

THE FUTURE WORLD PRESIDENT'S

FIRST TRUE LOVE

A novel in the here and now.

By JJ Alexander

EUTOPIA

Sure, okay, he was gorgeous enough to catch any girl's eye, with that curly black hair, broad shoulders and those deep, dark eyes. He sure caught Ariel's as he came across the dance floor, sidestepping a swinging arm, shimmying a gap between two wild-haired women, gliding around an unraveling knot of clumsy, foot-stomping students. He found a space at the bar and leaned over, a hundred-Euro note in a sculpted hand.

So okay, he was hot, and she was young and beautiful and all that, but that doesn't explain what happened next in this club swirling with hot, young, beautiful people, for when their eyes met something amazing happened, a honey thunderbolt of delicious connection, then a warm shiver right through her body. She saw – no, *felt* – it go through him too. He lost his cool and gaped at her as everything, the pulse of the music, the rhythmic lights, the hubbub of voices, everything else ebbed away. A smile came to his eyes in the quiet, and she felt it in her own.

Then the barman moved between them, and the world came throbbing back.

This is it! Love at first sight. This is what they mean. The myth is confirmed! She took a shaky breath and then a sip of her juice, willing the barman to hurry up. But he stayed rooted, legs spread wide, leaning forward and yakking away to the beautiful boy, ignoring the waving hands to his left and right. So Ariel's flustered mind had opportunity to interfere and over-analyze everything, as usual.

No, just chemistry, that's all. Genetic compatibility. Biology. Animal instinct. Maybe five years ago I dreamed about this, but now I know–

His head bobbed up over the barman's shoulder. A flash of eyes and he ducked back again. Her heart actually fluttered. *Animal reaction, that's all*, her mind went on and on. *A spike in blood pressure, reacting to the oxytocin, dopamine, adrenaline ... oh, shut up already.*

She giggled, giddy as an idiot, then had to freeze and compose herself as the barman jumped aside, leaving her once again in the light of his dark face. This time no smile. They hung loose, chill, breathless.

A hand dropped onto his shoulder from somewhere out there and he broke away. A psycho-ugly rat-faced guy, who glanced over and caught Ariel's shock and horror. His face hardened. She looked quickly down into her drink, and when she peeked up again, they were both gone.

She hopped off the bar-stool, craning her neck. Then she realized that people along the opposite bar were staring at her. A gangly boy, leaning sideways and leering drunkenly, a couple of sleek, pouting teenage girls, their chic style identical and their mouths tight blossoms of envy. Two older guys in who-cares leather jackets, watching with frank amusement. *They saw the whole thing!* In a flush of sheer embarrassment she plonked back onto her barstool, swinging her long dark hair forward to hide her face.

After a few seconds she looked out again. All gone back to their business, show's over. All except one strange-looking man, a cruel face carved with lines of suffering, pain, loss ... she shivered again, cold this time, spider up the spine. He sat alone at the far curve of the ovoid bar and stared at her, unblinking, a stray shaft of red light – it must be – worming in his shadowed eyes. She frowned but still he stared, so she stood and walked away.

Where was Noodle? Her best friend, last seen grinding away on the dance floor with a very tall and sexy black guy. Ariel searched for her and, of course, for Thunderbolt, drifting past the alcoves and dark recesses, circling the dancers. In the far depths of the club she saw a raised level, an off-set room with walls of white Roman pillars. A subtle blue-neon sign glowed above the arched entrance: VIP. Two bouncers in dark suits reinforced it. Out of bounds for mere mortals like Ariel.

She drifted closer, and saw between the pillars, at last, her Thunderbolt-boy, her beautiful boy, sitting at a low marble table with a gang of guys in very trendy,

expensive-looking clothes. He looked distracted, not joining in their raucous talk, stealing occasional glances out into the club.

He's looking for me, too. Hasn't noticed me here, watching him. Let's see if he feels it. She settled back against the wall. The nearest bouncer gave her a contemptuous glance.

As she watched, she began to get a feeling that she knew him from somewhere. Like, he'd been at her school before he grew up and became gorgeous? Or maybe a rock star, something like that? Almost all the guys in his group had distinct hairstyles, expensive do's from top salons. Except for poor Rat-face, short-back-and-sides. Next to him sat an angular, dark-skinned boy with dreadlocks, then a shiny skinhead, then a gleaming flow of shoulder-length locks. *Interns at a fashion house?* She was pleased that Thunderbolt's style seemed the least self-conscious, curls so natural it could well be the most expensive of the lot. *Oh, I hope not.* She realized that others in the group were also vaguely familiar to her, especially Rat-face. *So, celebrities?* It was frustrating. She needed Noodle's help here as an expert in such things.

She slipped out her phone, switched to camera and held it between the pillars. The light in the VIP lounge was brighter than the rest of the club but the screen image was still murky and grainy. She found Thunderbolt, zoomed to the max and clicked. A wall-spot shone directly above him and he kept his head still, gazing out into the club, so the photo came out a disembodied head on a platter of dark. She attached it to a text:

Noods wru? Who is this guy? Why I know him?

and sent it. Within seconds a reply:

Wait coming.

'Thanks, Ariel. You saved me.' Noodle had two bright red spots on her cheeks, and her long blonde hair had been mussed around by the wind. She looked radiant. 'Bastard asked me to come outside with him, and we kissed, then he starts, like, "I love you, I love you," with his hand on my tit! I mean, we'd only just met.'

'Where is he?'

'Following me. Then his whole tragic life story, how they're going to deport him back to ... Djibouti or, or Timbuktu or whatever godforsaken hole unless some dumb German cow like me *marries* him, which sort of put the whole "I love you" thing in perspective, right? Wow!' She stared between the pillars, eyes shining. 'He's even cuter in real life. Why are you taking photos of football stars?'

'Footba-?'

'His name's Juan Baptista. Don't you *know*? He's everywhere. Bayern Munich just bought him for zillions. The other guys are also Bayern. He's, um third, I think? Munich's hottest young eligible bachelors? *Tease* magazine?'

'Third hottest, youngest or most eligible?'

'Eligible is eligible, no?' Noodle giggled, and then groaned without pausing for breath. 'Look. The Djibouti Desperado.' The tall black guy was wandering among the scattering of tables between the VIP lounge and the rest of the club, looking lost. 'It seems *I* got the most eligible. You know what they say?' She pointed to Thunderbolt. 'It's tough at the top ...'

Ariel finished the sentence, at Desperado. '... but really crowded at the bottom.' And in a twinkle of laughter and disco-light Noodle was gone.

No matter how intensely she watched him, he still didn't sense it. *Here. I'm right here. Juan. Juuu-aaan. Juan! Baptista. Juan Baptista.* Nothing. She sighed, getting bored now. The bouncer gave her another look. *Damn it. Juan! You're supposed to get a strange feeling that someone is watching you, then you look over and we connect, like magic.*

She took a few more pictures, just for something to do. She saw in the screen that the footballers had fallen quiet. She looked up. A door at the back had opened, and an astonishing girl was making a grand entrance. Petit, with huge breasts and a perfect, hour-glass waist. A mane of big hair – definitely a wig – and a dress so weird, tight and

slutty it must come from some haute couture collection. Her face was difficult to see under the make-up and all that hair, but she looked Asian and very young.

The footballers applauded. But not Juan, thank God. She took a few more pictures without really thinking about it. The Doll striking a pose before the boys, arms raised to accentuate the impossible breasts, one foot forward. The Doll leaning over to kiss Rat-Face, her breasts bulging out. Juan staring at them. *Slut!* She stabbed her thumb down. The next photo appeared and she gasped. Rat-face, glaring straight at her.

She looked up. He was already through the pillars and upon her. With frightening speed he reached out and grabbed the phone. She closed her fingers around it. He took her index finger and bent it back.

‘What are you doing?’ she squeaked.

‘Give it,’ he grunted. ‘Give it to me or I’ll break your finger.’

‘No!’ She was angry now, and held on hard. ‘It’s mine!’

‘Frank, what’s going on?’ Juan the Thunderbolt had swept to the rescue, a restraining hand on Rat-face’s arm. He spoke English, Ariel noticed with surprise, with a lovely Cockney twang. ‘What are you doing, mate?’

‘Fucking paparazzi.’ Rat-face switched to English to reply, in a whiny French accent. ‘Taking pictures of my birthday present. I’m gonna smash her fucking paparazzi camera.’

‘I’m NOT paparazzi!’ Ariel pulled free and kicked Rat-face as hard as she could. His eyes bulged in astonishment. Then he squealed, fell to the floor and rolled around clutching his knee, his mouth a wide O of agony.

‘Oh come on, you baby.’ Ariel brushed her hair back from her face and slipped her phone back into her pocket.

‘Are you paparazzi? Were you following me?’ Juan looked sick. His eyes held hers, pleading.

‘No! I took a picture of you to send to my friend, because I recognized you from somewhere, I promise.’ She was babbling. ‘Look, look here.’ She took out the phone again, stumbled her thumb for a while – for a moment of freak-out she couldn’t even remember how – then showed him the text. ‘See? How could I be paparazzi? I didn’t even know who you were. In English this means, who is this guy? How do I know him? See, the picture? Here, read.’

He read it, leaning close to her, even though she was holding the phone at arm’s length. A couple of inches taller, just right. His scent was nice, clean man-smell, the subtlest hint of expensive aftershave. She brought the phone in closer. It took him a long time to read the text, or maybe just a few seconds.

‘Well, that’s alright then,’ he murmured into her ear. ‘So what ... happened at the bar, that wasn’t because I’m famous? It was ... you know, natural?’

‘Yes,’ she breathed back. ‘I don’t even like football. It’s boring. You’re nobody to me.’ A hint of challenge as she glanced up. He smiled back.

A low, plaintive moan came from below.

‘Frankie? Mate? Relax, she’s cool. But the real paparazzi might see you lying around like that, so get up.’

In a flash Frank was on his feet. Ariel reached out a hand to him, but with a glare he whirled and stomped back to the VIP lounge. The Doll was sprawled out on a couch, batting her false eyelashes at the boys. Frank took her arm rather roughly, lifted her up and led her off to the door at the back.

‘Who’s she?’

‘Some hooker. Birthday present from his agent.’

‘Really? That’s awful.’

And he shrugged. It was a gesture she would later remember, although it meant little to her at the time, being all caught up in his scent and his shoulders and his hair and those deep, dark eyes. Her mind had an inkling, a premonition, and could have spoken

up and warned her that before her lay a world where flesh was bought and sold, where bodies and their talents were valued only in money, but her mind stood no chance. When he held out his hand to lead her into the VIP lounge, she took it without hesitation.

Behind her, the strange man with the cruel face was now seated at a table in a dark corner, a faint red glow still worming in his eyes.

He watched her enter Juan Baptista's world, and he smiled.

Not only the pillars separated us from them, there were two marble steps as well, so Ariel was lifted above the rest of the club. Not much, but enough to feel, if not very, at least more important. She let go his hand, looked out and saw that most of the people at the tables were turned towards them. She laughed, 'It's a stage.'

'What?'

'Nothing. I said—'

'Yeah,' he smiled. 'All part of the ego trip. That's why I came down to get a drink at the bar. Sometimes I just want to, you know ...'

'Be ordinary?'

'Yeah, I'm just a guy, you know? Frank bent my ear, he said some nutter's gonna stab me or something, but my Dad was just a hotel porter, so all this ...' He gestured around. The other boys were all standing up, gathering their jackets. 'Listen, we're going to another club. Please come.'

'I, um. My friend ...'

'Oh, friend, a, a boyfriend?'

'No. She. The text?' She waved the phone.

'Oh, okay. Where is she?'

She scanned the club, one hand shielding her eyes. 'Don't know.'

'Call her again, tell her come with.'

She hunched over her phone and texted, then noticed a loose thread in the waistband of her skinny jeans. And a seam by the knee unraveling. *And* a splash of brownish paint on her sneaker. *This is terrible. I'm so scruffy.* 'Juan? I'm not really dressed to go to—'

'You look fantastic. Name's Johnny. Okay? What's your name?'

'Ariel.'

'Ariel.' It caught in his throat. His hand twitched. Their eyes met and then glanced away, met and glanced away, shiny stones skipping over the surface of a pool of deep excitement. Then her phone thrilled in her hand and she dipped her head to read Noodle's reply.

'She's outside, being ...' Ariel shook her head and laughed.

'What?'

'She's being ...' she searched for the English word, 'um, wooed?'

'Wooed?'

'Never mind. She'll meet us on the street. Look, your friends have already left.'

'Yeah, let's go.'

The door led to an alcove and then through heavy velvet drapes to a darkened room. It was like stepping into another, long-past century. Wooden floors, Persian rugs, swirling Paisley wallpaper, ornate wainscoting, a large framed mirror mottled orange with age. Fabric lampshades cast a yellowish light over a cluster of leather armchairs at the far end of the room, where a dark-haired woman in a long red dress was slowly gyrating before an enormously fat man, his face in smoky shadow. In one hand he held a bundle of money, the other was murky in his lap. Some sort of bizarre growly jazz music was playing, barely audible above the thump-thump-thump coming through the wall. Johnny grimaced at Ariel in mock-horror, took her hand and hurried her through a further door, to a landing with a large semicircular desk and an elevator door, closed, red-light numbers blinking to show where the other boys had gone. Alongside, another door led to a steep enclosed stairway. It was too narrow for both of them, so he let go her hand and went ahead, jostling down two stairs at a time, his hair flouncing. Ariel followed, slower, step by step. There were ancient framed photographs down the left-hand side, portraits, posed family groups, women with starched bodices and blank faces, goateed men in long-tailed jackets, stiff in their dusty elegance. The last portrait hung askew below a red light bulb, a girl child in a pinafore, her hands behind her back

and her eyes fierce and solemn. She looked remarkably like Ariel at that age, the same dark hair, the same intensity. Two words were scrawled in an archaic cursive in the bottom corner. She stopped and peered closer: *Rachel Edelstein*.

‘Hullo, Rachel,’ she whispered. ‘I wonder what happened to you.’

Johnny swept open the door at the end of the stairs and Ariel felt the wind waft through her hair, tugging her on. She hurried to catch up. It opened into a small parking lot. A *VIP* parking lot, presided over by another big guy in a black suit, who nodded approvingly and smiled at Ariel as she came through. It gleamed with luxury cars, Mercs and BMW’s, Bentleys, a beautiful dark-blue Jag E-type, hulking black SUV’s, a Ferrari in a child’s-toy bright yellow. The boys were dispersing to their cars, laughing and shouting. Johnny waited for her with an arm held high. For a moment she thought he was going to drape it over her shoulders, but then he beckoned and walked on ahead.

She prayed that the Ferrari wasn’t his, but no, a new, black Mercedes. *Nice. Classy, expensive. But not flashy.* It beeped and flashed as he pressed the remote. He opened the passenger door for her, and she was pleased, despite herself.

The scent of new leather. The sheer beauty of the glossy consol, its space-ship reds and blues. *Aaaaah*, she allowed herself a smile as he walked around the back of the car. *When I woke up this morning, I didn’t think the day would end like this.* Then, as he opened his door, *It hasn’t ended yet. How are you going to get home, exactly? Do you trust him?*

He settled in, fiddled the key into the lock, opened the cubby and traced a finger over a row of CD’s. She had to speak up:

‘Um, Johnny? Where are we going? I don’t mean to ... it’s just that, we took the, the U-bahn, how do you call it, the, the Tube! So ...’

