime, if a new idea is sparked, I'll start with the next story and allow it to take me wherever it wants to go. I can always, and will in any event do so, come back to the second and first stories to resolve them when the time is right.*

Because he'd written something complimentary about Lidia Yuknavitch's 'Dora: A Headcase' I bought Chuck Palahniuk's new novel, 'Adjustment Day', but struggled to read it.

*That was an interesting lesson in drawing conclusions!*

*Just because we both like Yuknavitch, doesn't mean to say that we will necessarily like each other's work.*

*One has to be careful about criticism... But really all I'm doing is finding out... what it is that appeals to me in the writing of some writers, and not in the writing of others. So actually, I owe Chuck a chunk of gratitude for allowing me to experience yet another example of what I don't find appealing...*

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> January 2019

Apart from the additional 6,000 words that I'd added to my word count by the beginning of the year, I had also been introduced to the writing of Diane Williams, a writer who kept me enthralled throughout my two week holiday.

*I'm still managing to restrain myself from the irritating need to edit and correct, choosing rather to get as much down on paper as possible, with a view to editing, rewriting and polishing much later...*

*... I was lent a copy of 'The Collected Stories' of Diane Williams... I drifted dream-like through this 764-page collection and enjoyed every moment while in its substantial grip.*

*... Williams creates fiction by revealing her characters to us through their stuttering interactions with others, the randomness of their environment and their humanness in a way that magnifies the mundane. The reader is left with half the story... an inadequate representation of what Williams does, because somehow she manages to give us both more and less at the same time.*

*While reading Williams ... I started to observe... fragments of conversations and interactions (of guests at the resort I was staying at) – wondering about them and how... each of these could become a small piece of flash fiction...*

*And of course, for the umpteenth time, I thought again of Brain Evenson's brilliant advice – to see life as a provocation, but now, not using my own as the primary stimulus... but instead, by using that of others.*

Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2019

*Time and space, I have decided, are the two most important support ingredients for me to be able to write. Time... simply means having enough of it to devote to writing without the intrusions of competing responsibilities and demands. Space... means having no one else in the house! When those two components are aligned, the creativity behind the writing is earthed in its most productive medium.*

Time and space to allowed me to accelerate my writing. And I was keen to explore an idea that had seeded itself while reading Diane Williams – I wanted to include in my thesis a story whose form was inspired by the 'novellas' that I'd read in the Williams collection.

*But just to get back to the business of time and space for a moment. What I've also learnt in the past couple of weeks is that when these two writing imperatives are present in the same location, then all else recedes into the background. I literally slip into a dream-like state of absolute exclusion where nothing else matters... It's this absolute surrender to the process of writing that I'm finding so intoxicating. That's not an exaggeration. I am hooked.*

Regarding my reading, I'd managed to make the switch to short story collections – I'd been scanning the possibilities on the Course reading lists and...

*What kept on coming up was Chavisa Woods, a writer who I'd previously glossed over. Reading Samantha Hunt's... review of 'Things to do when You're Goth in the Country'... I felt that this was something I needed to read and so acquired a copy of it and Woods's earlier (and first) novel, 'Love Does Not Make Me Gentle or Kind'.*

*Hunt's description is what sold Woods to me... 'Set at the irresistible junction of toxic reality and the truly strange, the electric unexplainable, Chavisa Woods stirs up stories...' All that I needed to pique my interest were those few words...*

*What Woods does so gloriously is to write convincingly. I think that it takes courage to depart from the known and the expected, to turn a story into an absurdity without losing any power or rhythm in the exchange. There is something in her writing that verges on the magical, the fairy tale quality that allows stuff to happen without the need for explanation, and for it to happen smoothly.*

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2019

By now I had accumulated approximately 35,000 words of unedited stories – more than halfway towards my end goal (at the time) of 60,000 words. I was happy with this progress and grateful that the words were flowing!

*The story that I got particularly excited about... was the one whose form was inspired... by the novella-named short stories of Dianne Williams... It's... only half done. But I've left it for now because during the past fortnight another story arrived on the page and I felt compelled to follow it. Like the others, it too started off as a loose idea, but then gathered itself together as I wrote. Eventually it came out in two long sittings. That's what's pushed the word count up to 35,000 – a complete, but unedited, short story out of nowhere!*

I was trying to find lessons in everything that I read – mostly to understand what I liked and what I disliked. I had by now become firmly fixed on the idea that all I sought in a writer was for him/her to entertain me. I wanted to do the same for my reader.

*I mentioned in my last RJ that I'd enjoyed reading Chavisa Woods's 'Things to do when You're Goth in the Country' and was looking forward to reading her earlier novel, 'Love Does Not Make Me Gentle or Kind'. Well, it didn't quite reach the same heights... and if anything I found it to be distinctly less memorable... do I have the right to be openly critical, I wonder?*

*I'm trying to convince myself that it is okay and that as a postgraduate student of writing engaged in the exploration of creativity, it would be odd to not have an opinion of someone else's work, even when that person is an acclaimed writer...*

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February 2019

Satisfied with the momentum that my writing had gathered, I took time to remind myself of the process that I'd adopted early on.

*I now know with absolute certainty that the only way for me to write is to sit down and start writing. I've said this before and I am saying it again – only when I am sitting in front of my keyboard do the words start to accumulate on the page... not before.*

*To some extent that's stating the obvious I know, but essentially my writing can only happen as the result of an action... not a thought.*

But I'd also experienced some trouble with my method – a method which allowed too much latitude to the story to decide its own fate.

*The sense of being in a story that wasn't going anywhere was like treading water. In this state of non-progress the principle that I adopted was that in order to stay afloat I needed to keep kicking and I needed to trust that if I did, I'd eventually find my way into a strong enough current to pull me through to the end.*

*Fortunately that's exactly what happened on both occasions – I kept writing and eventually the stories found out where they wanted to go.*

I'd added two more stories and I was happy with the 'weirdness' factor. My leaning towards fairy tales and my admiration and enjoyment of the writing of Lidia Yuknavitch, Sheila Heti, Lydia Davis and Brian Evenson, and others, was serving as a hybrid template for my own emerging style.

*... About these two new stories – the 'weirdness' factor was dialled up a notch... I am drawn more and more to the idea that short fiction is best when it exhibits 'weirdness'. By 'weirdness' I mean out of the ordinary, or unexpected improbabilities, or magic, or bizarreness, or the abnormal made normal, or the impossible made possible, or the normalisation of horror... etc.*

*Someone who seems at home flirting with the kind of weirdness that I'm partial to is Carmen Maria Machado. I read her collection, 'Her Body and Other Parties' during the past fortnight... Machado's real power resides in her ability to write effortlessly. Her stories, even the weirdest, flow with ease... I aspire to a writing style that flows as easily as hers does, comfortably carrying the weirdness along as if it really belonged there.*

*My other very satisfying read of the past two weeks was Brian Evenson's short story collection, 'Fugue State.' I've raved about Evenson before... I have an enormously high regard for his thinking and his writing – particularly when it comes to the normalisation of 'weirdness'.*

*But now I've learnt something else from his writing.*

*It was within the first two pages of one of the stories, 'Ninety over Ninety' ... that I realised exactly what it was that Evenson did so brilliantly... Evenson's characters were alive in a way that made me feel as if I'd met them before or knew them personally. He writes in a way that pushes his characters very close to the reader. As a reader, I often feel that both character and plot are being watched or experienced by me from a distance. Not so with Evenson – his characters are right there... in the room with me...*

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2019

After returning to and finishing my multi-chaptered Diane Williams-inspired short story, I encountered a challenge that tested my method.

*Again, I trusted my established process and started to write, using a broad variation of a real situation as the seed thought, but not really knowing where I was going with the story. And now, 2,200 words later, I'm no nearer to understanding where this... is going than when I put the first word down... For once, I am experiencing real doubt as to the viability of the story, the quality of the writing, and worst of all... instead of having no clue as to where the story might go I have three or four competing ideas.*

*The problem with competing ideas is that they get in the way of each other... all competing for the one thing that they all need – sufficient oxygen...*

*...I'm grappling with a story that seems less interested in resolving itself than it does it making life very complicated, both for itself and for me as the writer. But even as I write this RJ, I'm beginning to wonder if this isn't the route that this delinquent story really wants to take. Perhaps I'm resisting too much. Maybe the chaos created by the apparent competing possibilities is in itself a possibility for the resolution of this story.*

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> March 2019

The troubles that I experienced with the eighth story in the collection never quite went away – in fact, some significant rewriting was to still to take place as late as the last few weeks before submitting my draft thesis. The difficulties I encountered with this piece opened an internal debate about process...

*I wonder about this approach – the idea that one can write without knowing with any degree of certainty where the story will go and where it will end. While I think that the method is less important than the end product, I do acknowledge that this relatively blind approach has its drawbacks, one of which is probably that the editing process needs to be that much more robust if one is to arrive at a decent finished product.*

*But arguing against... my own reasoning... I'd say that creative writing that avoids an overly structured approach may allow for greater freedom to explore. But whatever the method, the final product will either be successful or not (or somewhere between the two extremes). I doubt that any writer has been criticized for the method that they have employed to get words down onto paper. What those words ultimately do to the reader is really all that matters.*

The seed of a story can come from anywhere. An innocent email message sparked an idea that set in motion what was to become the ninth story in the collection. The ordinariness of inspiration was also something that I noted in reading Robert Aickman's collection 'Cold Hand in Mine' and also in 'Uncommon Type', a collection by Tom Hanks.

*There are lessons also to be learnt about the subject matter that Aickman explores in his stories. They are often very ordinary but it's what he does to the ordinary that I find so*

*interesting. I can't help wondering what his writing process looked like and more pointedly whether he allowed the story to develop on the page (as I have attempted in my writing) or if he started out each time with a clear idea and a clear route from beginning to end... I am left with the impression that he knew exactly what he was doing from word one. It's the general 'tightness' of his stories that makes me think this.*

*I also started and finished the Tom Hanks collection of short stories, 'Uncommon Type' which was interesting because I know of him as an actor and not as a writer...*

*The one thing that really stuck out for me as I read Hanks's collection was how often I could actually 'hear' (in my mind) his voice echoed in his writing.*

*If I was familiar with other writer's voices, would I 'hear' them in their writing? Would people who are familiar with my voice recognise it in my writing?*

Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019

My eighth story continued to frustrate me, but it also provided some useful lessons...

*I could have discarded the story completely and started over with an entirely new premise. But that would have felt a bit like giving up after falling overboard when a life boat was available. There's something about short story form that demands more respect.*

*I also feel that my process has helped me to become less precious about my writing. If the story isn't making sense or is becoming too complicated, then it's a relatively easy decision to rework it from the beginning if necessary.*

I read – with difficulty – ‘*The Complete Short Prose 1929 – 1989*’ of Samuel Beckett. I'd wanted to return to his writing for a while and when I found this title, I decided to tackle it. It was tough going – not a good choice!

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2019

In the weeks leading up to the final contact week I resisted the urge to start writing a new story. I had reached the 60,000 word target that I'd set myself and still needed to do some editing and tidying up before the upcoming feedback sessions. It was during this time that I began to contemplate the notion of ‘completeness’ and its ugly sister, ‘perfection’.

*But then, what is 'perfect'? The answer that I settled on was that 'perfection' could only exist in the experience of others... if perfection was the correct term... Actually, no-one achieves perfection, I reminded myself, dialling into my own strongly held belief that the striving towards such a high (and generally unattainable) goal is a complete waste of time.*

But if ‘perfection’ could be so easily dispensed with, would ‘good enough’ suffice?

*So this is the question that I am left with... How do I get to a point where I am both satisfied that I have done a good enough job and am satisfied that my reader feels the same way?*

*I wondered about this last week as I read my way through 'The O. Henry Prize Stories 2018' edited by Laura Furman. In her thanks to her editorial assistants, Furman gave me a clue... 'we worked together in harmony and with respect for our differences in taste.'*

*I read the collection from cover to cover and was left generally underwhelmed. In my opinion the stories... are all vanilla. And that very harsh assessment is what I should feel bold enough to voice without chastising myself for appearing arrogant... And it simply comes back to the same point – our differences in taste.*

*...I have to allow myself the freedom to write the way I want to write and hope that I find an audience that is honestly receptive, knowing and accepting that not everyone will be so... That my writing may entertain some and not others, is the best that I can hope for.*

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019

After returning home from the final contact week I reflected on the reading and feedback sessions.

*Although my readings were generally well-received, there were certain very useful nuggets of feedback that left me contemplating not only the individual pieces that I'd read, but also my writing style in general.*

*The time spent listening to others reading their pieces was equally valuable – the critical observations offered to my class-mates by others in the room... although intended for the ears of the reader, were often pertinent as observations about writing in general.*

At the contact week I was happy to learn that the upper word limit of the thesis was actually 80,000 words! I needed a new writing challenge that would break the tedium of editing, and I had an idea for a tenth and final story.

I also started reading 'The Collected Stories' of Gabriel García Márquez and returned to 'The Collected Stories' of Bruno Schulz.

*Reading the Schulz stories now feels easier... His writing is still as densely rich as it was five months ago and yet it seems more accessible, easier to digest... I think that it may have to do with identity.*

*As the voice that I am finding in my own work starts sounding more like my own... it becomes easier to read another writer with greater comfort and less concern, knowing that their uniqueness cannot, and does not require to be emulated.*

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2019

I spent the next two weeks reading, editing and re-writing – working with the feedback received during the contact week – and toying with the new story that I'd thought about during that time.

*One of my stories that I read at the contact week is made up of 16 separate 'chapters', most of them approximately 500 words long... The effect that I wanted was to have a series of stories – snapshots, actually – of events, strange and weird and sometimes brutal, all tied together in a short story called Resort Tales.*

*...when I read it during the contact week... Stacy suggested that I read J. G. Ballard's 'The Atrocity Exhibition', because the form of my story reminded her of that book.*

I enjoyed the book for a whole raft of reasons but most importantly because...

*... 'The Atrocity Exhibition' is another great reminder to be bold... courageous even... I am reminded of the writing of Samuel R. Delany and Kathy Acker, and even Lydia Yuknavitch – all courageous writers who stay true to the voice demanded by their work, ready to rebel against their own caution, should it arise.*

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2019

I attended the annual Franschoek Literary Festival and used this as an opportunity to think more deeply about the relationship between writer and reader...

*It's obvious to me that every reader will engage with a writer's work in a unique way. My reading of a short story or a long novel... will always be different to anyone else's. The writing will always be the constant in the equation but the unique imagination of each reader will ensure that every reading of that writing will be uniquely private.*

And of course, I had to then think about the relationship that I'd had with the writers who I had been reading during the past two weeks...

*I started reading Gabriel García Márquez's 'Collected Stories' while in Grahamstown... I finally returned to this work... enjoying the fine, and sometimes strange, story-telling... Márquez's proficiency as a fabulist writer is evident and his story-telling flows effortlessly.*

*... Angela Carter's 1971 novel, Love... traces the dysfunctional three-way relationship between a young psychotic woman, her lover-become-husband and his brother.*

*...I found Carter's characterisation of the three people in the book to be very real. The writing feels authentic and doesn't struggle with itself – an attribute that I think makes this one of the more enjoyable and believable of the writings of Carter that I have engaged with...*

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019

I made good progress towards the completion of the tenth – and final – story in my thesis, but struggled with the ending, which provided some useful lessons.

*If I think about the times that I have been disappointed at the end of a book (or a movie), I can conclude that there has generally been one of three reasons why this is so.*

*Firstly is the situation where the plot... is left unresolved... I close the book with a sense of disappointment and often with the feeling that my investment (time) has been made without a satisfactory return...*

*Secondly, the story takes a twist at the end that is clearly designed to surprise and mystify. That's okay – I like a surprise. But the delivery of it needs to be handled deftly... the final twist, no matter how weird/bizarre, must have its genesis cunningly embodied in the general narrative of the story. This is sometimes best achieved when the 'obvious' is hidden in plain sight.*

*Thirdly, when a story ends weakly, it generally means that it has ended in an overly predictable manner. When I can see from twenty pages before the end where the story is going and it actually goes there, I'm usually left disappointed.*

As an anomaly to 'neat' endings, I had to reference the writing of Peter Stamm.