He looked surprised. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll give you a lift.’

‘Okay. So you’ll take us home?’

‘Yes, of course. Whenever you want.’ She realized that he was as nervous as she was, every action, every word he spoke – and even the music he chose - a window open wide to her judgment. He bit his lip and turned his focus back to the CD’s. She wanted to help, just pick any one at random, get on with it already. But part of her also enjoyed watching him squirm a little bit, and she was curious about his taste in music. *Not to be cruel and judgmental or anything, but if it’s big-dick rap or metal, I’m getting out right now.* In the end he pleased her again, choosing Seal, early nineties. *Cool over trendy. Nice. Even if a bit obviously sexy.* She relaxed and settled back into her seat.

The parking garage opened out into a side-alley and he braked, put the gear into neutral and took his wallet out of his leather jacket. The card had only one word – **oh!** – over tiny print. He activated the GPS on the consol and typed in the address, then slid into drive and purred up to Leopold Street.

‘There she is. The blonde, standing next to that tall guy? Just past the-’

‘Yeah, I see her.’ He angled across the traffic and pulled up into an empty space just beyond Noodle. She was standing with her head down, lost in the screen of her phone. Despite her body language, Desperado continued to hover at her shoulder, his teeth bright in his face as he talked.

Ariel rolled down her window. ‘Noooooods? Over here.’

She looked up with a quick smile and strode over, Desperado close behind. Johnny unlocked her door with a flick of a switch and she opened it and slipped into the back seat. As Desperado reached out to take the door and follow her into the car, she leaned over and whispered urgently to Johnny, ‘Go go go!’

He took off without hesitation, the back door swinging and slamming shut with the impetus. Ariel saw Desperado in the side mirror, his hand still outstretched and one foot suspended in the air, staring after them. Johnny looked in the rear-view mirror and laughed. Then he glanced over at Ariel, sensing, perhaps, her twinge of dislike, the first

sour note of the evening. One song faded on the CD and another, with a thrum of bass, began.

'*Gott sei dank!*' Noodle stretched out in the back seat. 'I thought I'd *never* get rid of him!'

'Sorry,' said Johnny. 'Sorry, I don't speak much German yet. What you say?'

'She hardly speaks any English. She—'

'Ariel be us ... *was ist Übersetzer?*'

'Translator. She says I must translate for her.'

'Yeah, come to think of it, why's your English so brilliant?'

'I want to study languages at university. They're a big obstacle in the EU, so I think—'

'Hang on. You *want* to? How old are you?'

'Eighteen.'

'What, you still at school?'

'Yes. Final year.'

'Shit. Management said we must never touch school kids. The tabloids go crazy.'

'So who is touching?'

'Ahaha. Quite. But just being in my car is enough for them, bloody vultures. To *insinuate*. Hey,' he looked in the rear-view mirror again, as the GPS told him, in English, to turn left at the next intersection. 'We haven't been introduced.'

'This is Noodle, my best friend.'

'Wazzup. Noodle?' He swung left. 'Your parents call you that?'

'No,' answered Ariel. 'Her real name is Heidi. She hates it because it sounds like ... you know ...'

'Yeah, the pigtails. I get it. The yodeling.'

Ariel laughed. 'Noods? This is—'

'Juan Baptista.' Noodle read from her phone. 'Brilliant attacking midfielder, recently transferred from West Ham to Bayern Munich for eighteen million Euros! Earns a

weekly salary of ...' she whistled. 'Horny monkey! If he wants to attack your midfield, Ariel, I'd let him.'

'Yeah yeah. Call me Johnny.'

'Promising teenager in the junior leagues, much talked-about,' continued Noodle. 'Selected for the England squad in the last European Championship, but injured his knee. His favorite color is red. Favorite movie is *Braveheart*. He drives a ...' she paused, frowned and looked around at her surroundings. 'No, no he doesn't. Stupid internet.'

'Any juicy stuff?' asked Ariel.

'Just a minute.' Noodle scrolled. 'Um ... here we go. Girlfriend. Betty Blonde. Model and pop singer. Bitch. Should I search her?'

Johnny, already glum, looked glummer when he heard the name. 'I broke up with her,' he muttered.

'Oh wait,' said Noodle. 'They broke up.'

'Why?' asked Ariel.

'Doesn't say. Hang on.'

Ariel smiled at Johnny. 'One thing I don't understand. It says you're English, but your name is, what, South American?'

'Portuguese. My Dad. He got work in an English hotel, met me Mum. She's a schoolteacher. I grew up mostly with her, but they were married for a while.' The GPS told him to turn right.

'Aha!' said Noodle. 'I knew it. Nasty little slut. Says she slept with another footballer, name of Ernst Thorverson.'

Johnny groaned.

'He was devastated. Poor Johnny. His form declined. There's a picture here, unshaven, wearing a hoodie. Kinda sexy, actually. This is sweet, says he has a heart, which was ... roasted on the fires of celebrity! Woman writer, you can see she's hot for him, and who can blame her? I mean, honestly. Ooh, smoldering dark eyes. Blah blah

blah ... mmmm, great six-pack. Then his manager told him to get a grip and dropped him from the team, um, okay. Triumphant return, scored a goal against Chelsea. Sweet left foot. Ah, a photo of Betty Blonde, charging by the hour. Oh my, you should see this, there's a picture of him without his shirt on-

'Okay, eenough!' He shook the steering wheel. 'It's bad enough she should read this crap, half made up anyway. But when I don't even *understand* what she's saying-' The GPS interrupted him in its silky, feminine voice, instructing him to turn right. 'Aaah, shut it already!' He slapped the off-button on the GPS, swung the car to the empty, tree-lined curb and slammed on the brakes. 'Look, I broke up with *her*. She rebounded onto Ernie *after*. Okay? What's she been reading about me?'

'It says you're gay,' said Ariel sweetly. 'That you had an operation to castrate yourself, because you were lusting after your teammates.'

'*What?*' He twisted back and lunged for Noodle's phone. Noodle hardly reacted, just sliding it away to avoid his grasping fingers and carrying on scrolling with her thumb. She giggled as he grunted and twisted further, fending him off with her elbow.

A photo opportunity just too good to miss. Ariel tugged her phone out and lent back for a good angle. With his arm bent back at the shoulder he was facing her, and he saw her fiddle the buttons and aim. A passing car splashed headlights onto the impish wickedness in her face and he sighed and slumped, dropping his head, his arm still bent behind him.

His hand, she thought. *His hand is so eloquent*. It hung loosely above Noodle's knee, no longer trying to grab her phone but still claw-shaped, the fingers curved and trembling, grasping at empty air. *So expressive. It's saying ... frustration?*

If I could just get a picture of that hand, but she closed the phone and put it away. He raised his head again, and his eyes were moist. *They hurt him. They wound him with their sick fascination*. She raised a soft hand and caressed his cheek. *He's too beautiful, and still just a boy*.

We just became his worst nightmare.

'Oh wow,' said Noodle. 'That old David Beckham underwear advert? They just offered it to Johnny here, like the new Beckham. There's speculation—'

'Noods, keep quiet. Put it away.' Ariel switched languages, 'I'm so sorry, Johnny. I was only joking. No-one thinks you're gay.' She leant forward and gently kissed him on the corner of his full, red mouth. He sighed and brought his arm forward, and then they were kissing, their lips pressed hard together but still soft and yielding. Her breath caught and she drifted away, but he slid his hand into her hair, pulled her back and kissed her again.

'Tum-te-tum,' murmured Noodle in a sing-song voice. 'Don't mind me.'

They broke off, laughing, swimming in each other's eyes.

'No, I mean it. Don't mind me. That was super-sweet. I think I'm going to cry.'

'What did she say?'

'She said ... never mind. Let's just go to the club.'

Freddy had never wanted to be paparazzi. Even now, he hated it. It was ironic, given his amoral job stealing images of private lives, that he had started out as an idealistic young policeman. That had been a step to his ultimate dream, to be a Private Eye. He had seen himself clearly at middle age, a tough, cynical individualist with a heart of gold, just like in the movies. A lone wolf ripping at the evil underbelly of the city, steely-eyed, irresistible to women, impervious to the temptations of money, and always, in the end, no matter how much he fucked everyone up, the hero.

He had followed his dream and found it banal; divorces, petty fraud, thieving shop assistants, years of struggle to pay the rent. Then one day, on a rooftop opposite a hotel, he had spotted a senior conservative politician with two black prostitutes and click! A single photo that made him more money than a whole year of ripping at the evil underbelly of the city. Now he was fifty, disgusting to women with his pear-shaped body and sad eyes, and paparazzi.

A long-lens specialist. Not for him the jostling on the pavement, the shouting and shoving at the airport. So when the old witch had contacted *Tease* magazine and offered to rent a window above the private entrance of an exclusive, invite-only nightclub, he'd been assigned. A week, so far, of sitting in this cat-puke chair, drinking cat-piss tea and eating salmonella sandwiches, and nothing. A few snaps of some revolting boy-band cavorting in the courtyard, but such clean, wholesome fun they could've been publicity shots. A shot of Bono striding by in a long black coat, doing nothing but jutting a thoughtful jaw. A major Austrian soap-star with a woman who wasn't his wife - Freddy had been briefly excited about that one, but the editor had BBM'd back that it was his *sister*, for God's sake. A parade of celebrity innocence, so far. Enough to make you sick.

A bunch of footballers had just come through with what looked like a prostitute, so there was still hope. He sighed and scratched his belly. At least the old witch had gone to bed, taking her stink of loneliness with her. She gave Freddy the creeps, the screaming heebie-jeebies, to tell you the truth. He could swear that there was some sort of awful red light glowing faintly from her eyes. Ridiculous, of course, it must be a reflection of neon from outside or something, but still, sometimes it looked like it came from *inside* her. He couldn't wait to be finished with this job.

The iron gate swung open and three bright young things sashayed through. Freddy recognized the kid in the middle and hefted his camera. Another footballer, the English one with the greaseball name, just bought by Bayern. Young, rich, super-fit, hot babe on either side with their arms linked through his. 'Piece of shit, I hope you die,' he muttered, and took a good shot of them striding across the gravel, smiling and laughing. The blonde was a real stunner, long legs, big tits, lovely tight jeans, like one of those Swedish porn stars. The dark-haired babe was more shadowy, her hair swinging forward over her face, her clothing more modest and subdued. Nice contrast, a babe menu for the kid. Good stuff for the Personality page. *Tease* traded in envy, and the losers and wannabees could wallow to their heart's delight with this one.

They approached the doorway. Probably a better shot, as they paused and huddled together, all sweet and cozy. As he pressed the button, the dark-haired babe suddenly looked up and stared directly into the lens. Freddy knew that she couldn't actually see him – the room was dark and the outside lights threw reflection off the window, he had checked – but he jerked back and ducked down, swearing under his breath. *Spooky*. As if she had somehow sensed he was there.

A rasp of dry breath at his shoulder. A waft of the old woman's rancid smell. He twisted around. She was standing close behind him, bending over, her yellow teeth bared in a smile that was more like a snarl.

‘Let me see?’ she hissed. ‘The last one?’ He fumbled at the camera and showed her the screen. ‘That’s a lovely picture. You should use that one, don’t you think?’

Now it was unmistakable. Her eyes glowed, like a glimpse of flame through dark smoke. Freddy could not control the wave of sheer terror that passed through him. He screamed, threw himself to his feet, and ran for the door.

The old woman remained standing where she was, rocking back and forth, staring out at the empty courtyard. Muscles worked along her swollen, drooping jaw line, as if there was some living thing under her skin. Then she groaned, took a step back, and spoke in a high, faltering voice, a child’s voice:

‘Mama? Is it time for school yet? Mama? I dreamed again, I pointed at Rachel. She’s my friend, Mama, we play in the wheat-field. I pointed to her. She’s running to the forest. She’s running ...’

She paused and closed her eyes. Then she opened them and spoke again, this time in a deep voice, with a growling accent that was not her own.

‘You pointed to her.’

‘I pointed to her. I didn’t know. They asked me. I pointed.’ Her hand rose slowly up, a trembling finger against the black sky.

‘You never confessed.’

‘I’m telling you now, Mama. I want to go to school. I promise I’ll be good—’

‘Too late.’ She closed her eyes again, rocking back and forth, back and forth. ‘Might as well take you with me right now.’ Then she opened her eyes one last time, sighed, and fell forward over the back of the armchair. Then she twitched, let out a single, rattling breath, and lay still.

Behind her, an old Siamese cat slowly emerged from its hiding place beneath a cupboard. It crept along the wall with its hackles raised and eyes wide. Then it hissed up at the ceiling and bolted for the open door.

In the future, long after he's dead, Freddy's second photo will become one of the most famous on the planet. There will be so few pictures of Ariel Jaeger before Africa, before the scars that marked her face forever. Cell phones will be discarded, computers consigned to recycling. But this photo, along with several others from that year, was preserved on the web and in the digital archives of *Tease* magazine. It will be reproduced over and over, even on the cover of a seminal history textbook.

Look, you can see why. To one side stands Ariel, staring straight up at us, dark, cascading hair framing the pale beauty of her young face. It's an iconic image. Something about the eyes. She looks like she's in love with the whole world.

On the other side stands poor Heidi Blum in profile, looking down, also smiling. But there's a delicate melancholy to her image, even if it's only seen in retrospect, a poignant reminder of how fragile we are.

In the middle stands a young man. Good-looking, leather jacket, a slight blur to his features as he turns towards Ariel. But most captions won't even bother with his name. Sometimes he'll be cropped right out. He'll be forgotten, just one among thousands of young men who used to kick a ball around for a living.

'J-Bap! Johnny B! The man of the hour!' A huge, pot-bellied man with a walrus moustache swept past Ariel. She leapt back in fright and then tittered, fingertips over her mouth. 'Welcome, *welcome* to my 'umble establishment! Make yourself at home, safe from prying eyes!' He made as if to embrace Johnny, thought better of it, and vigorously shook his hand instead.

'You're English,' said Johnny faintly, in surprise.

'Guilty, m'lud. Name's Floyd. Used to cabaret in Berlin, until this crept up on me.' He gestured at his vast belly with flamboyant hands. 'Followed a heartless boy down to Munich, and ... but goodness, listen to me! Prattling on like an old queen. Come, follow me! Bring your lovely young friends, welcome, welcome.'

They followed him down a passage into the club. The décor was muted and subtle, midnight-blue walls, grey carpeting, just a dash of royal purple around the doorway. An alcove held a marble bust – head and shoulders, a nod to Romanesque decadence but not too camp - and an elegant white orchid in a silver pot. The dance floor was small and discrete, located behind an abutting wall, the lighting was soft and ambient, the music smooth soul-house with no lyrics. The effect was pleasurable, warm, like good red wine. *Designed to reward the patrons for being rich*, thought Ariel. *Feels good. No cash at the doorway. I wonder how he squeezes their money out of them.*

As if he could read her thoughts, Johnny whispered in her ear: 'Frank says I should buy a membership. Whatcha think?'

'It's very nice. Like ... Heaven's waiting room.'

'Yeah,' he chuckled. 'Good one.'

Floyd knew when not to impose himself. He brought them to a recessed area with a twirl of his ample torso and a muted flourish, then stepped back without another word.

The boys were seated on a U-shaped leather bench around a marbled table, each with their first drink. There was no sign of Frank or his birthday present.