*I am nearing the end of a collection of short stories titled 'We're Flying' by the Swiss born writer, Peter Stamm translated from German by Michael Hofmann...*

*Most notably... is the way that he deals with the end of each story – by simply ending it without any profound twist, sense of finalisation or natural conclusion.*

*These are really well written stories, but it's the endings that have grabbed my attention – how they simply stop at a point where the reader is left with a little more work to do – to either accept that what has been written is simply enough, or to push further into one's own imagination to find more.*

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019

The RJ for this fortnight was an attempt to fall back on humour when I had nothing meaningful to reflect on. It had been a fortnight of no writing, no editing – no attention at all to my thesis.

Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2019

*What I didn't mention in my last RJ... was that during that two week hiatus, I read a delightful collection of short stories by Kurt Vonnegut Jnr called 'Sucker's Portfolio'... published in 2013, six years after Vonnegut's death.*

*...the writing is to the point, non-superfluous and steady in its delivery. It echoes the way I've been trying to write – delivering an easy-to-read source of entertainment, without over-complicating matters. There's dark humour and satire and the stories all exude originality.*

A self-editing process can never be said to be finally complete. There is always another way of writing something. I now have a better appreciation for the role of a dispassionate but caring editor, and the trust needed to build that relationship.

And my reading continued...

*... Margaret Atwood... Recently I decided that it was time to investigate her writing when by chance, in quick succession, I found a second-hand copy of 'Moral Disorder' and was given a new copy of 'Stone Mattress', her two most recent collections of short stories.*

*Despite the engaging nature of her writing, the apparent random appearance of characters from one story to a later story can be awkward to manage... I think back to the Vonnegut collection that I read earlier this month. He does something similar, but overcomes the randomness by linking the stories into successive 'episodes'.*

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019

With the deadline for the draft thesis submission only weeks away, I was now concentrating on final edits and revisions.

*The editor's eye is not the same as the writer's eye. Being both the writer and editor of the same piece of work poses new demands on my focus of attention...*

*To bolster and support my editing efforts, I have programmed my thinking to see this vital phase of thesis writing as... part of the creative continuum.*

Apart from this continual rewriting and editing, I was still reading new and interesting short story collections.

*I have recently finished 'Moral Disorder'; the second of the two collections of Margaret Atwood's that I last reflected on. Again I found Atwood's style of writing easy to engage with... she successfully builds sufficient momentum into her stories...*

*But I did find the architecture of 'Moral Disorder' a little self-indulgent.... If I have correctly surmised, Atwood has used a substantial amount of personal history in the writing of this collection...*

*I felt that the lesson in this was to be careful about how one uses personal history to populate the page, especially when writing in the name of fiction.*

Monday 12<sup>th</sup> August 2019

My final RJ was submitted on this day.

In the beginning, writing a fortnightly RJ seemed like a burden. Now I appreciate just how valuable it has been to record and map my journey as a writer.

And I continue to extract lessons from my reading...

*I recently came across The Complete Short Stories of Roald Dahl in two sizable volumes. I hadn't read Dahl's stories for countless years and I thought that it might be a*

*good time to revisit them... I'm nearing the end of Volume One, Dahl's short stories written between 1944 and 1953... I can see why he was so successful. Some of these stories are real classics and were immediately familiar to me although I probably last read them thirty-something years ago. That's impressive – to have written stories that are so entertaining that the reader remembers them some thirty years later. The collection is assembled chronologically – in order of publication – and includes all of Dahl's short adult stories. (This is in itself interesting – to see how Dahl's style evolves over time.)*

*Given my current thinking about my own writing, I wondered when Dahl first thought of himself as a writer. Everything has a beginning – his was the Second World War as a fighter pilot and his first few stories were based on his experiences at this time. But very quickly they move away from those times and become flights of imagination and ingenuity.*

*In my own flight of imagination I wonder about myself as a writer in a year's time – or two – and ponder where I will be then, and what path my writing will have taken me on.*

## POETICS & NARRATIVITY – In Search of a Personal Architecture of Writing

In his introduction to *The Wedge* (1944) William Carlos Williams asserts the following, “To make two bald statements: There’s nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there’s nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.”

The notion that “a poem is a... machine made of words”, finds a companion thought in the words of the modernist architect Le Corbusier, who in the 1920s, published his influential manifesto, *Toward an Architecture*, in which he famously wrote, “A house is a machine for living in”. Le Corbusier might also have had in mind the notion of redundancy when he wrote this. To me, architecture and writing share more than these coincidentally similar statements.

At the heart of this sharing is the realisation that neither architecture nor writing exists in isolation from, in the case of a building, its architect/observer/user continuum and in the case of writing, its writer/reader/listener continuum. Simply stated, how things are put together is not only of aesthetic interest, but is also structurally vital to the viability of buildings and written works alike. And, there is no place for redundancy in either. In fact, the same can be said of all artistic endeavours.

Writing then, is a form of architecture. And the architecture of writing is important enough to take seriously if one is to write successfully, in the broadest sense of the word. This applies equally to poetic endeavours as it does to prose – indeed to any writing that one cares about! I am drawn to the views of Charles Olson who in his *Projective Verse* manifesto offers guidance, perhaps even instruction, to the aspirant writer. This instruction/advice talks strongly to the point of view that poetry needs as its foundational structure, the poet’s ‘breath’, taking into account also the ‘breath’ of the reader/listener.

In The Poetry Foundation’s introduction to Olson’s piece, it is explained that, “Olson argues that the breath should be a poet’s central concern, rather than rhyme, meter, and sense.” And also that, “The syllable and the line are the two units led by, respectively, the ear and the breath.”

When I write poetry I feel that this is what I aim for, although I’ve never thought of it as ‘breath’. I realise now that the relationship between ‘line’ and ‘syllable’ is what I am subconsciously looking for as I edit and re-edit. In a 2004 interview with Joel Whitney, Billy Collins, the American Poet Laureate, makes the point that, “I write one line at a time. I’m a line-maker. I think that’s what makes poets different from prose-writers.” and “I’m very conscious of the fact that every line should have a cadence to it.” I think that Collins, in his own way, is referring to the ‘breath’ that Olson writes about.

I'm not sure that the principle of 'breath' above all other considerations could be applied universally to conventional rhyming poetic forms but perhaps there is a reason for that. 'Modern' poetic leanings have led us away from the neatly laid out city grid of rhyming verse to the informal winding country roads of open or free verse. While this de-conventionalisation of poetic form seems enticingly anarchic, the truth remains that for it to be successful, poetry still needs a guiding hand, as does narrative prose. That might not be the popular view, but any counter-argument, is in itself an argument in support of form and structure, albeit an alternative one. Even the extreme minimalist view that writing should have no rules or guiding principles, effectively, by the existence of that view, becomes that very rule, that principle. There is no escape!

But the structure of the written word can also lead to complications, whether or not we choose to follow the advice of Olson. One of those complications can arrive in the form of translations, considered here as an aside to my central search for a personal architecture of writing.

In *I heard rhythms* by Mxolisi Nyezwa, the writer bemoans the inappropriateness of a fellow poet's translations. In one instance, referring to the translation of a song's lyrics, Nyezwa writes, "As a poet I also struggled to understand why Ntuli chose to ignore the poetry in Maskandi lyrics for the more conventional praises of izibongo. His omission pushes the daring poetry into the background". The background that Nyezwa refers to is the ditch into which meaning and impact is shoved when something is 'lost in translation'. That danger is ever present and cannot be avoided without clear thought and carefully considered action.

If Olson's advice/instruction is to be respected by the writer, then the same should be required of whoever takes responsibility for the accurate translation of the original piece, poetry in particular. It would be a significant achievement if the translator were to translate in such a way that not only preserves meaning and emotion, but also the 'breath' that Olson advocates, and which, as Nyezwa seems to imply, is inherent in the original piece that he reviews. Had that occurred, a more satisfying outcome would have been realised.

Whatever the approach, writing, be it poetry or prose, like architectural design, like painting and drawing, sometimes feels like an impossibility of enormous proportions. The writer Jackie Wang, in her essay, *Aliens as a Form-of-Life: Imagining the Avant-Garde*, reminds us of the dilemma: "Sometimes, sitting before a blank page, I get a rush just thinking, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. Why is it that everything I write fails to capture the range of what is possible?" Wang's question to herself resonates with me. How is it that, if anything is possible, what so often emerges onto the page, looks, reads and sounds boring, conventional and uninspired?