‘Wooaaah!’ they shouted together, shifting up to make room. ‘Johnny scored already,’ said one. ‘Can’t leave you alone for five minutes,’ said another. ‘Legend!’ hooted the third. Johnny raised both hands, royalty receiving adulation, and ushered Ariel in first. He slid in next to her, leaving only a few inches for Noodle, who hesitated and then perched uncomfortably on the edge, her shoulder to Johnny.

‘Come this side, sweetness,’ said the dreadlocked boy on the other arm of the U, where there was more room. With a grateful, awkward scamper she crossed over and settled down.

Introductions were made, hands shaken across the table. Bjorn, the dreadlocked boy, raised a hand and a waitress in a frilly French maid’s get-up appeared. Johnny asked politely for sparkling water, Ariel a cranberry juice and Noodle a tequila sunrise. The girls had to repeat their order because the waitress couldn’t take her eyes off Johnny. Ariel crept her hand into his, and he gave it a squeeze.

The boys resumed their conversation in a mix of English and German, technical football stuff about offside traps, wingbacks and lines of midfield attack. Abbo, the pale skinhead, moved coins, glasses and phones around the table to illustrate the battlefield. The drinks arrived. Mikal, the long-haired boy, retrieved his beer from the melee, took a calculating sip and then thrust it back into the heart of the central defense. Johnny watched thoughtfully, leaned past Ariel and moved a coin to intercept him, raising his eyebrows. Mikal nodded and withdrew for another sip.

There was something nice about being so thoroughly ignored. Ariel winked at Noodle and they both shrugged. These were confident young men, taking it as their due a feminine presence relegated to the sidelines. No fawning, no sideways glances seeking approval, no false bravado. Much better than the kind of boy they were used to. And away from stage of the VIP lounge their hairstyles were less dramatic, just

ordinary guys, each with their own look. The strategy session ended inconclusively just as Ariel was beginning to find it tiresome.

'So,' smiled Johnny, turning to her. 'Ariel.'

'Johnny.'

'Here we are.'

'Hmm.'

He lifted his hand and traced a fingertip down the curve of her cheek, then brushed it over her lips. His eyes were hooded and sleepy, and she caught a whiff of his man-smell. She blinked and half-laughed, unsure how to respond, not wanting to spoil this by acting all vampira-sexy, but not wanting to pull away, not wanting him to stop. The fingertip dropped under her chin and tilted her face up, and he kissed her softly on the lips.

She closed her eyes. 'What ... what color are my eyes?'

'Aaah. A test. Let's see. They're strange and beautiful. Green, flecked with pale blue, almost grey? I bet they change with your mood. A golden flare around the pupil. Okay?'

'Perfect!' She laughed and opened them again, to find his closed.

'And mine?'

'Haven't a clue. Only interested in your body.'

He smiled and frowned at the same time. 'That your final answer?'

'No, brown. They're, you know, dark brown.'

'Right,' he opened them. 'Not exactly poetry, but you'll do.'

'Thanks. You'll do, too.'

He kissed her again, just as gently, then brushed his lips down the side of her neck. *Strange, her mind interrupted, how the softer the touch, the more intense the feeling. Like my nerve endings are reaching out to him.* She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed him back, a little bit firmer to slow the unbearable shivering inside her.

'Oi!' shouted Abbo. 'Get a room, why don'tcha!'

'Yeah,' sniggered Mikal. 'Maybe Frank's finished. You can use his.' As if on cue, the music faded and they all heard a woman scream in wild sexual abandon, a great theatrical orgasm. Ariel and Johnny twisted around. A door behind them marked Private, half hidden behind a Japanese screen with a motif of butterflies exploding into flight.

'Frank's birthday party,' said Johnny wryly.

'Why is it, ladies,' asked Abbo, 'that women make so much more noise during sex than men do?'

Oh no. Ariel's mind had the answer, and spoke before she could stop it: 'Because we're social animals with a sexual hierarchy. The alpha male could mate with every female in the tribe. But if he's infertile, then there would be no babies, so she makes that noise to let the other males know ... you know, that it's their turn when he's finished.'

They stared at her, speechless. She blushed, and her mind panicked and kept on babbling. 'In fact, in most social animals with a sexual hierarchy, the female orgasm takes *exactly* three times longer than the male's. So when he's satisfied, then she's only one third ... oh dear.'

The stare only deepened. Then Johnny rescued her. He slammed his fist on the table, leapt to his feet and roared, 'She's right! Frank! Leave her legs open. I'm coming in!' The tension around the table dissolved into laughter. The orgasmic yodeling next door stopped abruptly, with a squeak.

'Then it's my turn,' yelled Abbo.

'Then me!' Mikal.

'Wait, that's already four,' said Johnny, sitting down. 'Sorry, mate,' he said to Bjorn. 'You also miss out.'

'No problem.' He leered at Noodle. 'I can last three times longer than any other man.'

'Whoooo,' the boys sang. Noodle gasped, and took a great flustered gulp of her drink.

The door behind the screen crashed open and Frank staggered out, a goofy smile plastering his rat-face. He hitched up his pants and swaggered over to the table, to a semi-circle of barely-suppressed grins.

'What? What you maniacs shouting about?' No answer. He fiddled his privates and hitched up his pants again. 'Man oh man. She just can't get enough of me.'

A gale of fresh laughter hit him and the smug faded from his smile. Johnny came to the rescue again, raising his glass in a toast. 'To Frank! Happy birthday and many happy returns.' They all raised their glasses and toasted him. 'Well, at least two more happy returns!'

The party broke up as the evening wore on. Frank took Abbo and Mikal to a small bar around the corner. Their voices rose, loud and triumphant, above the music. Ariel saw Floyd slip through the private door. He did not re-emerge, *must be a back door*. But Johnny grew distant, not holding hands, not kissing her, lost in his thoughts. She silently cursed her big-mouthed mind. At the other side of the table Bjorn was putting a move on Noodle, murmuring into her ear, touching her hand, her arm, her hair. She sat quietly, enthralled, wide-eyed with flushed cheeks, certainly not going on and on about evolutionary theory or anything. Ariel grew a little jealous, and eventually had enough.

'Johnny? What's wrong?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'Come on. You're just sitting there—'

'Thinking about what you said. I mean it's, it's *scary*, you know? The implications. It means by nature all women are whores.'

She almost asked him about Betty Blonde, but thought better of it, saying just, 'No.'

'No?' He glanced up at her.

‘No, Johnny. That’s not how it works. Survival, procreation, all that. Everything’s a strategy. It depends on the environment, in this case, the social environment. We no longer live in tribal groups, where everyone takes care of the children, and the alpha male has first choice. Nowadays a woman has to take care of her own children. So by nature we choose a man who is kind, loving, we choose monogamy, our own man. By nature, do you understand? Apart from choosing good genes, but that’s a different story, and not one *you* have to worry about.’

‘All sounds a bit ... I dunno, mechanical. Cold, even.’

‘Yes, I agree. When my mind says that love can be explained by genetic inheritance, by instinct, it just doesn’t feel right. Doesn’t *fit*, you know? Sometimes we fall in love with the same person for our whole lives, even when we’re separated for years, we stay faithful. We sacrifice everything for love, we have overwhelming obsessions, we die of broken hearts. Love is real, but not always rational in biological terms. We’ve evolved.’

‘You ever been in love?’

‘Mmm, I don’t know. You?’

He shrugged, then raised his languid eyes to hers with just a hint of a smile. ‘So that stuff you said before, now you saying it’s not true?’

‘I was talking about inherited sexual response, that’s all. Look, um ... I know, grey seals.’

‘Huh?’

‘There’s an island near Scotland where grey seals breed. On the one side of the island there’s a big beach with typical seal breeding behavior. You know.’

‘No?’

‘The males fight, and the strongest gets to rule the beach, with a harem of females. The losers hang around on the outskirts, trying to get a bit on the side. It’s a mess, blood everywhere, baby seals being crushed by the fighting, females being forced to mate. A brutal society.’

'Like us. Like we were.'

'Perhaps. No, I don't think so. Anyway, on the other side of the island there's a string of small, enclosed beaches, little enclaves, and in each there's a single pair of seals. A husband and wife. Same species, but they remain faithful to each other their whole lives, raising a new pup every year. If one of them dies then the other disappears, and their child takes over, usually with a pup from one of the other couples, although they sometimes take a mate from the main beach. It's love, you see. The freedom to choose. And because they are free to choose, they're faithful. The females on the main beach cheat with the outsiders whenever they can. The behavioral dichotomy makes sense, because if disease wipes out the main group, then the isolated pairs can survive and repopulate. So I think it's the same with us. We have different instincts encoded in our genes, different strategies for survival, which emerge under different conditions. And so, also, different kinds of people.'

'Wow. You're like a major boffin. A super-nerd.'

'Oh. I'm sorry. I-'

'Relax. I like it. Mum was a schoolteacher, remember? She didn't raise a total idiot. And after my last girlfriend,' he shook his head, 'all she wanted to talk about was clothes and gossip and ... different ice cream flavors. This one's her favorite, no! *That* one's her favorite. And money, of course. Always money. You know why I dumped her? The last straw? She bought a handbag that cost a thousand quid. I tell you, a thousand quid-'

''A thowsand quid'', she imitated his cockney twang. 'Say that again. It's so cute.'

'A thousand quid,' he said, deadpan. 'Say, wee willy wonka.'

'I can't, come on.'

'Say it.'

'Vee villy vonka.'

He laughed. 'Say woind and woind the wagged bush the wagged wascal wan.'

'Shut up, you meanie. Say, give me a kiss.'

'Gimme a kiss.'

And he was back again.

'Boys?' Frank interrupted. 'Party's over. Curfew time. Discipline!' He clapped his hands once and strutted off back to the bar.

Johnny groaned and disentangled himself. Bjorn and Noodle just carried on kissing.

'What ... what's happening?' asked Ariel, breathless.

'Got a game on Sunday. Oh gosh, look at the time. Bjorn? We gotta get going, mate. Video strategy session at nine. Come on, I'll take you girls home.'

'Do you have to?'

'Yeah, absolutely. This is the life.'

'Okay,' she sighed.

'Bjorn! Let's go. No sex before the game.'

'What you doing Sunday night?' Bjorn asked Noodle, his voice husky.

'She has school on Monday,' replied Ariel, a bit primly. 'And we have final exams in two weeks.' Noodle shrugged and nodded, her mouth slack and her lipstick smudged. There was a numb pause, then slowly they began to gather their things, shifting out and standing up. Ariel asked for Johnny's number and thumbed it in. She called him and it rang, a nice ordinary ringtone, old-style telephone. 'Got it,' he said. Bjorn and Noodle exchanged numbers the same way and they drifted out towards the exit.

'Hang on a mo,' said Johnny. 'I want to talk to that Floyd guy about a membership.' So Ariel went on alone, while Bjorn and Noodle leant up against a wall to kiss awhile longer. Outside the air was crisp and chilly, a faint autumn breeze bearing just a whisper of winter. She leant her head back and stretched out her arms. For once her mind kept quiet, simply enjoying the warmth of the love chemicals infusing her body.

A *miaow* at her feet. She looked down. A white cat – no, Siamese – staring up at her with eyes as blue and perfect as planets. It lashed its tail from side to side and came closer, still holding her gaze. She bent over to stroke it, but it ducked away and meowed again.

‘What’s wrong, kitty?’ She squatted down. There *was* something wrong, she could tell, hunger, trauma, some desperate edge to that ragged little vowel. The cat prowled even closer, right between her outstretched knees, and this time permitted her to stroke it, but did not purr or arch its back like an extrovert cat flirting with a stranger.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked again in a soft voice. And again, a plaintive meow and those intense, pleading eyes.

A crunch of boots on the gravel behind her. She jumped up. ‘Made a new friend?’ Johnny asked. He kissed her cheek, running fingertips down her spine. ‘Damn,’ he sighed into her ear. ‘I wish this night could go on forever. Gonna miss you like crazy.’ He shrugged, took her hand and led her off across the courtyard.

The cat followed closely at her heels, and was still there as they approached the car. Behind them, Noodle and Bjorn said their clinging goodbyes. The cat meowed again.

‘Wait,’ said Ariel, bending down and gathering it into her arms. It did not struggle. ‘There’s something wrong, Johnny. I think I must take it home with me.’

‘What? No, it belongs to someone round here.’

‘I suppose, but ... I’ll come back tomorrow and put up a few notices.’

‘No way, Ariel,’ he said, opening her door. ‘I don’t want some raggedy old tomcat in my car.’

‘She’s clean, look–’

‘I said no, okay? This leather’s brand new. You can’t get the smell of cat piss–’

‘I think she’s sick or some–’

‘So it’ll puke everywhere. The answer’s no. Put it down.’

For a moment she stared back, defiantly. Then slowly she lowered the cat to the ground.

The Merc purred out of the parking lot while the GPS pondered her curt address, and then swung left. In the side mirror, Ariel saw the cat slip out onto the pavement and sit back on its haunches, staring at her as it receded. Something flashed in the air above its head, wheeled, whirled and took off towards the car, vanishing up out of sight. *What on earth was that? So fast. A hawkmoth?*

She checked in the sunguard mirror. Noodle lay sprawled in the back seat, earphones in, eyes closed, lost behind a dreamy, happy smile.

‘So,’ said Johnny. ‘I hope we can ...’ he glanced over and caught her expression. ‘Hey, I’m sorry, okay? We can’t go picking up every stray animal—’

‘Whatever.’

‘Aah, come on, Ariel. Okay, whatever. Sulk if you want to.’ He fumbled for a CD and slid it in without looking. Lady Gaga, she noted with distaste. He drove awhile, a pensive expression on his face. At a red traffic light he glanced at her again. ‘Now I feel bad. Let’s go back.’

She sighed. ‘No, it’s okay. Just take us home.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes!’

‘Okay, okay.’ The light turned green and they crawled forward, then picked up speed. He coughed awkwardly. ‘Um ... what about Noodle?’

‘What about her?’

‘Where must I—’

‘Round the corner from me. We’ll drop her off first.’

‘Okay. So where do you, who do, do you still live with your parents?’

‘Of course, I’m at school, remember?’

'Right, right.'

'My father, actually. They split. You know.'

'Sure. You have brothers and sisters?'

'No. Only child.'

'What your parents do?'

She sighed. 'My father's a businessman. Supplying fiber-optics at the moment. He travels quite a lot.'

'Cool. And your mum?'

'She's a member of parliament.'

'Really? What party?'

'The Greens.'

'Ah.'

'Don't you ah me! When I tell people that, always think they've had some sort of insight. I'm not like her. I hardly ever see her. And we don't agree on things at all.'

'Ah.'

She laughed. 'She was meant to visit me tonight, but she was late as usual, so I went out.' And she'd deleted the voicemail without even listening to it.

'So what stuff don't you agree on? Saving the world?'

'Well, no, I mean ... when she was my age, they had all this grand ideology, communism versus capitalism, feminism, Marxism, all that. They lived in this neurotic world of ideas, and you *had* to be either one side or the other. And if you were the other, then you were evil, that's it. Good guys and bad guys, everything black and white. So she's really disappointed in our generation. She thinks we're superficial, all about internet and sex and clothes and stuff, so nothing I do is *ever* good enough for her.'

'Take it easy.'

'Sorry.'

'No no, it's true what you say. It's like ... they fought this hectic battle against the Evil Empire, and all we do is fart around. But *actually* all they did is sit on their bums and talk a whole lot of shit, while the world carried on getting fucked up, business as usual.'

'Couldn't have put it better myself.'

He chuckled. 'I get the same vibe from my mum. I dunno, scornful, y'know? I mean, she's not political, but ... when I try to get her hooked up to Skype, or Facebook or whatever, then she's like, yeah yeah.'

'That's the point, Johnny. Our generation's job is the global communications system, the information network, the first step to fixing the mess they made of the planet. Sharing knowledge, finding common ground, transcending the divisions they created. I mean, as far as I can see, what's the difference if you're comrade commissar or a CEO, if you're polluting or using up all the resources, then you're exactly the same, right? And what was their grand struggle for, if not to give us what we've got now, where it doesn't matter what color you are or what your religion is or what flag you wave or whatever? We have very real, practical problems to solve in our lifetime, and all their old-fashioned ideological posturing doesn't help us in the slightest.'

'Gee, if I didn't know better, I'd think you worked for the Green Party.'

'Oh, very funny. Anyway. That's my mother. You asked. Please can you turn this off? Bitch be like Nero fiddling.'

'Sure. What kind of music are you into? I've got all kinds, I've got-'

'There, you see? We can pick and choose whatever identity we want. Today fashionista, tomorrow sexy vampire, or hippy ethno, or punk, emo, metal, house, rap, pop, we can be corporate chicy-mickey, we can be drop-out skaters, green crusaders, techno-geeks, whatever we want. Surf the menu, point and click. Put the iPod in shuffle, be young and have fun. Burn it up. Why not? We're the free-choice generation. The eclectic generation.'

'Eclectic electric. But sometimes I think our mothers are right. Maybe deep down we're superficial. We think life's just a game.'

'What you do for a living again?'

'I'm a slave, actually. I've got no freedom at all. My whole life is under management. Okay, I make a lot of money. Don't get me wrong, I know I'm lucky. Eeny-meany-miny-mo Johnny gets football talent, Ariel gets to be incredibly beautiful and intelligent and thoughtful and kind to animals and have a gift for languages, and who gets the big bucks? I live in this ... like I'm not part of the world and all its challenges, I've been denied, I dunno, meaning? Purpose? People would laugh, but sometimes I feel like *I'm* the one cheated. And you're the one that's lucky; you weren't stuck in the Thoughtful Academy when you were just a kid. And let me tell you, sometimes I feel ashamed of being so rich, so young. It's just ... wrong, y'know? Things are changing. This economic crisis isn't going to go away, not ever, even if we're getting used to it. Too many people, too little to go around. We may think we're free, but the poor little kids today are gonna be the hard-choice generation.'

'Hmm.' And *hmmm* said her mind. *This is so cool. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he's not just a gorgeous frog. Maybe he's a prince, after all.*

The rest of the weekend was pure torture. On Saturday morning her father forced her to phone her mother to apologize. And surprise surprise, mother dearest was gruff and dismissive, obviously bustling off to some imminent unmissable meeting again. Punishing her with distance, so what's new? She had studied, or tried to study, but her eyes kept wandering from the laptop to the blank phone-screen. And she kept remembering how abrupt Johnny had been when he dropped her off, a quick kiss, a I'll-phone-you, and off he drove, leaving her like a stray cat on the grass verge outside her house. Had she said something wrong? Just when she was really, really starting to like him, had she driven him away? Was he getting sweaty with some football groupie during her long, insomniac Saturday night alone? Or a hotel room-full of them, all looking like models, all barely-dressed in French lingerie and hip-hop hot pants, all incredibly knowledgeable about offside traps and defensive strategies and physiotherapy and sex and stuff? On Sunday she had tried to find the Bayern-Bremen game on TV, but her father shouted at her for wasting time and unplugged it. By Sunday night she was exhausted and in a foul mood.

And then the phone rang. Caller ID: *Johnny*. She stared at it, her tummy a sudden riot of butterflies, and then snatched it up on the last ring.

'Hullo? Johnny?'

'Hey, did you see that? What a disaster.'

'See what?'

'The game, of course.'

'No, I told you, I hate football.' Oh no! Why did she say that? The phone was silent, clearly shocked. Then, to her relief, a slow chuckle, warm and sweet and Johnny.

'Ariel,' he said. 'I swear, I'm probably the first guy in the history of Premier football to hear *that* the first time he calls a girl. And you know what? I hate football too. What a balls-up. How are you?'

'I miss you.' Oh, uh-duh. Pathetic. 'What happened in the game?'

'I couldn't stop myself. I kept thinking.'

'About what?'

'Just thinking.'

'That's bad?'

'Yeah,' he sighed. 'That's bad. My old coach used to say there's no time to think on the pitch. At this level the game's so fast and precise you have to be pure reflex, pure instinct. Zen, he called it. Getting in the zone. You have to live in the moment, sharp and clear as crystal. They even train us how to do it. But I kept looking up into the crowd and wondering about them, who they were, what their lives are like, what we talked about, you know, the past, the future? It was weird. It was like the first time I was seeing them as people, not just ... noisy wallpaper. Felt like I was drowning. And I kept thinking about you. What a disaster.'

'Thanks a lot.'

'No, wait,' he chuckled again. 'Boy, did that come out wrong. It's not your fault. I'm just going to have to separate you from, from all this. You know what? I miss you too, like crazy. From now on I'm going to be two people. A kid who plays football, and a man who spends time with you. If ... that's okay?'

She was so overcome she started thrashing her legs around, kicking and dancing a jig while still sitting down. She kept her lips pressed hard together, lest she bray or scream or say something seriously uncool. Then her foot caught the leg of the desk and she flew back, the chair twisting and tipping over, and with a thump she was sprawled on her back on the carpet. Only an *oof!* managed to escape.

'Ariel? Are you there?'

'Yes! Sorry. I fell down.'

'Literally?'

'Of course not. When can I see you?'

'Tonight? I've got a couple of hours. There's a Champion's League qualifier on Wednesday, then next weekend we're away to Cologne, so ...'

'Not tonight. School tomorrow. Exams coming up. So is this how it's going to be? A couple of hours a week?'

'No, my evenings are mostly free. They give us time, otherwise the pressure becomes too much. And soon you'll be finished with school, and I was thinking I could buy a little flat for you-'

'Your old coach was right.' She righted the chair and sat down. 'You shouldn't think too much.'

'Okay,' he chuckled again. 'Getting ahead of myself. Can't stop. I keep thinking about me and you-'

'You and I.'

'... both of us together on an endless, white beach, barefoot under the palm trees, the scent of jasmine and honeysuckle in the morning breeze, our little house behind the lush frangipani-'

'Frangipani?'

'Yeah, well. It was in a poem me Mum forced me to learn. I wouldn't know a frangipani if it bit me on the arse.'

'So this would be the off-season, then?'

'Ten years. Even five, and I'll have enough to set me up for life. Then we can – oh shit,' he dropped to a whisper. 'There's the manager. He's looking for me. Gonna give me the old hairdryer for the way I played today.'

'He's going to give you an old hairdryer?' Visions rose in her mind of half-naked men standing around in a steamy change room, wet muscles rippling as they shared hairdressing equipment and beauty products, the make-up bags, the curling tongs-

'Football parlance. Sorry. Means he's going to scream in my face. You know, blow my hair back-'

'I get it. Good luck.'

'Thanks, I'll need it. Do me a favour. Don't read the papers about the game, okay? Whoops, gotta go. I'll phone you.' And he was gone.

So, of course, she went online, where the first reports were already dropping in. He was right, total disaster. J-Bap takes a nap. Johnny B, Bayern's multi-million catastrophe. She caught a video stream of him gazing up, belatedly hacking at a passing ball and missing it completely. He looked so cute in his little red shorts, the baffled expression when they zoomed onto his face. She put her arms around the laptop and then froze.

A headline link. She sat back, opened it and gasped as the photo came up. The man from the club, the one staring at her at the bar. Much younger, shorter hair, but unmistakable. She scanned. Croatian war criminal, sought by Interpol for almost two decades, beats woman to death in an alley behind a Leopold Street nightclub. Police called after screams heard. Man shot dead, apparently during a frenzied, suicidal rush. Details sketchy. One quote, from a visibly shaken young policeman: "It was him screaming. Like he was in terrible pain."

Her phone rang. She snatched it up without looking. 'Johnny?'

'No, he's gone into hiding.' Noodle sounded smug. 'Bjorn, on the other hand, was strong and dependable, and ... and a rock in defence. That's all I can find.'

'Did you see this? The guy who killed the woman behind the club on Friday night?'

'No. Hang on. Okay, got it. Shit, that's where we were.'

'Yes, he was staring at me. Gave me the creeps. Oh God. Do you realize that could've been me?'

'Well, if she's stupid enough to go off alone with some strange man-'

'And what did you do?'

'Okay, no need to ... hmm. Scary, huh?'

'Yes. Very.'

'Oh well. I just thought I'd phone to gloat. Bjorn's coming to fetch me in about an hour.'

'Hey! School tomorrow?'

'Who cares? How often will I catch a top-class footballer? I mean, please. School? You must be joking. Have you heard from your Johnny?'

'Yes, he called me-'

'Disguising himself? Buying a ticket back to England?'

'No, he was very ... happy, actually.'

'Ah, deluded. The power of love. Anyway, ta-ta. Must put on my face.'

'Noods, my treasure, be careful. Don't give it to him right away.'

'I won't. Thanks, Ari. And be cool. Don't be a groupie.'

'Yes. You too. Take care.'

'You too.'

She dreamed of lush frangipani, their little house only vague, whitewashed angles behind it. It grew out from her imagination, generous, fragile leaves, heart-shaped and broad as beds, white orchids dashed with silver and fleshy pink. A blue, blue sky. She didn't have the heart to google real frangipani when she woke up, to see what it actually looked like. Strangely, he wasn't in the dream, but he was coming, coming over the gentle ocean lapping behind her. She washed and brushed her teeth, humming nonsense, then drifted out into the damp suburbs with soft, warm, tropical sand

beneath her feet, a tang of salt air a thousand miles from the sea. A slow pirouette down the mossy stone path, through the frangipani, through the frangipani. A secretive smile lingered on her face through the day.

It dismayed her friends. With the Abi exams looming straight ahead she looked, well, confident. Amused by their panic, like she knew something they didn't. And for the next three days she cruised, murmuring goodbyes with half-hearted hugs to people she'd known since forever, no regrets and few promises, none meant. And all the while that damn Mona Lisa smile.

Then *Tease* magazine hit the stands.

It was a mad, uproarious scandal, a pressure valve bursting. They completely lost all cool, yelling and bouncing around like a German version of High School Musical, tearing copies apart as they went from hand to hysterical hand. On the last day of their school career, Ari & Noods became *famous*.

And for nothing, really. A photo of three friends, arms linked, strolling outside. A smaller inset, the focal point Ariel's amazing eyes. A voyeur's view, happy intimacy made lurid by the light of the public eye. But the words did the real damage, starting with SEX v PERFORMANCE? then on to *Johnny B's a naughty boy!* and *Friday night threesome frolic blows the game!* Two facing columns of copy, the first carefully non-speculative about what Johnny-boy might have actually got up to with the two sexy young *ma(u)luab*dels, clubbing and carousing all over town all night long, draw your own conclusion. The second passed the ball from the sports pages to teen-zine over common ground, sex. Does sex before a game affect performance? This opinion and that. Bragging by implication. Robert de Niro pouring ice down his shorts, you *know* he's gonna throw a beating. Famous athlete's quotes – "It relaxes me" – in giant quotation marks to club home their veracity. Apropos of no-one in a rhetorical question: *monkey sex*, in startling pink font. Turn the page and there's the implied answer to did they or didn't they? NO MOJO across a photo of Johnny hoiking his now-infamous air

shot, the daze in his handsome face, serve you right, you smug bastard. Nothing's for free.

They had one night's notice before the last day of school. Ariel dressed down in her hoodie and jeans, swirling morning mist as she scurried through the gate. Now everyone knew exactly what had happened. Now they smirked at her, at her first-orgasm smile.

Noodle went the other way. She dressed up in bright, skin-tight satin and ironic hair, pinned in curlers the night before, flouncing around *a la* Hollywood tartlet. Some got it, for the others she had to ham it up, waving at the crowds and pouting behind her shades, saying things like "Dahhling" and "World peace. And a new contract!" and "English, please!" She was quietly invited to two clique parties, but proclaimed, loudly and with relish, that she would be with her fans at the big common-people's party at Stefan's house as planned. By mid-day no-one would speak to her, and still she laughed.

Some whispered that she was deliberately stealing the limelight from Ariel, and yes, it was true. But not, as they said, because she was jealous of *that* photo, the smaller one, the one boys all over the school were caught staring at, losing themselves, startling up guilty. At school, if not the editorial room, Ari was the star. And Noods the loud, brassy supporting role. But she didn't care. She spread flamboyant wings wide to deflect their attention, to protect her friend.

Ariel knew it and thanked her, a quick hug and a word in her ear as they passed each other in the stairwell. That sparked another whisper that it was a kiss, which flamed, in some circles, into full-on girl-on-girl by the end of the day. Otherwise Ariel played her part well, Garbo in a dark veil of hair to hide her face, hoodie up, sitting inside alone.

So no-one saw that, despite their best efforts, the smile still lingered on her face.

And suddenly, that was that. School's out. The seed-pod's bursting, the scatterlings never to be together again.

That night Noodle celebrated her triumph. A jump up onto a table, an air-punch, standing high over the bitches. POW! After all they'd been through, the knock-out! On the very last day. Victory! She made sure everyone knew it, who won and who were the lo-ooosers, then said ciao-ciao before something went wrong, and because, by the way, she had a date with a famous footballer, which just also happened to be true. Ariel stayed away altogether.

Because he phoned her again.

'Did you see that?'

'Terrible! How dare they? They just assume-'

'What are you talking about? It was amazing, I scored two goals. And I made the third.'

Oh. The midweek game. She'd completely forgotten.

'You did? I'm sorry, that's wonderful. Well done.'

He sighed. 'I completely turned it around. I wished you'd seen it. One of the best games I ever had. So *now* you can read the papers.'

'So you didn't see *Tease* magazine?'

'What? No.'

'They had a picture of us, together.'

'Aah, don't worry about it. Load of old bollocks. In the real world I scored two goals.'

'And you made the third.'

'And I made the third. It was brilliant. I was dancing. I miss you, babe. It feels like ... you're slipping away, like maybe you weren't even real. I dreamed about you.'

'Me too.'

'Can I see you tonight?'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'Okay.'

'Yeah? Hold on.' She heard glug-glug-glug, and realized he was drinking water, really pouring it down the hatch. 'Aaaah. Just gotta shower, and I'll be there.'

He was hot when they kissed in the park, literally hot, burning up, his skin several shades darker in the moonlight, the flesh of his face rippling with fine muscle. He held her lightly, trembling fingers tracing her hips, back and shoulders, his breathing deep, as if it took all his strength to be so gentle. She writhed and kissed him back, her hands in his wet hair. He pressed forward, hard as rock. Their breathing came together for a while.

'Mmmm. Nice.' He chuckled. 'Man, I wanna ... whoo!'

'You wanna what?' She swatted him. 'Huh?'

'Talk. Just talk. About ... like, how animals do it.'

'Antelope do one hard little poke, and that's it.'

He regarded her glumly, suddenly deflated. She laughed.

'Naaah.'

'Naaah.'

'Screw the antelope.'

'Uhh ... no.'

'How 'bout monkeys?'

Just the wrong thing to say. She grimaced and looked away.

'What?'

'Nothing. I should study.'