One part of the answer may lie in the unique life experience of each writer. Joël Matlou, in *Man Against Himself*, tells the story of one man's attempts to make some much-needed money and how this need leads him on a difficult journey to find work, which he finds temporarily on a mine, before returning home. The story is deceptively uncomplicated, but it

hides a darker, much more complicated reality – that of the dehumanisation of ‘black’ people (mine-workers in this example) under the Apartheid government.

While Matlou’s own life experience was unique to himself, his experience *of life* was one that was in many ways typical to the vast majority. This typicality transcends the obvious socio-cultural-religious dynamics that naturally draw people together, by having added to it the systematic processes of deliberate discrimination.

The point is, while I can read and appreciate the work of Matlou, I cannot possibly experience what he has experienced or what has empowered him to write as he does. I could never write with that keen a knowledge and understanding of institutionalised racism without having walked in his shoes. In realising this, I have to accept that each unique experience of life is a forceful and legitimate source of individual inspiration. In this instance, Matlou is just one example of individual uniqueness.

That’s the first point. Secondly, irrespective of our different life stories, (or possibly because of them), in order to write in a way that opens the door to “ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE”, the writer must be released from the confines of a self-limiting belief that may, for a variety of reasons, be present. Safety, aversion to risk, conventional thought, non-adventurous behaviour and propriety are neither useful nor highly sought after qualities when searching for one’s writing self.

So, for this writer, who may suffer some of these afflictions, it seems that the following medicine is prescribed: escape the confines of an architectural construct that is more confining than inspiring, more repressive than audacious, more restrained than free.

Kathy Acker may be what the shock-doctor ordered – like an effective enema, just to get things moving. In *The Killers*, Acker advocates the following: “Why bother with the lie of realism? Why bother being so miserable. So reductive, when one could play?” She goes on to ask questions about our attachment to reality, and how through this adherence, we, the writers, “...who practice realism want to limit their (our) readers’ perceptions...”

A by-product lesson here is that when I was first introduced to Acker, through reading her novel *Blood and Guts in High School*, I was instinctively dismissive of her work, indicative perhaps of some of the afflictions mentioned previously. To quote myself (as I cringe), “I just found it to be pointless and without any credible story-line. I think that the piece is a bit dated (published in 1978) and so has lost some of its original provocative power” (MACW Reflective Journal Week 9). What an arsehole! The by-product lesson for me being – unhitch from the self-righteous carriage of criticism, dismissiveness, and being so fucking anal!

But, in order to unhitch or to recuperate/rebuild – to stay with the medical/architectural metaphors – some stronger medicine/cement is required. Some of this involves suppressing the instinct that I succumbed to when I first met Acker’s writing.

It is becoming more obvious to me that in learning to write creatively, I need to become less stuffy. Ann Lauterbach, in her piece *Use This Word in a Sentence: "Experimental"* has some useful advice: "Between promise and fact, between new and unapproachable, known and unknown, the experimental is always between, like a hinge." And later, in the same piece, she writes, "To experiment means you must put what you know at risk to (do) what you do not yet know."

Stuffiness, as I understand the definition, means taking no risks, thereby staying comfortably stuck with what one has and knows best. That's exactly what Lauterbach seems to be warning against as she urges us to embrace "experimentation; a willingness to adapt to contexts (e.g. like how I should remain open to the thoughts and writing of others, like Acker), in order to derive not so much new meanings as new ways of interpreting the unpredictable."

Taking a more direct approach, Alissa Nutting, in her essay *Our Wrong Parts*, extols the virtues of the Avant-Garde, (still a useful descriptor of the brave cohort of experimental artists out there). Nutting makes it clear that the instinctive "things you'd hide beneath the bed before company comes over" are exactly what fuels her writing. This is bold experimentation, the deliberate literary equivalent of publicly picking one's nose, of farting in church, of laying bare the most awkward, painful and humiliating of self-truths. This provides a great lesson for me – that the discomfort of uncensored reality, when exposed through the written word, is the sharpest weapon against the tyranny of the ordinary.

Here then is another way of understanding 'stuffiness' – it is the dulling of the imagination by submission to experimental reticence that is the oppressor of creative endeavour. This 'dulling of the imagination' gives licence to the dominion of realism.

Conventionally, in terms of narrative and poetics, I have been stuck in thinking of realism as the only viable informant in the development of a believable fiction, that which is rooted in the observation and characterisation of a 'normal' and largely sanitised world – the antithesis of Nutting's seductive universe of ugly possibilities. I must be missing something.

In their Introduction to *Extreme Fiction: Fabulists and Formalists*, Robin Hemley and Michael Martone (Eds.) remind us that, "The realist writer seeks to create an illusion so perfect that the reader cannot tell it is an illusion."... "The writer does this through concreteness, using specific sensory details in the language and in the images the language creates. Abstractions are to be avoided. The realist story wants you, the reader, to forget you are reading."

That is a useful assessment, but so too is the thought that Alissa Nutting has stirred into being: can the attachment to realism fire up the imagination of both writer and reader in a way that encourages a break with the safety of what is already known? The answer to this depends on which colours one chooses to nail to one's mast. No doubt, many will claim realism as the only legitimate heir to the narrative throne. What the experimental writer does, is challenge that order. This would seem like a hazardous approach and probably one that

risks the interest of the literary reviewer's equivalent of the guillotine. But, I cannot allow myself the lazy luxury of the ordinary. I want to grow my writing-self and to do this I must take risks, however uncomfortable or dangerous this might seem.

In carrying this idea forward, I am encouraged by Stephen Graham Jones who in his *In Defence of Non-Mandates*, assures the reader that, "I trust an artist so much more if they don't have any name for this weird stuff they're doing. If all they know is that it feels right, that it's true to them, and if there's some way I can access it, then that's good enough for me."

Jones was railing against the issue of alignment to a literary cause, be it Avant-Garde or anything else, all of which seem to him to indicate the presence of a 'movement'. Quite aside from his obvious itch with anything mandated or labelled, he does offer hope, albeit unintentionally, to the writer struggling to find the appropriate ground in which to sink creative foundations. But I am comfortable to attach my own meaning to his words.

Labels aside, the student of creative writing, or at least this one, seeks a personalised architecture of writing that has the familiar feel of home, but at the same time stands directly opposed to any comfort that might exist there. This dichotomy seems to be at the heart of what I am trying to achieve – a place of comfortable disruption, one might say.

Perhaps this is what Stacey Levine means when she writes in her very witty, very short piece, *Writing Properly?*: "Writing requires a revolutionary drive against at least a part of the self." I take this to mean that because of the sometimes too comfortable acceptance of self, writing has to find its nourishment, its need of its own expression, somewhere other than at the all-too-easily-accessed bosom of its parent. It must eventually become an abandoned child.

However, in Lidia Yuknavitch's case, the child is not a metaphor. Her references to her daughter are soaked in emotive truths – real truths to which her life and her writing are inescapably attached.

Yuknavitch seems to me to possess the 'comfortably disrupted' quality that I referred to earlier. At once marvellously at home in her own skin, she writes with the authority and presence of absolute abandonment. In *Daguerreotype of a Girl*, Yuknavitch blasts convention out of the way with a story of incredible power, pain and pathos. We are literally sucked (and suckered) into it, and remain pinned hopelessly there while she lashes us with our own voyeurism... because, "Even if we already know the story, even if we do not know the story, or understand it, ever, even if there will never be an understanding, we have to have it. For once a woman has captured the imagination of an audience we must read her all the way through to her desire, to her demise."

Such is the power of one writer – to weave a tale into existence that feels as if she has wrenched something so deeply personal from her own being that it becomes literally, the dead child offered up to our gaze. "My daughter died", writes Yuknavitch, "and I have been

writing this story or it is writing me for my whole life. This is how to keep living. Make art in pieces.”

I said that Yuknavitch appears to be ‘marvellously at home in her own skin’. I didn’t say that this was a guarantee of comfort, for that is just the point – at home in her own skin, she remains violently disrupted... and also dangerously honest. She might have parts that are broken, but as an impactful writer, she is comfortably disrupted.

In *Toward the Edge of the Hermetic*, subtitled *Notes on Raising Fiction from the Dead*, Yuknavitch drip-feeds the reader with information that suggests this violently disrupted life. Then, in the closing paragraphs, she turns the taps wide open, leaving us with little doubt as to the enormity of what she has faced – vastly different to the life experiences of Joël Matlou or any other writer for that matter, but also hugely significant in its ability to shape a writer’s ability around experiential impact. The writing that leaches out of the turmoil of a lived experience as vivid as this can hardly fail, one feels.

At the end of *Toward the Edge of the Hermetic*, Yuknavitch, after figuratively removing the skin from her own body, leaves us with this: “The physics and erotics of one woman’s story. It is coming to this. I have nothing to say if saying something means filling her mouth with nonsense. I may be a very under-published girl. Is this the risk then?”

And so here I am left wondering about two things – what has been the disruptive experiential impact on my life that could fuel my creativity and what risks do I need to take in response? Compared to the authors that I have mentioned here, I feel woefully hard done by. I’m certainly not complaining, not at all, but how do I use a life of such distinct ordinariness to build a credible narrative?

Perhaps Brian Evenson, writing in *Dark Turns of an Imaginary Past*, can help. Certainly, I’d prefer to avoid the didactic approach. We don’t have to waste time there, because how I might find solace is when Evenson relates this: “Henry Fielding, in *Tom Jones*, compares writing to cooking and suggests that ‘the excellence of the mental entertainment consists less in the subject than in the author’s skill in dressing it up.’ The subject matter provides the raw material, but the final product is due to the chef’s skill. What matters is not so much what is depicted, but the way it is ‘cooked’”. Hope at last!

More from Evenson: “Life is something fiction can use as a catalyst to get elsewhere. Fiction is not a question of trying to depict what *really* happened... in other words, using life as a provocation.” Did I just hear a penny drop?

My earlier summation of Yuknavitch and others, who have lived lives of greater ‘interest’ to mine, needs closer scrutiny. Rereading her work, I realise that her incredibly strong writing is simply a response to ‘a provocation’ (as suggested by Evenson) in the same way that Matlou’s is, and of course, all others who are called to write.

Even the title of Evenson's essay holds a clue – *Dark Turns of an Imaginary Past* suggests a conspiratorial approach, even a dishonest one, if that's what it takes. My online dictionary strengthens this position, offering yet more hope, when it confirms that 'fiction' is also synonymous with 'something that is invented or untrue'. Yes, untrue! This we all know as fact.

So, the acceptance of "life as a provocation" seems to be the key to the unlocking of a potential architecture of writing that disturbs the placidity of a seemingly quiet, uneventful life, which in turn allows one to re-imagine, for example, the possibilities of what may really lie beneath the waters of Loch Ness, or closer to home, the Vaal Dam, or even a suburban fish pond. This may seem trite, but actually not so, or even if so, so what? Imagination is spawned by provocation. The 'risk' that Yuknavitch referred to now becomes the risk of not telling the story that life has provoked. The writer's duty is to tell it in a way that makes it utterly believable, no matter the cost, no matter the truth – because fiction, it now seems to me, is nothing but an agreeable lie.

R. M. Berry (Ed.), in *Writing in the Present*, his Introduction to *Forms at War FC2 1999-2009*, has a lot to say about lies, particularly those of George W. Bush, as he takes us through his version of Bush's attempts to spin the Iraqi War of 2003 to the American public and the listening world. Berry's writing is difficult to read – it's dense and unrelenting. He has gathered a collection of, broadly speaking, alternative experimental writers to provide a counter-history to the alleged Bush falsehoods.

It seems that the twenty-three works that Berry showcases in this anthology are all provoked by an "intense pressure", as he describes it, and provide uniquely independent answers to the question, "How is writing written, not to tell the truth, but to discover what writing it here and now means?" Whether the question gets answered or not is not clear from the introduction, but then of course, the question is probably meant only as a rhetorical mirror to life's provocations.

Earlier, I described fiction as 'nothing but an agreeable lie'. To expand on this and bearing in mind what has already been said about 'risk', I am more and more drawn towards the form of lie that justifies its existence by playing the experimental card. In her essay *Experimentalism*, Camille Roy asks, "How to pass suffering, eroticism... from one person to another? Where does coherence fly apart? The answer to these questions does not lie in one or another particular strategy but in the sensual devotion of the writer, taken to formal extremes."

I am intrigued, and perhaps even seduced, by the phrase, 'the sensual devotion of the writer.' If I understand Roy correctly, she is asking the writer, the experimental writer, to bend the lie which the fictionalisation of reality demands, to such provocative extremes that "the audience becomes an unwitting collaborator in its own disintegration", to quote her again, although this time, slightly out of her original and intended context. That speculative indiscretion aside, here seems finally to be the architecture that I have been searching for.

And just then, lo and behold, and not a moment too soon (i.e. in the nick of time), like the ascension of the Christmas fairy to the highest extreme of the decorated tree, Kate Bernheimer drops in. Her essay, *Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale*, describes an architecture of writing that has at its core an inclusiveness not often seen in the bitter world of writer one-upmanship. Generously, Bernheimer offers this olive branch: “Fairy tales magnetize writers who identify themselves as realists, along with surrealists and Dadaists and modernists and existentialists and science fictionists and fabulists (not to mention romance novelists and greeting card authors and tabloid headline writers).”

Roy’s ‘sensual devotion of the writer’ if properly understood by me, now allows for even greater licence to explore her question, “Where does coherence fly apart?” because the answer might be provided by Bernheimer in her exploration of fairy tales, as she “celebrates their lucid form” and reveals “how specific techniques in fairy tales cross stylistic boundaries.”

Bernheimer’s celebration of the form is enthusiastic and contagious! Her dissection of the fairy tale and the study of its primary anatomy: “flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic and normalized magic”, is done with such authority and passion that one is left with little doubt that (modern) “fairy tales hold a key to the door fiercely locked between so-called realism and nonrealism, convention and experimentalism, psychology and abstraction.”

Here then is a clear invitation to all writers, from whatever genre, tradition or style, to learn from a form that “connects all of us in the act of living”, to again quote Bernheimer. What this means to me, is that it is okay to step outside the house of the obvious, to shake loose the stifling afflictions and, as earlier encouraged by Kathy Acker, to simply play... with the ‘sensual devotion’ that Roy suggests!

The invitation to explore (and play) is becoming more and more apparent. Perhaps even, it is less of an invitation than it is an imperative invocation of one to submit to the creative possibilities that surround us.

In his lecture for *The African Writer’s Experience of European Literature*, Dambudzo Marechera (perhaps unintentionally) sums it up best of all, at the same time affirming the likes of Kate Bernheimer and all other writers who have slipped the restrictive bonds of realism, when he simply states that, “Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer’s task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it.”

There it is then: reality exists as a foil to all other possibilities, the access to which is never denied to the courageous writer.

There is one more element that I would like to add to the mix of ideas that have been collected in this attempt to find an appropriate architecture of writing. Federico Garcia Lorca, in his *Theory and Function of the Duende*, quoting Manuel Torre, the Romani

Flamenco singer, says that “‘All that has dark sounds has *duende*’. And there’s no deeper truth than that.” Lorca’s respect for the *duende* is palpable.

He does not seek to blithely settle for a definition of this term, rather choosing anecdotally to illustrate examples of the idea. Setting the scene, he quotes Goethe, “who in speaking of Paganini, hit on a definition of the *duende*: ‘A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.’” Lorca emphasises that the *duende* is a force that is felt, and nothing else.

His deliberately circuitous explanation speaks more to a deep respect than it does to a lack of appropriate words to describe the *duende*. But the Merriam-Webster dictionary has no qualms about asserting its authority when it comes to definitions, confidently stating that the *duende* is “the power to attract through personal magnetism and charm.” I sense the displeasure of Lorca’s spirit moving uneasily at this crude attempt.

But besides that, could this ‘force’, the *duende*, be felt in fairy tales, or in a mode of writing that allows itself the freedom of movement and expression that such writing seems to offer, that which lies “beneath reality”, as Marechera puts it?

Lorca makes it clear that the *duende* can make its appearance in any art form: music, dance, art, poetry and all other forms of writing. He stresses that “the *duende* loves the edge, the wound and draws close to places where forms fuse in a yearning beyond visible expression.” Isn’t that what Lidia Yuknavitch’s writing does? Or Alissa Nutting’s?