In a moment he was attentive, swimming sharply into focus, his dark eyes shining in the distant street-light. *He's not like the rest of us. His time is sharper, his senses quicker. He's*

perfectly honed. She raised a soft hand to his face, her fingertips slipping on the sheen of his sweat.

‘I’m not listening,’ he said. ‘Missing something. Taking you for granted.’

So she told him about the photos, all the madness at school. He listened. She talked for several minutes, quietly, her hand on his shoulder, his on her hip, touching hands, cheeks, hair with their free hands. She scuffed at the thick grass with her boots and broke free from him, and he caught her and drew her back. They kissed once or twice.

Then she stopped, realizing how silly her little story must be to him. Her anonymous brush with celebrity, one of millions of babes and their fifteen seconds of fame. He stood in thought a while as if he was still listening. She heard a sigh on the fresh evening breeze and turned to it. An old couple, a man and a woman, his arm around her shoulders, watching them. *We’re silhouettes under this tree. Eternal. We look so cool, the way they once did.* They moved off, their dog scampering after.

‘I tell you something,’ he said, a slow hand on his chin. ‘I did this. I came here and dragged you into this pit of hell.’

‘Well, it’s not that bad.’

‘This stinking filthy pit of sin and evil. So it’s my job to get you out. So how about we ... just step out, that’s it! There’s a function tomorrow. Stadium advertisers, some presentation by the club. I’ll dress you nice and take you, hold out your chair. Find someone, some freakin’ demon of the mass media, and introduce you. Hi, this is Ariel, she’s by my side, get used to it.’

‘Are you asking me out on a date?’

‘No. Yes. Of course, sorry.’

‘But what’s the story? Soccer player has girlfriend. Who cares? They screwed us.’

‘No, it’s still a story. One of the better tabloids, it embarrasses this ... *Tease* magazine, throws their dirty minds back at them. Just hang it out there. It’s worth a try. But we have to do it now.’

'Can't I just be anonymous? The mystery brunette, you know, or something?'

'But why? This is your people, your community. Your friends. It's why I'm suggesting it, come barging in here with the paparazzi after me. They lied about us, we put the record straight. That's all. It's beautiful.'

She dropped her hands and swung away, the pale moonlight of her face suddenly gone, extinguished by her hair. He reached out and then paused, puzzled. She drifted, with wide, stiff-legged steps, each a balancing act, arms stretched wide.

'What?'

'I don't know.' She came back to him, head to one side. 'This is about us, not them. Why should we be pushed into an announcement that we're boyfriend and girlfriend? Into anything? This is only the second time I've actually, physically seen you. Maybe you-'

'Don't say it. Come on, think about it. This is what it is. This is where we live. It's in public whether we like it or not.'

'It? What's-'

'Our relationship. I'm crazy about you. I have to see you. You wanna see me begging on my knees over there,' he pointed to her house, 'in broad daylight, how the media are going to love that?'

'So I've no choice.'

'No. You're coming on a date with me. That's all. A date. Our relationship? Who knows? Nobody's business but our own.'

'Okay. Okay, it's a date.'

They kissed again, but for some reason it was funny this time, lips and foreheads bumping, their eyes dancing. Then her front door opened and her father strode out, scanning across his field with an out-thrust jaw and worry in his eyes, she could see all the way from the other side of the park.

'Come meet my dad.'

‘What? No way. I’ll wait here, while you–’

‘So we can announce to the whole world, but you can’t say hullo to my poor little papa?’

‘He’s huge! Look at the size of him. Maybe when there witnesses around.’

‘Frighty cat. I mean, what you say, scaredy cat. All right. When will you fetch me?’

‘Tomorrow. Seven thirty?’

‘I’ll be here.’

‘Wait. Earlier. I want to buy you a dress.’

‘I’ll dress myself, thank you.’

Poor Papa Jaeger. Every choice looked wrong. He didn’t like this Eurotrash skulking away in his fancy black Merc like some rich little cockroach. A boy like that only wants one thing. But to say no? To Ariel? She’d studied so hard this year. Too much, sometimes, he’d told her to go get a life. Maybe what she needed for the exams was a bit of fun. But *abi* exams ... her mother will go Vesuvius. Hopefully she won’t find out.

Bild carried the photos, a quarter-page spread, chosen mostly because of the debutante, stunning in her silver-white chiffon, lovely hair pinned up just so, fresh and visibly excited, a scent of sex – he’s an athlete, celebrity-grade good-looking, she’s been picked from the forests of Bayern like the sweetest cherry. They were smoking hot, there had to be fire.

He took her straight home afterwards, like a proper date. She waited for the twitch of a curtain from the upstairs window, and when it came his eyes flashed instantly up. They talked for half-an-hour, kissing only once. He watched her to the door.

Noodle wasn’t invited.

'Was Bjorn there, the bastard?'

'Yes, but alone. I mean, sitting with his comrades. He looked guilty when he saw me?'

'Okay. So maybe ...'

'Johnny took me to throw *Tease* into the bin. You weren't, you know, you aren't ... Bjorn probably didn't even think about it.'

'Yeah,' she sighed. 'He doesn't do a whole lot of that. Not really his thing. I went to his place-'

'You went to his what?'

'Well, he said we couldn't go out because of the paparazzi and everyone, like ordinary people. Everyone watching us. And he said he'd cook me supper, but it was pizza, and his place was so sexy. Wow. All chrome and marble and big windows, big colorful paintings. Lots of energy, lots of ... *thrust*. He put serious moves on me, Ari. I thought I was going to die. It was so hot, I almost lost my mind.'

'You didn't?'

'No, almost. Tried to talk, to cool him down, you know, just about stuff. Football, even. Stuff. But he was just like, uh-duh.'

'Oh well. You know boys.'

'No, that's not the worst of it. Because then, wait for it - he switched on the TV!'

'What?'

'I'm so jealous, Ari. You get the prince, I get the penis. What shall we do?'

'Let's go out together. The four of us. Give him a chance.'

'After exams.'

'Sure.'

'I'm frozen inside. Fear, I suppose. I'm not even thinking about it. Y'know, when I started high school, I had this sort of idea, that when we reached this point everything would crystallize, everything would make sense, it would all ... come to a point or

something? But now ... there's so much to learn. Like this wall in front of me, and I'm too scared to even look at it.'

'You know more than you think. Open the books. You'll see.'

'You think so?'

'Absolutely. And forget the boys for a while. Let him stew. Or go.'

'Yeah, the bastard.'

'Enough of this chit-chat. Go open a book. Now.'

She ignored her own advice because the afternoon outside was so lovely, a cheeky breeze blustering in all directions as if summer was still young, the sun fresh and warm. It hadn't rained for days. Barefoot weather. At the grass verge by the gate she paused and turned back to look at her house. It seemed smaller, the way it looked when she came home from holiday. The wisteria's sad, she thought. Needs water. She continued on her way.

The house would be hers, in time. It had been passed down a maternal line over a century long and was now owned, on paper at least, by her mother. Her grandmother was still alive, still kicking her heels in a village altersheim next to the Starnberger See. Her father paid no rent in lieu of maintenance, and had lived his life in a state of suspended eviction both before and since the divorce. Recently he had developed a habit, spending secret, wistful hours viewing properties on sale, from sleek bachelor pads in town to gnarled old bear-cave houses in the forests south of Munich.

In spirit the house was Ariel's already, by now Mama would never come home. Ariel remembered how happy she'd been when she fled, how haunted she was when she visited, hovering in the kitchen with her coat still on. Recently she wouldn't even come in, preferring to wait in the car.

She shook her hair back and broke into a run across the grass.

Past the neighbors, the young Hoffenheim couple, with their clean new tile-and-paint job. Then old Mrs Bledic, one of the scariest witches of Pasing. There she was, pottering in the garden, her cat in the apple tree. As always she grinned and waved and began shouting Ariel's latest astrological update. Ariel waved back and ran on. The Ghanaian businessman, low maintenance, never home, the tech-design students with the stone wall, always so boring and studious. Across the asphalt and the tousled green lawn of the park, down towards the river.

She stretched back on the bench with her eyes open to the restless sky, her mind reciting the English oral exam, twittering away, happy to be back at work. The words she had so carefully written sparkled along, brought to life, perhaps, by Johnny? She hummed his name out loud and broke the train of thought.

A twig crackled, the sigh of fabric on leaf, moving around and behind her. A fresh breeze arrived, gusting through the autumn trees and swirling leaves to her bench. It brought an unexpected stink of sulfur, nasty in the clean air, and a snatched fragment of muttered speech, '... lost the scent. You fool! All this green ...' then a noise like broken gears, but still a voice, human, almost a word. She shivered and slipped off the bench, back into the copse of trees that hung shade over her thinking place.

From the deep green she saw his silhouette, lurking on the other side of a raspberry bush. He seemed to be *sitting* on something, a stool or branch or tree-stump, she couldn't see through the branches. Knees up, Buddha-style. It looked crazy, like he was floating in mid-air. He was familiar, his shape ...

'Oh no,' she said. 'Mouse? You following me here, now? What are you ...?' A tree briefly hid him from view and when she came out into the open he was standing there, feet on the ground. Cropped grass all around, no stool, no branch, no tree-stump.

'Wha-? You were sitting on something. What the hell? I saw you!'

'Excuse me?'

'I saw you. Like you were floating?'

'But Ari, that doesn't make any sense.'

His voice was a surprise. Clear, rich and masculine, veined with subtle amusement, a man's voice. Here stood moody Mahmoud, the Mouse, Hashishin, the stoner jihadist, all the names he'd gone by over the years, a German-born Palestinian boy with a bayerisch accent as thick as a forester's and a very sulky attitude. This voice just wasn't his. He was standing differently too, his shoulders squared, his head drawn back.

Come to think of it, she hadn't really heard him say anything over the last couple of years. A notorious weirdo, he had stalked Ariel virtually throughout high school. It had been intermittently creepy, but he never said or did anything at all, just drifted around nearby with his red, stoned eyes, staring like some dull beast, so after a while she had hardly noticed. His eyes were still terribly bloodshot, but for once they didn't drop away. He took a deep breath and a step forward.

'Sorry if I scared you, Ari.'

'But you were sitting on something. I saw you.'

'What? Come on.'

'I dunno. Branches? Looked like ...' She looked at the raspberry bush, but no knee-shaped branches. 'Weird. My eyes are playing tricks.'

'The stress, maybe? Exams?'

'No.' She let her eyes drift around, as if searching for clues, then shook her head. 'Okay, whatever. No, I'm cruising. You?'

'I couldn't care less.'

She regarded him for a moment. Quite handsome, actually. Arrogant. A simmering wildness about him. And strength in that bad-boy sneer. *Dangerous?* She held out her hand.

'Hi. I'm Ariel. Pleased to meet you. At last.'

He laughed and shook it. His hand was hot. 'Yeah, sorry about all the, you know, the following, following you around.'

'Why didn't you just talk to me?'

'No, I wasn't myself. Doing a job. I wasn't a nice person at all.'

'Job?'

'Watching over you. Come, let's walk.' He took off abruptly then came to a halt, waiting for her. She paused, then hurried to catch up. They strolled together down the dirt path towards the river.

'What do you mean?'

'You have friends, Ariel. People who care about you. You're important to us.'

Okay, so delusional, paranoid-schizophrenic, something like that. Not just hash and Ariel-fantasies. A whole world going on in there.

'What people? Like a club? The Friends of Ariel?'

'I just said something crazy. Why aren't you afraid?'

She stopped walking. He strolled on a few paces and half-turned, a curious smile on his face.

'Because I deal with stuff, Mahmoud.' She used his real name deliberately, and saw him flinch. She had always hated Mouse. 'Look, when you followed me at school it felt, I dunno, not dangerous? Natural? Like it ... had happened before, I ...'

'Like a jackal following a lion?'

'Yes. Cool. More like a monkey following another monkey. But you never came down here before. You never followed me home.'

'There are others here.'

'More lunatic talk, a bit threatening. You'll probably never see me again, so crisis? An episode, maybe? Of what? So now I need to deal with *you*, poor me.' She came closer.

'Of course I'm afraid.'

'Don't be. I worship you. You're amazing, magnificent, like an angel. You-'

‘An *angel*? Are you mad? Hullo? Here I am. I’m a girl. Just a girl, you know?’ Her arm flashed out and her knuckles rapped twice on his forehead. ‘Who are you? If I disappoint you, are you going to, I don’t know, burn the Ariel shrine up in your bedroom? Cut off my wings? What the fuck do you *want*?’ She bounced up close to him, feigned a head butt and danced away, hands low, eyes on his.

‘Ari, please. Not literally an angel. You’re really something very different. Trust me, I’m not crazy. You’ll remember this.’

‘Absolutely. Remember what?’

‘Quiet now. Listen. You have a great destiny.’

‘Oh...kay?’

‘Your pictures? In the paper? That’s just the start. You’re going to be famous, Ariel. You’re right, I probably will never see you again. You’ll leave us all behind. I just came to say thank you. To plant the seed of your destiny. And to give you my blessing.’

‘Your blessing? Fine. Thanks. Blessing accepted. No offence.’

‘Never. Another thing. He may be good for you, but the Baptista boy is only the first step. Yours is true glory. The money, the travel, the thrill of cheap celebrity, you’ll transcend all that. The pleasures of the next few years shouldn’t satisfy you, they are only a taste. Keep preparing. Opportunity will come, I guarantee it.’

‘That’s good advice. Thank you.’ *Wow! I mean, wow!* Nutjob alert! *What a fruitloop! I can see you in a few years, preaching in the train station, starving and dirty and wearing other people’s clothes. I’ll give you five Euros – hell, ten, I guarantee it - and walk away. Which is what I wish I could do right now.* ‘Mahmoud?’ Again, something squirmed beneath his skin at his real name. ‘I really should go home. Exams, remember?’

‘Of course.’ He shrugged, laughed and turned towards her home. They strolled back up the path together. ‘Sorry if all this sounds strange. I just ... had to say it.’ Spoken lightly, with a self-depreciation that made her unwillingly smile, as if to reassure him.

*This voice, this posture. Mature, confident ... charming. The complete opposite of the Mouse.
Is this multiple personality? A father figure?*

Who is this strange boy?

At the street he took his leave with a polite bow. As she crossed the park she felt suddenly nauseous, the sun too heavy on her shoulders, and had to rest awhile under the tree where she and Johnny had kissed.

A weird coincidence, totally unplanned. Three movies in the two days since the last exam, all set in the future, all horrorshows of human nastiness. And all three quite unbelievable, somehow. The first, collapsed in front of the TV, a high-tech android dictatorship versus New Age rebels who looked like homeless drama students, in the second we were all stuck in these grim, black spaceships (“Interior design? The best suicide décor you’ve got. Depressing, get it? The crew must *hate* each other.”) and seriously wedgie latex jumpsuits, except for the rich who lived in a doomed greenhouse and wore cotton frocks, and then tonight, by far the worst of all, two long hours of a gym-bunny Hollywood old guy on steroids killing most of the few souls left on our dark, dead planet, somehow finding the energy despite the total absence of any food or water goddamn *whatsoever*. Oh yes, there had been a hairless cat. Disgusting. And two old tins of beans from his glory days.

Ariel staggered out of the cinema with a headache, rubbing her tired eyes. Officially all grown up now, so she made the grown-up decision to get a big, strong drink as soon as possible. And hopefully catch amnesia.