I remember standing in front of Pablo Picasso’s epic mural, Guernica, years ago as a young student travelling in Spain, feeling a sense of something that I had no words for then, and still to this day, don’t. I had the same feeling standing inside Le Corbusier’s Notre Dame du Haut, the chapel at Ronchamp in France, and more recently, listening to a band called Disturbed’s rendition of the old Simon and Garfunkel classic, *The Sound of Silence*. These very different exposures all felt like moments that were probably experienced in the presence of the *duende*.

Would it be possible, I wonder, as I come to the end of this exploratory journey, as I gather together all that I have found, reflecting on the building blocks of a writing architecture that seems true and meaningful to me, to infuse within it, within the writing that I must still write, the power of the *duende*? That would be a nice touch, I think, and why not? After all, didn’t Jackie Wang say that ‘ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE’?

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## WRITING IN THE COMMUNITY

For the *Writing in the Community* project, Michelle Ainslie and I teamed up to read our own work and to run a writing class for a small group of interested writers. The rationale and benefits behind our teaming up was based on the following:

- We are the only two current MACW students resident in Cape Town.
- We have read together before at the 2018 McGregor Poetry Festival under the banner of *Different Voices*, where we made a point of displaying to our audiences that writers need not step back from the fact that each one brings their own unique voice to the room and their own unique words to the page. We felt that this would be a powerful method to help encourage other writers to feel confident about exploring and developing their own voices.
- Because she works in a local bookshop, Michelle was able to access the shop's database of bibliophiles and aspirant writers. We reasoned that these would make for an interesting group of participants for the project.
- *The Book Shoppe* provided a comfortable and appropriate venue for an intimate group of writers to experiment in a safe environment conducive to exploring the written word. We were literally surrounded by books!

We sent out an invitation to the database on a 'first reply, first confirmed' basis, aiming to attract between 10 and 12 people. We had no idea who would take up the offer and who would commit to attending two successive Tuesday evening sessions. In the end we were grateful to welcome 10 confirmed participants to the event.

I was intrigued to discover that all the attendees were female and wondered why this was so. I was also intrigued and gratified to discover that we had attracted an interestingly diverse group of individuals, only three of whom knew each other. These were an intern at *Modjaji Books*, a copywriter, and an undergraduate student of English. The other participants included a musician, an MA (UCT Creative Writing) student, a freight forwarding specialist, a film industry person, a published writer/poet, a retired travel magazine editor and a retired proof reader/typesetter.

The format of our project was as follows:

We all met at *The Book Shoppe* in Tokai on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018 where we introduced ourselves to each other. Michelle and I provided light snacks, wine, water and juice and we spent the first 10 minutes chatting to everyone in an effort to make them feel comfortable! We then explained the purpose of the exercise and invited all to participate enthusiastically and without any fear of judgement. Michelle and I read pieces that we had written on the MACW course and encouraged the group to make comments and suggestions or to say anything else about our writing that they felt could be helpful. Not unsurprisingly, (because

they were a polite, newly formed and slightly self-conscious group), we were given nothing but complimentary feedback.

We then moved into a phase of a few rounds of free writing. Each person drew a prompt from a hat (Michelle and I each provided a selection of prompts) and then we all wrote for approximately 5 minutes per round. Everyone then had an opportunity to read what they had written and everyone had fun doing so.

We ended the 1½ hour session with a request that everyone write a short piece of approximately 500 words as ‘homework’ for the second session to be held a week later. We allowed absolute flexibility in that each participant could select what they wanted to write, provided that it took the form of a very short story. Some said that they would expand on and polish the free writing that they had done during the session. Everyone seemed excited by the challenge and all agreed to email their work to Michelle and me so that we could prepare feedback for each of them at the next session.

As an incentive to ensure that they all returned for the second session, we promised to hold a lucky draw for two winners of vouchers for *The Book Shoppe* at the end of the following week’s session.

As it happened even this wasn’t enough to entice three of the participants to return. The three young women who knew each other, all for one reason or the other, were unable to make it the following week. All three sent their excuses and were very gracious in their compliments of the session that they had attended. One of them, the *Modjaji Books* intern, did send us a copy of her short story written as ‘homework’ and both Michelle and I gave her written feedback in return.

On the second Tuesday the remaining seven participants returned and they were joined by an interesting new-comer whose energy and enthusiastic, if not somewhat whacky ideas, more than compensated for the loss of the three younger women. Everyone, including the new-comer had sent us their stories and we had prepared our oral feedback for them individually.

After each person read their story to the group, Michelle and I gave our respective feedback and then opened the floor to the others. The readings and the feedback went extremely well. Everyone had made a real effort to express their unique voices through their writing and everyone participated enthusiastically during the feedback sessions between readings. Everything was expressed in a complimentary and constructive manner.

Finally Michelle and I had the floor again and we each read what we had written for our homework writing.

We rounded the evening off with a discussion about how each participant had experienced the two sessions, what they liked, didn’t like and what they would do differently. The consensus was that everyone had thoroughly enjoyed themselves and most expressed the desire to carry the concept forward so as to make it a regular writing group meeting.

Finally we had the lucky draw. The whacky new-comer seemed a little peeved by the fact that she was excluded from the draw because she had not attended both sessions but cheered up quickly enough when we invited her to draw the second and first prize winners from the hat. She excelled at this task and the two winners, who were ecstatic with their

prizes, were both my and Michelle's favourites to win. That was obviously not a sentiment shared with anyone else!

The group were all subsequently thanked a day or two later for their enthusiastic participation in an email sent by Michelle on both our behalves and were invited to give additional comments regarding the project if they wished to do so.

Some observations and impressions that I formed during the process of the sessions that we held are as follows:

- If, as Shakespeare said, *the eyes are the window to the soul*, then writing must be the window to the heart. I have seen this before – how when asked to share one's writing, many people express some or other reserve, different I think to the expression of any other art form, which to my mind comes more easily to most, if that talent is present. People shy away from sharing their writing as if it would be too much to expose of themselves, as if it were too much of a risk. When introducing ourselves and our intentions with this project we tried to encourage the participants to let go of their reservations and to be willing to expose that part of themselves that is mirrored in their writing. We assured everyone of a safe environment and I believe that we succeeded with this objective.
- The point made earlier about 'different voices' holds true. The group was a varied mixture of age and background, but all shared a love of reading and writing. Despite this shared love, the voices we heard and heard read, were all distinctly different.
- Imagination is the door to a world that is not defined by age or any other marker of physical identity. Words are the vehicle by which the imagination is shared. The sharing of the imagination is an alliance between writer and reader. Both are invested and both honour each other. There can be no writer without a reader and no reader without a writer.
- There is a hunger out there... both to read and to write. I'm trying to understand what this means. People have written and read since the first primitive markings were made on a rock-face before recorded history began. What is the driver of this form of expression, I wonder? Why does it manifest itself as a base instinct of our shared humanity?
- Our writing and reading participants shared something of themselves, created in the time that we made available to them. That's pretty awesome.

Feedback that was received from the few who wrote back to us included the following:

*You were both friendly and relaxed. It made me feel safe and willing to participate.*

*It was a good idea to take the three short pieces of the first evening and extend them into a longer piece for the second evening.*

*Firstly thank you to both you and Graham for organising the workshop and creating a safe environment in which I felt very comfortable sharing and contributing. I love connecting with other writers at any opportunity so this workshop provided a great space to interact with others of varying levels / experience / genres. In a situation like this, you always learn from others and leave the richer for it.*

*As we went round the circle on the first night, I listened to all the others introducing themselves and all I heard was "Masters in Creative writing, sub editor of xxx magazine, copy writer, poet, written 2 books" and to be honest, my self-confidence began to wither! I then reminded myself that we all have to start somewhere and I had nothing to lose and everything to gain from such a varied and talented group. Writing for the most part is a solitary activity so being able to share and get feedback from a group is fun and gives you a boost.*

*Flash fiction - have never done this before and loved it. It is definitely something I will continue to do on my own and I have already started building my own "magic hat" of ideas. Great for when you are feeling low on inspiration or need a kick start.*

*I felt that the second evening was more relaxed and more interactive probably because there were fewer of us and we had become more comfortable. I really enjoyed listening to the other pieces and am always amazed at how everyone's style and topics differ. I loved the dark humour, the quirky and the strange. I couldn't help but compare it to the current group I am a member of which is fairly strait laced and conservative. I much prefer off beat than main stream! I think that I am now inspired to introduce a few mermaids of my own to "mix it up a bit"!*

*My personal challenge is to try and find the time / energy to write in between all the other things that seem to always take priority. Having a workshop or being set a piece of work with a deadline, makes you find the time to do this. Getting feedback and being able to interact with other like-minded people is just a bonus!*

The objectives of this assignment were to *engage in the process of teaching and performing writing in the broader community* (from the *Outline* in the MACW Service Learning Assignment for 2018). I believe that we managed to achieve this objective with the generous assistance of the participants who 'signed up' for the programme. It was a privilege to work with them and to read our pieces to them. It was also a wonderful opportunity to engage in a teaching process where Michelle and I were afforded the opportunity to give guidance and direction and also to suggest writers and books pertinent to the writing style of each participant. The disappointment of losing a few participants between sessions was adequately compensated for by the enthusiasm and positive contributions of those that remained, and enhanced by the late entrance of our wacky additional last session participant.