Noodle had gone to the loo, so she wandered out into the street alone, breathing in the fresh air of the real world. She loved Munich at this time of year, the lingering twilight, the buzz of the street at night, the chill of the air crisp and pleasant. Winter soon, but not yet, not yet. She watched a knot of teenage boys saunter up and smiled as they stared back. Then Noodle made a hair-tossing, long-stepping entrance out into the street, and they tangled up with each other before running away in happy confusion.

‘My God. Noods! That was awful. The worst movie ever. We finish school, our glorious future lies before us, and you take me to *that?*’

‘It was great. It made me happy, ‘cause I’m not my grandkids.’

‘What a load of crap. It’s like we’re trying to convince ourselves the apocalypse will come, *has* to come, it’s inevitable. I mean, how many people does it take to predict the end of the world for it to happen? And children? What’s the point? Why not just drink and fuck myself to death?’

‘Hallelujah! How about there?’ Noods pointed to the bustling Irish pub on the other side of the street.

‘Wait.’ Ariel’s phone was vibrating. ‘Eeeek! It’s Johnny! Hullo?’

‘Ariel.’ An uncertain smile in his voice. ‘Did you see that?’

‘What?’

He sighed. ‘I scored the winning goal. Kinda the happiest moment of my life, all that bollocks. No big deal. Never mind.’

‘Oops, I’m sorry. Johnny? Noods came round and we-’

‘I said never mind. How was the last exam?’

‘Easy. How you say? Easy as pies. A breeze. I’m still surprised.’

‘I’m not surprised at all. *Du bist sehr klug*. That means you’re clever?’

‘Who’s been teaching you?’

‘They have a guy here. Ariel? I have to ... I ... I really miss you.’

Did she miss him too? It was odd, but since the spell of nausea in the shade of their kissing tree she hadn’t really missed him at all, thinking of him only a few odd times a day. The exams, she supposed, her bossy subconscious pulling the plug on the oxytocin, dopamine etc. She paused at the curb and kicked an empty coke can into the street. All this litter, Europa, these foreigners everywhere. She knew he was waiting for her reply, but this was a pattern that had just happened, she distracted, he worried and attentive, a puzzled tone to his voice. She hadn’t seen him in almost three weeks.

She'd dreamed of him a few days ago, making love to her. It *was* Johnny, but he had the ecstatic face, and then also the body, of Fernando Torres, one of her hottest crushes when she was around twelve. A sadness on the phone since, a sense of loss.

She was about to step into the street when a sheet of paper rode a gust of wind towards her. A flash of recognition, so she watched as it settled at her feet. A tabloid page, torn and stained but with a big color splash of Johnny, *her* Johnny, sprinting into the wind with his arms outstretched, his fists pumped, his face fierce with wild joy. Unexpected, like a pop-up into the real world – and so beautiful, radiant, a work of art come to life, framed just so by the dark, grim dirt of the cobblestones. The wind whipped it away again, and her airy sense of loss became a jolt of pain, deep beneath her gut.

'Right-ho,' he said, his voice brisk. 'Awkward. Left me hanging again. Look, give me a call some-'

'No wait, John-bon, I'm sorry, I miss you too. I do. I was just thinking.'

'About what?'

'About, about you. About how little I know you, really. Talking like this, it's always so ...'

'What?'

'Always something between us, your career, my exams. I have this ... this yearning? I'm dying here.'

A lie, sure, maybe, but right now it felt like the truth. Yes, *yearning*. Not loss.

'I have to see you,' he said.

'Me too.'

'Now. Tonight.'

'We're in Haidhausen. There's a little Irish pub near-'

‘No, not like that. All these idiots staring at us. We’re not like ordinary people, you know, we can’t just go out anywhere. It’s better to ... I know, how about I cook you dinner? At my place.’

She’d heard this one before.

‘Okay.’

Noodle was cool with it, the pub was teeming with all kinds of exotic boys. Ariel left her at the stairs and began looking for a taxi, just as one pulled up right in front of her and his address texted through. It whisked her away through a sea of light and then down into the slow, dark green of the suburbs, arriving at a low-slung building at the end of a winding cul-de-sac. Three floors, hanging balconies across the front, black marble, chrome railings, bamboo in earthen pots softening the lines. Each apartment had the same dark-wood deckchairs for the view over the valley behind her. A man waiting behind a glass wall swipe-carded the door open and asked, ‘Ariel?’ with a big grin. She nodded, scampered through and took the stairs to the next floor two at a time. 23, the last door on the left. He had left it open, and she smelled the cooking – *real* cooking, something nice and spicy – all the way down the corridor.

‘Hullo-o?’

‘Oh crap!’ he shouted back, from far away. ‘That was quick. Come in.’

She closed the door. Ash-blond wooden floors, glossy bare walls, white and royal blue. An ornate entrance table with keys, scattered coins, an empty energy-drink bottle and a pair of grass-stained sneakers, white socks spilling out. She hesitated then followed the short, curved passage to the vast living area.

Her first impression was that he was moving out. Cardboard boxes on the floor, no pictures on the walls – wait, there was one, a big seascape, a ship in a melodramatic storm, leaning against a wall as if ready to be packed. She walked awhile and found signs of habitation – a low red sofa in front of a super-sized TV, an X-box, an empty

pizza box, sports magazines, a wad of used tissue peeking out from behind a flattened cushion. Space for only one next to the debris, she noticed. *Lonely, transient. No female presence here at all.* A wave of relief turned her towards the cooking-smell and there he was in the off-set kitchen around the corner, a knife in his hand, his T-shirt and tracksuit-pants molded to his body. He was sweating, his face glowing and eyes bright. *Excited.* He put the knife aside and came towards her.

‘Wow. I forgot how beautiful you are.’

‘Oh plea-’

‘Sssh,’ and he was leaning forward, his lips on hers, soft and salty, all too brief. Her hands lifted as if to stop him and then settled back to her sides. He swayed back to look at her again, ran a hand into her hair and kissed her again. Now she touched him, slipping her fingertips over his stomach, up to his chest, down again, her fingers rippling over his abs, around the shaft of his midriff and to his back. She slipped away from the kiss to breathe, resting her head against his chest and glancing down to his cock, outlined by the soft, clinging fabric. It was swelling and growing fast while he stroked her back, her neck, her hair and she hugged him tight, melting at his sudden hardness in her centre, her back arching, hair floating behind her, his lips on her throat. They tried to kiss, but they were breathless, panting, burning too hot. Music throbbed like a heart in the background, a smooth, driving rock, so they rode the beat until they could kiss again. Then he gasped and broke away.

‘Bed.’

‘Yes.’

There was quite a way to walk, across the broad, three-leveled sweep of the apartment. It turned into a stroll, arm in arm, neither with anything much to say, their faces numb, eyes shining. Treetops danced and flourished in the wall of moonlit window and she leaned against him, humming the song. The music grew louder. His bed was rumpled with duvets and cushions in a dark cave of a room, shuttered

windows, a thick door, a place of deep, exhausted sleep. His scent was strong here, and in the half-dark she drew him close and then down onto the bed.

It all slipped into place, natural, effortless, elegant even. Her mind was too battered from the exams to care, to analyze this biological imperative which drives us to fuck against all reason, to resist the narcotic power of the chemicals raging through her. Babies, disease, nothing marred her mood, and he was just as eager. It was amazing. He wasn't *good*, in a gigolo way, just beautiful in the gloom, smooth beneath her hands. The only moment of awkwardness, the only reminder of all her sexual experience thus far, was when he fumbled at her jeans and she remembered, as if from far away, how soft and pallid her body was from the exams. For a moment she panicked, I mean, just *look* at him. But it passed quickly, because clearly he loved it, loved her, loved her whole body. She reached for him and he came quickly in her hand, thrashing around and crying out, and then he turned her over and lost himself in her with his fingers, lips and tongue. She stretched out on her back, floating in waves of pleasure, her body undulating to their rhythm, and then came too, fast and urgent as fire, her first real orgasm. When she drifted back he was hard again.

She gasped, 'Condom,' but he didn't have one in the bedroom and leapt naked from the bed, ran to one of the cardboard boxes outside and ripped it open, scrabbling through the contents. *Oh ... he didn't plan this. No preparation. My Johnny.* She squirmed and writhed in sweat-scent of his bed. Then he was striding back, teeth bared as he tore at the wrapper, his side-lit face for a moment savage and frightening. He put it on with one hand as he leant over. Her hands fluttered on shoulders turbulent with muscle then dropped to his waist, and she opened her legs and drew him in.

It seemed like hours, but who could tell? She became a creature of pure feeling, of skin and smell and taste, a pause in time stretching out forever. Then a sudden raging thirst, so she croaked his name and patted and stilled his heaving back. He slipped out and swayed back on his knees, his eyes hooded and dreamy. She glanced down.

'Where's the condom?'

'Uh?'

'Oh no. You've *got* to be kidding me.'

At the same time as the total nightmare freak-out that followed, her poking around with her fingers, the condom writhing away like a fish from her fingertips, he, eeeuugh, *staring* at her and she *grunting* oh my God then leaping to the small en-suite bathroom to finish the job alone, the acrid smell of burnt fish and spices, the oil fire, the naked sprinkler-shower, during all that turmoil inside a fancy concrete box up in the northern hemisphere, a female leopard, heavily pregnant, lay on her side in the dry quiet of her cave, panting rapidly, waiting, at peace.

Neither knew it, but Gaia tied a thread of true destiny between them that night, a line through the Earth from Europe to Africa, parallel with the soft fringe of twilight as day slipped into night. Did they sense it, when Ariel was infused with a strange inner calm, stopped shouting, wrapped herself in a towel and went out onto the balcony, and Ingwe snarled and lashed her tail? When Ariel glanced south to the sky past the mountains and Ingwe glanced north at precisely the same moment? Of course not. We're just animals. We don't know half of what's going on around us.

The moment of anxiety passed, and she stretched out again, writhing in the leaf litter. Although this was her first child, Ingwe knew the birth would be wonderful, the pleasure and the pain already so sweet as her baby broke from her womb. Just one, she could feel it moving inside her. Just one. She'd never seen a kitten before, but when she closed her eyes she saw it, memory from genes, the fuzzy face-lines, the miracle little claws. A purr rumbled through her shallow breath.

And just as Johnny's best little runner squiggled his head through the membrane of Ariel's egg, the kitten thrust out, first its nose then its head, shiny as a wet rat in the

starlight. Ingwe watched, rapt, then lay back and pushed. Out it came in a rush. She turned over, ate the afterbirth and licked herself and then the kitten with innate urgency, *no scent of blood here. Sweet blood. Our blood. Is it a boy or girl?* She squinted down in the faint light, but she couldn't tell. *No matter. I will know when she opens her eyes.* A lingering, sweeping caress with her tongue, then she raised her great eyes to the stars in thought. *I said her eyes. She. My she-cat, my little queen.*

And for some reason Ariel found herself smiling, rocking back and forth in the fresh air, the stars ablaze above her. Johnny was inside, on the phone to the building manager and the pizza place. It grew chilly on the balcony, the potted bamboo whispering in the breeze by her deckchair, so she sighed, went back to his room and untangled her clothes from the covers. She dressed quickly and found him mopping the floor, his naked torso and tracksuit pants wet and grimy, his face flushed with embarrassment. Just like that she forgave him and joined in to help, laughing, a bit hysterical.

And the she-cub mewed, lifted her head and crawled towards her mother's heartbeat, the soft rhythm of her breath. She lay trembling for a while, then opened her mouth and suckled. Ingwe nuzzled her, circling with the white tuft of her long tail. The light of the stars shone faintly onto the swollen little face. Her breath spoke to the cub, *survive, survive, survive.*

THE CRUCIFIXION

'My darling! How *are* you? How were the exams?

'Hullo, mother.'

'What are you doing?'

'Watching TV.'

'Oh. Hang on, please Ariel. Another call.'

Ariel lowered the phone to her shoulder, raising her eyes to the ceiling. Johnny had ordered ice cream with the pizza and she balanced the little spoon on her lip then stole another spoonful, watching him. Beaming from ear to ear, his eyes glazed and shell-shocked, his skin several shades paler. Muttered something thoughtful to the footballer on the TV. He smelt of soap, as did she, the same scented lather in a very hot, shared shower. She was rosy in his bathrobe, the fabric softer and snugglier than she'd ever felt against her skin, her legs drawn up to one side, her head nestled on a silk cushion.

The phone squawked in her hand.

'Sorry, excuse me?'

'I saw the pictures! In the magazine. I'm so proud of you.'

'Which one?'

'Excuse me?'

'Magazine.'

'*Bild*. There are others?'

'Yes.'

'This is great. Keep it up. Are you still seeing him? The footballer?'

'Say hi to me Mum,' in a passable cockney as she tossed the phone over. He picked it up.

'*Gruss Gott, mutti,*' he croaked, winking at Ariel. '*Wie gehts?*' The phone pealed with laughter. He listened awhile, muting the roar of the crowd on the TV, then said, 'Of course, we'd love to. Sure, no problem. Text it to Ariel. See you there, uh ... bye.' He slowly closed the phone. 'Wow.'

'What was all that about?'

'Asked us to some Green Party party? Uh ... I dunno. I think speeches and such. Media.' He grinned. 'She said you must wear green clothes, you'd understand. No sexy dress, I suppose. Damn.'

'Um, John-bon?'

'What?'

'Why did you accept on my behalf? Hullo? Maybe I don't want to go, because, you know, I don't want to go?'

'Aaah, come on. Why not? Help me understand this. You want to translate, you want to go forth and bridge the communication barriers of Europe, but not be part of a Europe-wide political organization? A pretty cool one. What, you're gonna join another? The conservatives?'

'Of course not.'

'So like I said, why not?'

'Why are you so keen and eager?'

'Bored, I suppose. Politics is interesting. Can't play soccer forever.'

'Oh, so it's *your* career?'

'Of course. I'm visualizing. You, you just stand there, you wave, smile and do charity stuff while I fuck the interns. Okay? That's the grand plan. That's why I'm taking you to a party.' He laughed and slapped his leg.

She didn't even crack a smile.

What a change, from a few hours ago. Then her eager servant, tender and loving, now lord of the manor, lounging back on his big expensive sofa in front of his TV half the size of a wall, his voice deep and masterful. Irritated, she threw down the ice-cream spoon, stood up and went for a glass of water, resisting an urge to run. *How nice it would be to have a kitchen right here, like a normal home. Instead of having to walk for goddamn half-an-hour.* By the time she reached the taps she was furious.

'Okay, sorry,' he shouted. 'Don't get your knickers in a knot. I'll phone back and cancel. Whatever.'

She considered the matter. Of course, he was right. The Greens were an obvious career path. And she understood the basic math of her psychology, the mother abandons, so she flaunts her independence to punish her, a pattern of avoidance and mistrust for the past seven years, on and on. But to let all that history get in the way of her future, to sulk and deny opportunity? Walk away from an opening into the system, the money-beast, the rock and roll? He was right. Not exactly rational.

But not the point, either. He hadn't listened. Hadn't glanced her way, shown any thought for her feelings. Just gone on ahead, expecting her to follow. Okay, she knew how pushy her mother could be, especially in pursuit of publicity, but that didn't excuse it. She was fuming so much she could barely swallow, and then she coughed and sprayed water across the counter. *That's it.* The last straw, the final indignity. She flew back at him.

'Listen, I need my clothes. I have to go now. Please, call a taxi?' No, one more: 'And pay, please? I spent all my money on the last one.'

He was flabbergasted. 'But I thought you were stay-'

'You thought wrong. You never asked. My father will worry.'