It was a great project to be part of. I am particularly grateful to Michelle, who kindly arranged for us to have a superb venue in which to stage our Service Learning Assignment.

**BOOK REVIEWS***The Physics of Imaginary Objects* by Tina May Hall

Hall's writing is beautiful. She does a remarkable job of holding her rhythm without becoming tedious. This is made more remarkable because the rhythm is gentle and almost grey in tone. Her stories are delivered in a manner that doesn't rely on emotional swings or sudden shifts in pace. I found her writing to be incredibly strong and yet not in a way that suggests power, dominance or force. This feels to me like poetic prose of incredible strength – the way spider webs are sometimes described as being the strongest tensile material of all compared by weight.

*The Woman in the Dunes* by Kobo Abe

Abe's story is centred on two characters who share the fate of their joint detention in an unlikely place, under unlikely circumstances. What I found really interesting about Abe's novel was the way in which he developed such a credible story out of a highly unlikely and yet very simple premise. Not only this, but he was also able to maintain this credibility throughout the entire piece, relying mainly on the protagonist and one other, both of whose distinctly different characters are steadily built upon. All of this is achieved in a setting that although utterly bizarre remains persuasively plausible.

*Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* by Alissa Nutting

Alissa Nutting's collection of short stories and essays is a satisfyingly strange collection of (apparently) effortless writing, where the often absurdly over-the-top premise rolls down the page without any difficulty at all. Oh... to write like this! Her story-telling has reminded me that a confident simplicity can be an alluring attribute to one's writing. This is well demonstrated by Nutting who in many instances takes the reader on a completely improbable journey, but with a comfortably unassuming and confident writing style.

*Middle Stories* by Sheila Heti

Like Alissa Nutting and like Tina May Hall, Heti's writing is addictive – I love the more than occasional absurdity, the wry humour, the cardboard cut-out like background detail, the carefreeness, the gentle pattern of words and paragraphs, the absolute confidence of the writing, the arbitrariness and mostly, the lightness. Her stories are new age fairy tales with added rocket fuel and vitamins! When I find an author like this I become a bit fixated and determined to read everything that they have written. Sheila Heti does that to me.

*Ham on Rye* by Charles Bukowski

I found this book to be sad, powerful, entertaining and inspiring. The inspiration comes from Bukowski's raw honesty and his deceptively simple style. It is a well-worn cliché I know, but it was incredibly difficult to put this book down! Bukowski's no-holds barred honesty about himself and his early life is jaw-dropping and remarkable. The narrator, Henry (Hank) Chiniski, a thinly disguised version of Bukowski, who also regularly appears in Bukowski's poems, describes a journey through childhood that leaves nothing to the imagination, other than wondering how he survived it!

**REFLECTIVE ESSAY IN RESPONSE TO THE READER'S REPORT**

October 2019

My Reader's report was complimentary on the whole. I was particularly pleased with the assessment of my story-telling abilities and grateful for the encouragement and words of approval. But balanced against these compliments were comments regarding room for improvements, both general and specific. In responding to some of the advice given in the report, I think that it is important that I first comment more fully on my intentions with the stories I wrote.

I'd like to start with the comment that my stories 'would easily appeal to a global audience as the influence appears to be Anglo-American'. I was grateful for this observation. I have deliberately tried to keep my stories as universal as possible, not wanting them to be obviously located in any specific country. At the risk of being accused of treason, I specifically did not want my characters to be necessarily recognisable as 'South African'. I want the readers of my stories to locate and assign identities to the characters according to their own field of reference. In other words, I want my stories to be a collaborative effort between reader and writer. This was a deliberate decision and one made knowing that it probably carried some risk.

The primary reason for this is that it goes to the heart of identity. I cannot avoid the fact that my life as a South African has been very different to the lives of many other South Africans. I am not equipped to write in the voice of so many of my fellow citizens. And I'm not even thinking race here... I'm referring more to the way in which English speaking South Africans are often depicted, whether in print or on the movie screen. I have an aversion to the awkward attempts of some writers who try to portray the characters of English speaking South Africans through their characters' dialogue and who then get it so horribly wrong. I am in awe of the writer who gets it right, but I simply do not have the confidence to write an authentically recognisable South African character, other than those whose white middle-class Anglo-American influences are most similar to mine.

Perhaps I'm straying from the point here, but even more jarring is when a foreign writer attempts to characterise one of us. Twice nominated for the Man Booker Prize, writer Sarah Hall offers a prime example. I have just finished her collection of short stories titled *Madame Zero*. In her story *Wilderness* – clearly located in the Southern Cape area of the same name – the writer depicts two male English speaking South Africans in truly cringe-worthy fashion. Perhaps it's just me – maybe I'm deaf to how most of my English speaking fellow citizens actually sound!

The point is that I don't want to fall into that trap, so I am very comfortable writing stories that will have universal appeal, where the reader can fill in their own details! I'll refer to him again later in this document, but the little of what I've read of Ivan Vladislavić's work points the way towards the avoidance of the stereotyping-pitfall by supplying just the outline of the character, allowing the reader to fill in the blanks for him/herself.

The Reader made mention of the excessive use of clichés in my stories, and I am in agreement. Other than where these are necessary – in the way in which certain characters might speak – I have tried to replace all others. It's worrying that these can creep so easily into the writing and more worrying that, despite having read the stories countless times myself, they still evaded detection.

The Reader also highlighted the need for brevity. Again, I agree. However, making the necessary changes to ensure a less wordy document proved to be more difficult. I have worked my way through each story and have deleted phrases, sentences and paragraphs which appear to be repetitive. I don't think that I have been entirely successful in this attempt and I have reconciled myself to the realisation that this will be an ongoing challenge if I am to continue writing fiction. I am aware that other than the issue of repetition, my sentence construction is often excessive, sometimes bordering on the damning observation, by the Reader, that 'at times the language/style is a bit archaic...' Eek! I say 'damning' because no writer would like to hear that their writing has been defined as 'archaic'! But of course, I accept this observation as useful criticism. I must be conscious of this if I am to take my writing further.

Generally, other than these areas for improvement, the Reader's comments were very positive and I was greatly encouraged by her very kind and complimentary words. And I am particularly grateful for the time and effort taken in her careful reading and reviewing of my stories.

What follows is my response to the Reader's commentary specific to each story as they appeared in the collection.

*Learning About Animals* was the first story in the collection and was written instinctively. I started off not knowing where the story was headed and allowed it to develop at its own pace and in the direction that it seemed destined to progress. As a general note, this process was much the same for all of the stories in the collection and is therefore applicable to each of them. In the interests of brevity, I won't make this comment again! The Reader's suggestions to cut certain lines and paragraphs made sense and so I took her advice. I went further though, and also looked for other instances where the text was possibly too wordy and make some changes where I thought that the narrative could be improved.

I was glad to find that the Reader had bought into the idea of communication with the animals and that she found that this 'surprising communication between human and animal translates seamlessly...' The intention here was to have something other-worldly taking place between the narrator and the animals, but in such a way that the reader would both be accepting of this improbability and also left wondering how much of this unusual communication was 'real' and how much of it took place in the narrator's (slightly unsettled) head. The Reader's comments suggested that the intention was attained.

The suggestion to relook at the titles of some of the stories was noted and this one in particular was identified as one for a name change. After some thought about this and taking into account the Reader's suggested alternatives, I settled on the new title, *A Conspiracy of Animals*. I think that this both sums up the gist of the story and addresses the point made by the Reader of 'the added implication that the protagonist/murderer too is, himself, an animal bent on survival'.