'Come on. I can drop you off early in the-'

'Johnny. Please.'

'Fine!' He sprang up, lithe and full of power, almost colliding with her. She didn't flinch or step back, her eyes sullen and unblinking on his throat. So he jumped to the side and past her and then flounced off like a kid throwing a tantrum, his elbows flapping like wings, hopping away with his legs splayed out. For a moment she wasn't sure if he was joking, *Oh no, another psycho-freak, he turns into a giant, violent baby when he doesn't get his way*, but then he slumped back into his sexy footballer's lope, so it was okay. Just joking. Quite funny, actually. She laughed. *If he turns around and comes back right now, I'll forgive him, and stay the night.*

But he didn't. He came back with a hundred-Euro note in his hand, and the history of the human race branched off.

He did phone in the morning, though. It was intensely sweet, she apologizing at the same time as him, both forgiving each other in general for being human, he pressed for time and growling instead of saying goodbye. That night he called again and asked her out, and so began an Indian summer, three weeks of play, sunshine and starlight, football games and vast crowds, VIP boxes, twenty-seven parties. Because she kept a subtle distance from Johnny, not quite trusting him, often going out alone, with Noodle or with her new friends, she had even more fun. The record shows she appeared in six different magazines and newspapers that autumn, the best photo a punk-style monochrome of her laughing, cool in her leather jacket and black skinnies, reaching up over the camera at something. Johnny was backlit behind her, his pose all the sexier for being natural. The caption, in tasteful lower case over her spiky, wind-whipped hair: *ariel reaches for the stars*. Her mother phoned again, sounding orgasmic. Her father framed it and hung it up in the office. She flitted around, with Johnny and *sans*, met all kinds of people, sowed all kinds of social seeds. Everyone wanted to know her. You could write a whole 'nother book about those three weeks.

Then she missed her period.

Deep inside she knew, of course. She didn't need to go buy a test, piddle on it, wait for the ink. She sat on the toilet, waving the stick around, this way and that. For the first time in her life, Ariel really didn't have a clue what to do.

Ingwe watched the kitten patter back from the furthest corner of the cave, her eyes black and golden-blue flash through patches of shade and sunlight. She had been very careful to cover her business back there, scoring up the earth and leaf-litter, concentrating so hard she was still trembling. She composed herself in the curve of Ingwe's body. And with eyes and ear-twitches, snuffles and purrs, with an ancient telepathy flowing down from her soul like a soft, secret smell, Ingwe began to teach:

'When you are big, like me,' she purred, 'you will leave this place, leave me. You will go alone, with only shadow for a mother, passing through forest and mountain to the valley where the river runs blood and the prey lies down before your beauty. Lion ... *pah!*' She sneezed. 'Lion and hyena will squeal like bushpig at your scent and crawl off to live in the stink of the dogs and the toothless, two-legged baboons. You will—'

'Mama?' the cub interrupted. 'What's ... lion?'

Ingwe yawned and stretched out in the late-afternoon sunshine. 'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'I can only tell you what my mother told me. She said that they wish they were cats. Cats like us? But they are dogs, fighting each other and sleeping in the dust and howling in hideous voices at the night. But, little one? They are huge, powerful, much bigger than your mother, and they live only to kill us. We are cats, and live alone. I don't think I've ever scented them. I don't know if they exist, or if the two-legs have killed them all.'

The cub shivered and snuggled towards her teats. The early summer rains had been intermittent and light, and the milk flowed slow and turgid, nourished more by blood than water. There *was* a scent of water from somewhere beyond, but Ingwe didn't go that way. The kitten suckled for a while and then growled and tore free, her eyes fierce.

'I will fight them,' she spat. 'Them and the hymas an' dogs an' toothlegged ... toothl ... what did you say?'

'Two-legged baboons. I know *their* stink well. We don't fight these creatures, little one. They are beneath us. We are silent, we are clean. We live in shadow. We are cats, and ...?'

'We are alone.'

'So what you going to do?' Noodle lay on her back on Ariel's bed, her feet up on the wall. 'Are you going to keep it?'

'I don't kn-'

'What about Spain? Are we still going to Spain?'

'I don't *know*. I feel like life played a trick on me. Set me up and knocked me down. I don't know *what* Johnny's going to say.'

'You haven't told him? Oh crap.'

'It's my body. My decision. My life. Maybe I won't even tell him.'

'Yeah. You you you.'

Ariel swiveled the chair back to look at her friend. 'Noods? What-?'

'Abortion's murder. I'm sorry, that's just how I feel.' She swung her feet down and bounced up. 'And you know what else? I'm pretty sick of always talking about you and all the drama in your fabulous life!'

'I ... but-'

'Okay, calm down. Here's the thing. You tell me to chill on Bjorn. Play hard to get, don't give in to him. So now he's forgotten I exist, while you're humping butt-fucking naked with celebrity Joe, going to all the parties and you hardly ever invite me! And then when you get pregnant, hey, no problem. Just kill it.'

'That's not fair.'

'Fair! Look, I'm angry now, and soon, I won't be. So maybe we can talk later. But if you ... I don't know.' And in three quick strides she was out, slamming the door behind her.

Her father shuffled down the passage, opened the door, leaned his head in, and asked, 'What's going on?'

'Nothing. It's nothing.'

'Oh shit. Oh no. What a disaster.' Johnny sat down and ran his hands over his face. 'Just when everything was going right.'

Just the reaction she'd expected. That was the worst thing. *What an asshole. I knew it.* She cleared her throat.

'So what are we going to do?'

He stared at her. 'Well, you're not thinking of like, *keeping* it, are you? Jesus. The problem is the press, if they find out, I mean, come on. Come on. You're fresh out of school, and I ... well, I might be moving to Barcelona. Or Milan, next year. We can't, we should do this in ten years. Not now.'

'So when you move to Barcelona, or Milan, I'm just going to drop my studies? Follow you there? Irrespective of the baby?'

'We, we can, y'know, sort it out, when, shit, *I don't know.* C'mon. You have to do the right thing here.'

She stood, silent, vibrating inside like an electric guitar, feedback. He looked up from his hands to her.

'Ari? Are you okay?' He stood up. 'Hey, baby-doll, I'm sorry. I know how tough this must be. We'll get through it, I promise. Together.' He caressed her hair with the back of one hand, the other encircling her for a hug.

A thousand times she thought of a better response in the years to come, the last time in her nineties. Blithe and witty, contemptuous, compassionate, she ran through them all. Because all she did is scream, 'Motherfucker!' at the top of her lungs, and push him away as hard as she could. Somehow she got the angle of leverage just right and he flew, his feet lifting from the teak floor. He smashed into an empty bookcase and walloped down like a rag doll.

'Aaaah! Oh my God. My back! You crocked my back. Motherfucker? Aaaaaaaah, God.'

'Fuck you. You asshole.' She marched out. This time she had the cab fare. There was a sick smell in the car, and she covered her face with her hands. She peeked through her fingers, and for a second she could swear that the driver's head whipped violently from side to side, an impossible blur, but when she lowered her hands he was normal. Bald and fat, his head painted red by the traffic light. Dead eyes met hers in the mirror, and she shifted away to look out the window. The street was empty, *they're all inside*.

She cried herself to sleep, and woke up in anger, all through the night.

Freddy Truhahn closed the phone thoughtfully, ignoring the twinge of nausea, damn sausage for breakfast or something. Young guy, Bayerisch, his voice husky and low. One line: 'Ariel's scheduled for an abortion this afternoon.' Then the name of the clinic, and the phone went dead. He balanced it in his hand, something teasing at his beer-deadened memory – of course. A story, the Baptista boy, taken to hospital after a domestic accident. He'd sat at the bar last night and thought, *See? Justice in the world after all*, before scrolling on.

Ahah. Domestic accident? Abortion? He glanced at the time and speed-dialed the office.

'Today?' The doctor pursed her lips. 'Not possible. By law we have to-'

'I want it out of me. He raped me.'

'Then, uh, Ariel? We have to report-'

'If I tell anyone it'll destroy my life. And other people. And you, you can't just sit there and pretend to know, what's going on out there, in my life. If I don't get it out of me today I'll kill myself.' She'd seen a movie, deadpan melodrama, that's the most convincing.

It was working. The doctor went all noble-warrior, the flared nostrils, the haughty eyes. She glanced towards the door and nodded, once.

'Very well, Ariel. But I have two conditions. Well, three. One, you don't tell anyone you were here. Okay? This never happened.'

'I promise.'

'Second, I'm referring you to a psychologist, a rape-victim specialist.' She handed her a card. 'Twice a week at least. Okay? Do we have a deal?'

Fuck no. 'Yes.'

'And third, you must promise me that you'll report this to the police. No listen, one day, when you're strong enough. When this terrible man no longer has any hold on you. Okay? Do you promise?'

'Yes.'

'If you've got any evidence, freeze it. Believe me, one day you'll want to do the right thing.'

'Just get it out of me, please.' She sobbed, and then real tears came, seeping from her eyes. She couldn't get them to stop.

'Oh no. Oh Ariel. I can't believe this.'

Great way to start the day, her mother's voice blaring in her ear. Ariel had been dreaming of ocean, slow, thoughtless swells rocking back and forth. She smeared salt from her dry, itchy eyes and squinted at the phone. 11:17 am.

'B ... believe what?'

'You haven't seen this magazine yet? Someone very kindly slipped it under my door. Oh God, now I know why they were smirking at me. How could you do this?'

'Do what?'

'You don't understand. Under the surface we're still very Catholic, you know.' Her mother's voice was bitter. It was as if she was talking to herself. 'We'll play for

sympathy? But you ... oh God, you assaulted poor Johnny? No, no, what *is* this insinuation?’

‘Mother, please tell me what’s going on.’

‘*Did* you have an abortion?’

‘What?’ She sat up.

‘There’s a photo of you. Oh dear, look, you’re weeping. Oh, my poor Ari. My baby. Why did you do it?’

‘I’m sorry, Mama.’

‘Did you fight with him? They insinuate, you know. Um ... here, a source. Speculation. Should we sue?’

‘No. I pushed him away. Quite hard.’

‘You dislocated one of his discs. He can’t play football anymore. At least until next season.’

‘Oops.’ She giggled.

‘Ariel! This is serious. *He* could sue you, never mind the damage you’ve done to our reputation.’

‘But you’re a Green. What do you care-’

‘Grow up.’ Her voice was icy. ‘Give me time to think, and I’ll come by. Just stay at home, okay?’

‘Okay, Mama.’

Her bed smelt sad, like stale sweat, like broken dreams. She had a foul, metallic taste in her mouth and her insides were cramped up, like the worst period. She sighed, stood, and limped off to wash and change her pad. Two glasses of water, a cup of coffee, and she jacked up the laptop to google herself.

The article was bad enough, but the reaction was already worse. A picture of her with a beard and horns scratched crudely on, a pitchfork in her hand. An article or blog

or something she skipped the cursor over: MURDERER! An email from the Sisters of Something or other, standing strong in the wind or something. She gulped, and for a moment felt like she was drowning, a sea of unseen forces swirling around her. She hovered around her Facebook icon for a moment, but then decided against it. She had an urge to call Noodle, and even reached for the phone, but realized there probably couldn't be a worse time. Noods always bought *Tease*.

How did they find out?

She'd told no-one, she'd darted into the clinic with her collar raised and a chic black hat on, so she wouldn't be recognized. The photo was of her leaving, half-turned to look behind her, her posture furtive, stooped ... *guilty*. The tone was bold and nasty, revenge tarted up as vindication. *See? We told you she's a slut.*

It got worse. Others were already chipping in. A pattern was emerging, pros and cons - *abortion*. An issue had resurfaced, a disturbance in the heart of Germanic Catholicism, the first twists of a gathering storm. And Ariel in the eye, the right kind of target in the wrong place and time, young, innocent, celeb-grade looks, connected politically, almost famous for being famous. No. 7 on the search list, a single name, "Ariel", an angel corrupted. Joan of Arc up high on Icarus wings, carrying the seed of a rich, handsome, famous athlete, a heavenly union to express the wonder of God's creation, now cruelly denied. An evil bitch destined to burn forever and ever in the fires of eternal Hell. A poor child, poor tragic Ariel, seduced by a man-pig and then victimized by a witch-hunt of the patriarchal hegemony. She watched with growing horror.

Lurking behind her was the real target, the real source of all the gasps of excitement as media across Germany logged on and twittered and tweeted, the source of one "No comment" from the fortress of his hospital bed.

Johnny.

Oh no. What have I done?

Then, in the afternoon, a new sensation, front page:

DID BAPTISTA RAPE ARIEL?

The source again unnamed. The good doctor, unable to bottle her outrage, striking forth at injustice? *Thanks, Doc. Really did me a favor.* She laughed out loud, alone in her cold house, shivering with rising panic.

The phone rang. She snatched it up.

'Ah, Ariel?' A man's voice. English. *Johnny?* 'This is Jay Hoggsbottom, from *The Sun*? Please forgive me, but do you speak English? My German is-'

She stabbed the off-button. It rang again immediately. This time a German reporter. She cut him off. Again it rang. She pressed down hard to switch off the phone. The landline from downstairs was ringing. With hands to her ears she sat on her bed, swaying to and fro, her eyes scrunched tight. Then she toppled onto her side and drew her knees up, and in less than a minute she was fast asleep.

An ogre leaned over her. Not green, lovable Shrek, but a gnarled, putrid zombie-face with sharp black teeth and crazy eyes *eat my flesh*. It reached out and took hold of her shoulder.

'Ari? Ari, my treasure. Wake up, child.'

'Daddy?'

'I made some tea. Come, drink.'

Chamomile. Sweet and steaming. She took a sip and then drank it all down, enjoying the cleansing heat down her throat.

'Have you eaten?'

'No, not since yesterday.'

'Something light? Are you feeling sick? You have to eat someth-'

'It's real, isn't it? What must I do? They're saying he-'

'Forget about them, chattering idiots. Got the attention span of dogs. By next week they'll be barking and chasing their tails somewhere else.'

'Do you think so?'

'I don't know.' He sighed and sat down on the bed next to her. 'Who knows how this will play out? How *he* will react.' His voice was thin and quiet, as if his self-control was strangling him. 'Now the truth, child. Ari? Look at me. Did he rape you?'

'No.'

'I said, look at me.'

'I told the doctor that, because a girl at school told me that she'd told them that, and they did it right away.' Her tears spilled again, and she shook her head angrily. 'We made love, and the condom came off, that's all. He's not a rapist, he's just a guy but I

don't love him, so I don't want to ... you know? Daddy, am I in big trouble? What are they going to do?'

'Trouble?' He snorted. 'I'll tell you who's in trouble. I'm going to go outside right now, ask the nearest reporter to please turn around, then I'm going to bury my shoe in his ass. And then I'll give him the other one, because, you know, I can't use it anymore. He can enjoy making them a pair again in the privacy of his own home. While he makes up more lies.'

He was trying to make her laugh. She gave him a brief hug. 'What, are there reporters outside?'

'About twenty of them. Standing around in the park.'

She got up gingerly, supporting herself on his shoulder. He raised a hand to help her, but then dropped it again. She walked slowly over to her window. It was weird, because her mind was so used to this view of the park, this boring, empty vista, that it played a trick on her, and for a moment she didn't see anyone at all. Just shades of green, her sad little tree, the row of pretty little houses along the other side. Leafy branches brushing a Bayern-blue sky, cirrus cloud scudding slowly past. A camera flashed. She sighed and reluctantly looked down.