*Sophie's Revenge* provided me with a useful lesson in how careful one needs to be when developing a character through dialogue. Again, the Reader's observations were on point and I was made aware of the mistakes I'd made with Rosie's (the narrator's) voice. I was aiming for a young, reckless, party-loving, tough, crude-mannered woman. (Such people do exist – I've met some of them!) What I portrayed was – through the deployment of language – more in the style of a sexist, male teenager. My Reader's suggestion that I tone down the narrator's language was wise, although the 'sexy femme fatale' character that she alluded to was not what I was striving for. So, in an attempt to portray Rosie more like the hard, brash young woman I was looking for, I made some changes to her choice of language, but without toning down the brashness too much. I think the character is better portrayed now.

Also, in trying to provide a better understanding of the character of Rosie (and Sophie), and how Rosie's character changes over time (as a result of the execution of 'the plan'), I deliberately chose to switch tenses in the story, using the present tense at the beginning when Rosie explains what happened on the night of Sophie's disappearance. I think this also serves to accentuate the immediacy of the situation. Although the Reader noted this change in tense, she didn't offer an opinion on whether this tactic works or not. I've decided that it does, so I've left it as it is.

*Sophie's Revenge* also underwent some experimental changes in title, but I finally came back to the original and it remains as is. However, after initially being the second story in the collection, it now moves ahead of *A Conspiracy of Animals* and takes the spot of the opening story.

*Cousin Kirstin* suffered from a slew of unnecessary idiomatic cliché's in the narrator's voice and also instances of repetitive language use. Those faults that were pointed out have been dealt with and, as with the other stories I have scoured the piece for similar examples. I was very pleased with the Reader's assessment of the story having 'the perfect twist'. Consequently, and in line with the suggestion that I rethink the ordering of the collection, this story has now become the last story in the collection. I feel that this works well – the collection starts with *Sophie's Revenge*, which takes the reader straight into the action and sets the tone for the later stories, while *Cousin Kirstin* anchors the back end. *Cousin Kirstin's* 'twist' seems an appropriate place to end the collection and will hopefully leave any future reader with a sense of satisfaction with the whole.

The Reader was particularly complimentary of *Resort Tales* and in commenting on its form, states that this is what 'makes the sequence stand out.' I was well-pleased with this assessment as the story – or sequences that comprise the story – was the one that I had the most pleasure writing. I recall commenting in a Reflective Journal at the time, that I almost wished that I'd had the idea earlier and that I'd crafted the entire collection in this manner. It's an idea that has not left me and I'm considering the writing of a new set of stories using this technique. But, to return to *Resort Tales*, the Reader's suggestion that I rethink the ordering of the sequence presented a minor problem. There is a certain chronological order to the story that suggests to me only two possible solutions – either stay with what I've got or reshuffle so as to bring the other option into play as the story's end-piece. Although the Reader only expressed the opinion that the original ending 'was not as strong as it could be', she offered no reasons for this assessment. I reread the story with her comments in mind and I

think that I understand what prompted her comment. I have therefore chosen my second option and the sequence now closes on a different ‘chapter’. The story now seems to be better resolved and the ending more in keeping with the overall tone of the sequence.

*Missing* also suffered from some over-writing and so I have tried to remedy this by partly omitting and partly rewriting in places. In its initial writing this story occupied more of my time than most of the others. It felt as if it needed more polishing and so I probably spent more time with it than entirely necessary, making minor changes here and there. I was encouraged by my Reader’s comments that the ‘recurring theme of disappearance is carefully constructed without being predictable,’ suggesting that the risk that I took with this story paid off. While writing the piece I was aware that a story involving the separate disappearance of more than one (in this case three) persons risked giving the game away too soon. It seems that I managed to hold the piece together while still allowing for a not entirely predictable outcome.

My instinctive reaction to the Reader’s suggestion that I omit *It Must Have Been the Knife* was to take a defensive stand against its proposed culling. After all, these are my children! But the more I thought about it and the more I tried to reread this story through the eyes and experience of an independent reader, the more I realised that the collection would be better served without its inclusion. When I finally took the decision to drop the story, I felt relieved that I could do so without further hesitation. This provided another valuable lesson – the writer requires a distance between him/herself and his/her work. That is not always possible without the assistance of a third party. As it stands now, I can see that the collection is stronger without the *Knife* and that to insist on its inclusion in the final product would have been a mistake. So I’m very grateful for the Reader’s input regarding the excising of this piece. She is absolutely right – it does ‘not carry the same weight as the others.’

*A Truly Memorable Dish* needed some attention to the appropriate use of language and so again I set off on a quest to find the right words for the job, to replace those that had been pointed out as being not suitable. More lessons! To write effectively, the writer must take care with both the choice of words and the avoidance of their repetitive use. These are simple principles and it irks me to have been found lacking in such elementary matters. I console myself with the thought that writing creatively requires of the writer to be so immersed in the creative process, that lapses in fundamentals can sometimes be excused. I suspect that the whole profession of editing and proofreading leans heavily on the knowledge that writers will make mistakes. Anyway, that’s my story and I’m sticking to it!

Apart from rereading and correcting minor spelling and grammatical errors, *Apricot, or Not* did not need as much attention as some of the other stories. This may have something to do with the amount of time spent guiding this story through its initial evolutionary phases. My Reflective Journals at the time alluded to the difficulties I had with the development and trajectory of this story. I have made some minor changes here and there – every time I reread it I found something else that could either be told differently or changed or omitted. In this instance, the first thing to go was the first sentence – it seemed unnecessary and felt weak as an opening line. The point about always finding something to change or omit is applicable to all the stories and again highlights the need for an independent editor/reader. Every time I read one or other of the stories in this collection, I found something new that I felt should be

changed. It becomes tedious after a while! I also decided that the title of this story needed revision. So, in the final version, it is now simply titled, *Apricot*.

*Long Fingers* did not need much by way of changes and corrections, other than hunting down the usual spelling and grammar gremlins. Again, the Reader was complimentary of this story, which was pleasing. If any of the stories were to be omitted, I was concerned that this would be the one chosen. Because the story is unusual in so far as it is set in a vastly different era to the present, I was curious to see how the Reader would respond to this epochal difference. It seemed not to bother her and in fact it appears that she feels that its inclusion somehow strengthens the collection. I'm relieved that she sees it that way, as I am particularly fond of it. (Perhaps this is because it stands as my unofficial homage to the immense talents of Brian Evenson, one of the most influential writers who I have encountered on this Course.)

*The Groove* rounded out my draft thesis collection of ten stories, but with the promotion – I think of it like this, rather than as a demotion – of *Cousin Kirstin* to the position of closing story, *The Groove* is now placed second from the end in the revised collection of nine stories. There were no strong reasons to change anything in this story, so it too was just subjected to closer scrutiny for tiny errors and minor improvements.

Closing comments by my Reader included a suggestion that I take a look at the works of Eben Venter, Ivan Vladislavić and Chris Abani. I found a copy of Vladislavić's *101 Detectives*, his most recent collection of short stories. I have just completed it and found it to be very readable, with lashings of tasty weirdness. He writes eloquently and those stories set in familiar-sounding Johannesburg locales work smoothly. Impressively, he avoids the trap that I referred to earlier of writing characters whose South African identities are flawed by awkward stereotyping. I have yet to find an Eben Venter book written in English, but I haven't given up trying. I have placed an order for Chris Abani's *Lagos Noir* because this does not appear to be locally available. Perhaps, once I have familiarised myself with these writers, and after I've reread Herman Charles Bosman (I have all of his books but haven't dipped into them for many years), I'll be tempted to try write something with that elusive authentic South African flavour. (My Reader also made reference to Bosman in reviewing my stories.)

My intention in writing the nine stories that comprise my thesis was to write in a way that was true to my own 'style' – or 'voice' – something which developed over the course of the two-year part-time MACW. In creating these stories I also wanted to acknowledge the 'styles' of those writers whose influence I felt were greatest on me. Tina May Hall, Sheila Heti, Brian Evenson, Lydia Yuknavitch, Lidia Davis, Bruno Schulz, Noy Holland and Diane Williams are just some of these. Although I have felt their influence I wanted my stories to be uniquely mine.

I hope that I have achieved that goal.