More like thirty, pooled in the grass at the edge of the park, a few anarchic souls standing in the roadway itself. None crowded her garden; this was a victim, so there was decorum, a tense watchfulness between the vultures. TV vans and cars lined both sides of the street. She looked down on them as they gazed up at her, remote and lovely above the ivy, and a sigh passed through them all.

She raised a hand to shield her face from the ruddy, late-afternoon sunlight and looked out again. Cameras flashed. The pose of the visionary, seemingly untouched by the attention, by the here and now. No-one ever forgot it.

'It's mother.' A small electric car was buzzing around the bend on the far side of the park. 'She's here.'

'Come downstairs. I'll make some more tea. What would you like to eat?'

'Meat.'

'Really?'

'Uh ... chicken? And an apple first. Are you glad Brigitte is here?'

'Yes.' He smiled. 'You be nice now.'

'Oh daddy, I'm so tired. I hope she can help, that's all.'

First things first, divide and conquer. Pick one or a chosen few, trade exclusivity for a sympathetic ear. Brigitte parked at the end of the row of vehicles, so she could walk up unnoticed and assess the situation. There was a possible, a woman from the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* with serious feminist credentials. Perhaps too obvious. She spotted another, one of her favorites, a dreamy young guy from *Bild* with lank, soft hair, an air of the Green about him. She approached across the grass.

'Hi, Stefan? It is Stefan, isn't it?'

He nodded and then bowed, flattered. 'Please forgive the intrusion, Frau Haupt.'

'Not at all. There are serious allegations here. And a defenseless child involved.'

'Perhaps not so defenseless, now.'

She spread her hands wide, *what can I do?* Be humble, appeal to his protective spirit. She was aware that a ring was forming, other journalists raising their recorders, the glint of cameras. She kept her eyes on Stephan and said, 'Well, I really know nothing more than you do. I'm going to speak to my child now. We must get to the truth of this matter.'

'Do you live here, Frau Haupt?' someone shouted.

She lowered her head to the side, acknowledging the question without looking at the questioner. She managed to convey an air of disappointment, and answered simply, 'No.'

'But the house is in your name?'

Now she looked up. 'I have always worked much too hard at my job, and my marriage suffered as a result. It happens, right? I thought it best to leave Ariel in the home she grew up in, for her emotional stability. Okay? Any other irrelevant questions? Then if you'll excuse me, I must attend to my poor daughter.'

'Ari? Is it true? Did he rape you?' She disengaged from their hug. 'I've consulted one of the best criminal lawyers in-'

'No! Calm down. Tell her, Papa.'

He recounted the story.

'So it was the doctor? The source?'

'Or maybe a nurse? Receptionist? Someone there.'

'Hmm. We don't want trouble with them, in case they defend themselves by revealing you cried rape. So do we deny the abortion? Can we? How about the actual pregnancy?'

'It's none of their business,' said her father flatly.

'Of course it is. It's exactly their business.'

'I know,' said Ariel 'Why don't we say that I suffered a miscarriage, and I went to the clinic for help, for advice. I didn't know where else to go. I was bleeding.'

'That's a good one,' said her mother, impressed. 'Yes. I've looked at the original article more closely, and I think they were just speculating about Johnny's injury, you know, domestic accident, abortion, one plus one equals two, so there must have been an argument. But if we take the abortion out of the equation, then ...'

'Then the fight caused the miscarriage,' answered her father. 'Then he's forced to defend himself, and he tells the truth. He says she pushed him. He could charge her with assault. He could sue for millions.'

'Yes. Yes, in which case, why did they fight? Why the break-up? Because he didn't want the baby? He'll have to allege the truth, abortion. The clinic could confirm it. Then

we're liars, we cried rape and lied, on top of assault and baby-murder. And if *we* say the fight caused the miscarriage? Then he's a villain, unfairly so. It's tricky. He could open us right up. How well do you know Johnny? Do you think he'll keep quiet?

'Embarrassing?' answered Ariel. 'Big macho footballer, dropped on his back by a girl?'

'But if he does tell the truth,' said her father thoughtfully, 'then maybe his insurance company will ask questions, about fighting and negligence and fault and suchlike. And so what if he sues you? He'll attach your iPod?'

'And I'll claim self-defense,' said Ariel.

'Yes, exactly.' Brigitte was scrolling her phone. 'Still nothing, as far as I can see. "No Comment." Hmm, just wait. Yes, another "No Comment." Okay, let's get in first, in any event we have to set the record straight about the rape accusation. Take a risk on the rest. I prepped a guy, but I don't think we'll need him. It's a simple statement. This is what you say.'

'It's a total lie.' Ariel's voice quavered, but carried clearly to the crowd on the other side of the road. 'He never raped me. He would *never* do such a thing. He's a good man. I love him with all my heart.'

'Then wh-?'

'Quiet!' barked her mother. 'Continue, Ariel.'

'I was running, and I had a miscarriage. I was bleeding. I went to the clinic for help. They were kind and helpful, they cleaned me up and sent me home. Johnny didn't even know I was pregnant. Neither did I. It just happened.'

'So what happened to Baptista? How was he injured?'

'I don't know, I wish I did. I haven't been able to speak to him because of all this, all these crazy people accusing me of murder. I do hope he's okay.'

There was a moment's silence, then a general grumble. No bloody story here. Egg on a thousand avid media faces, whatever their suspicions. And because they'd already made it a story, it now had to be reported: no story here. Man didn't Bite Dog, after all. They crumpled notepaper and lowered their cameras, dispersing slowly to their vehicles.

A few glanced wistfully back up at Ariel's window, a few paused in thought as if they'd forgotten something important, but none crossed the road to offer condolences for her loss.

On the way back into the house, Ariel tripped and almost lost her balance. She giggled and leapt back up. *What a rush!* So easy to lie, to raise her hand and move the world. Problem poofed with a wave of a magic wand. She whirled and offered her mother a high-five.

'Don't be an idiot,' she muttered, already texting on her phone. 'This will be on page three, if we're lucky. They ignore their mistakes. We may have convinced these guys – well done, my love, you were brilliant - but people won't believe it. He fell down and you miscarried? Coincidence? Hah! Hang on ...' she read an incoming message. 'Okay, good. My people are in contact with Johnny's. They know the story.' Another beeped in. 'And we've set up a meeting.'

'For when?'

'Right now.'

'Ariel?' Johnny blinked several times, his famous hooded eyes now wrinkled and gray. They closed in a sleepy smile. 'Ariel. You're so beautiful. Sweet Jesus, take my soul,' his smile lingered, '... if heaven be like rock 'n roll.'

She laughed. He was flat on his back, the lines of his body shrouded in sheet. She reached out a tentative hand to touch him, and then took it back.

'Johnny. I'm sorry.'

'No. No, not your fault. You just don't know your own strength. Appropriate course of action you took, under the circumstances, as it were. I've had time to think, you see. I was such an asshole. I'm so sorry.'

'Hey ...' she shrugged.

'And I'm sorry about the baby. If you'd waited I could've changed my mind. Now it's my fault.'

'No. It was my choice. I would have done it anyway, because ...'

'Because?'

'Nothing. Later. Hey, what's up with *you*? Are you going to be okay?'

'Yeah, don't worry. They're just stabilizing me. I feel like a Ferrari. All the mechanics fiddling around.' She realized he was a bit high. 'Hey, Ari? Thanks for clearing up that rape malarkey so fast. Crikey! Heart attack. At first I thought it was you, they had to change my diaper. And I get the miscarriage story, clever. I injured myself running to the phone, are you aware of that? Those three big steps by the TV area? I slid theatrically over them and *smashed* into the shelves, that explains the extreme severity of my injury.'

'You really must get a smaller place.'

'Yeah, gonna move the bed next to the kitchen. Still have to hobble all the way to the bathroom, though. Probably just get a bucket.' His stomach suddenly groaned and squealed, then a long, rhythmic grumble. 'Oh shit, listen. I'm going to fart. I'm sorry. It's bad. You have to go.'

'Okay. Bye.'

'Hey, you'll come back, right?'

She didn't answer and didn't look back, and that was that.

Brigitte couldn't leave the house. She had no need to wait for Ariel's return from the hospital, she had her phone and a brimful inbox, but she found herself in a strange place, somehow almost too scared to go outside, to leave this sanctuary where she'd been born and lived until it nearly drove her crazy. She wandered listlessly around the small, pretty kitchen, the high windows framed in ivy, the garden herbs hung in bunches on a string, her grandmother's lovely, heavy skillets, their sheen not what it once was. She swept and washed the dishes, enjoying it for the first time ever, and rearranged the cups and glasses in a daze, in suspension, a pendulum swinging from her teens to her forties. Paint handprints of her infant Ariel behind glass, the frame shrouded in dust. She wiped it clean and felt tears rising, but swallowed them back with impatience. Her mind was groping back to the unresolved work in her inbox when the front door creaked open.

'Hi mama. You still here?'

'How did it go?'

'Fine. He said he was running to answer the phone, and slipped and fell. He didn't blame me for pushing him. Sorry about the baby, and all that. It's over.'

'No, it's not.'

Ariel sighed. She desperately wanted to sleep, she was hungry and repulsed by the thought of food at the same time. Standing in the doorway of the kitchen, she reached out and swung the door to and fro. *Time to go, mother.*

'Come sit down, please, my love.' Brigitte took the chair at the head of the table and waited. Ariel sighed again and sat down next to her. 'We have to talk. This is not going to be as easy as you think.'

'No? Why not?'

'Next year. Student life. People will know you. They'll be very jealous. You've grown into a threatening young woman. And now they can despise you, and you'll carry a secret, in the face of their suspicion.'

'Whatever. I'll deal with it then. Right now I-'

'Of course, my love. I don't want to burden you even more. But I'm worried, I have a bad feeling. I can see it following you around like a cloud, for years.'

'What, the shame I brought to my family?'

'Oh, Ariel.'

'So I had an abortion? So what? No-one will care. Why don't you all just leave me alone? I'm so sick of all this. I never wanted any of this attention. You did! And now you're just thinking about yourself. Again. Now I'm just a liability to you.'

'That's not fair. It's not true. I'm only trying to warn-'

'This town. All you people. You're killing me. I wish I could just ... go the *hell* to the other side of the world.'

'That's funny. I thought the same thing today.'

'What?'

'If you took a gap year, then people would forget. You could come back without notoriety.'

Notoriety, my queen? So now you want to exile your little problem? But wait a minute ...

'But where could I go?'

'Oh, I have friends in America, South Africa, all over Europe. I've thought about this before, actually. I think one of the reasons I left ... this house, was because I never had a break from it. School, university, work, marriage ... I was suffocated by the sameness.' She clenched her throat, a strangling gesture. 'You know? It's good to broaden your horizons. Pull your head out of your books. You're not a liability, that's just silly. You mean more to me than all that nonsense outside, I know we've had our ... differences, but I really do have a bad feeling about next year. Anyway, we have time. We should talk later. Sorry I stressed you.'

'It's okay, mom. Hmm. South Africa, you say?'

'Yes, interesting for a career in politics.' She saw Ariel's expression and laughed. 'Or not. I have an ex-boyfriend who lives in Johannesburg, in a big house. He has a daughter about your age. It's a beautiful country, I believe, and much safer than the media makes out. It has everything, sea and mountains, desert, African bush. Yes,' she clicked her fingers. 'I also know someone with an apartment in Cape Town, I'll find out if they're using it.'

'Okay, slow down. What about money?'

'I can give you a lump sum, I've been saving for you. Thirty thousand? I'll talk to your father as well. We'll need his approval.'

'Do we? He won't like this.'

'He's very angry. Very worried about you and this whole freak-show. I think he just might.'

Ariel yawned, so tired of having to think. Her mother took the hint, hugged her and left.

Such a nice dream, a black cat running through the night just ahead of her, branches whipping against the stars overhead no, *she* was the cat chasing a misty presence over a mossy log under the outstretched arms of a dark, sparse bush - a child, she could see

now in the clearing, a girl-child running ahead, shimmering and transparent, a ghost-girl laughing and jostling along childlike through this alien forest. Ariel laughed and leapt ahead into the moonlight. The child turned and in a streaming rush swept towards her, through her, into her, here she is safe inside her, a pearl of exquisite silver - and her ringtone came loud through the trees.

The room was dark. What's the time? She fumbled at the phone-light, squinted at the caller ID and clicked just in time. 'Nooooods?'

'How are you, Ari?'

'I don't know. I dreamt, I think it was my baby, still inside me ... growing, still here. My breasts are tender.'

'You sound terrible. Did they give you ... medication?'

'Sorry.' She shook her head free of the forest. 'Noods? I've been wanting to apologize-'

'No don't, Ari. Don't. I read your lies.'

'What? Oh no. Not you too.'

'Don't worry. You won't read "Best Friend Reveals All" or anything tacky like that. You and your manipulating mother. I'm concerned about you and me. At University next year.'

'Oh!' Ariel sat up. 'You were accepted? Well done!'

'Thanks. But when people ask me? You know, about you? Do you expect *me* to lie?'

'No. Well, actually, yes. What's the big deal?'

'Hmm, it'll be awkward. Anyway, just something to ponder.' She hummed awhile. 'Clubbing with Bjorn tonight. All night lo-ong,' she broke into song, 'all night. That's right. I phoned him. So there.'

'Oooh. Curses. My evil plot didn't work.'

'Quite enough evil for a while, don't you think?'

'Basta, Noods. It's been a terrible day.'

'What, you kill a baby and it's supposed to be fun?'

'Oh ... fuck you.'

'Yes. Quite. Thank you. After everything. You said it. Look, when you come to the club with that man you apparently love so much, then perhaps we should avoid-'

'We broke up. I dumped him.'

'Right. Sure. *You* dumped *him*.'

'Okay. I'm going to be very, very careful here. I'm not going to just open my mouth and say *whatever* comes into my head about a stupid, judgmental, superficial blonde bitch who thinks she ...'

'No? What a shame. I'd just *love* to hear it. But sadly I must say, tra-la-la! Gotta dash! The limousine's arrived.'

And silence. And that was that.

Africa. With a wad of cash. She stood at the window, looking out over the empty, moon-bathed park. A moth swooped from the dark and circled the metallic-blue solar lights on the wooden fence, then rose and fluttered above her window. Rain had fallen while she slept, and the trees glistened and shimmered in the faint breeze. She smiled as a shooting star arced across the southern sky, trailing sparks in the dew beneath her window, *make a wish. Africa?* A streak of black – a cat through a pool of lamplight on the far side of the park, heading down towards the river, running fast.

The child lives inside you.

She shook her head in surprise. Not a voice, like in a barking loony-symptom sense, just a thought, but so strange and unexpected it seemed not her own.

Her soul clings on. A memory of a dream, a forest ... but no, it was gone.

She'll guide you home.

Okay, so she's probably clinically insane, after all. This time it sounded exactly like a voice, speaking inside her brain. She watched the moth flutter closer. Boys afloat behind bushes, men with blurry heads, talking cats and flying creatures *something flew above me* and now this, what was it, this *idea?* So strong, so deluded, it crystallized into words. This pervasive feeling, *baby's still alive.* Here, here inside her.

'My breasts are tender,' she whispered.

Crazy Ari, all alone. She thought about Mahmoud the weirdo mouse. What *was* that? Just a schizo boy with an obsession, taking a last desperate leap as his fantasies crumble around him? But no, because then why so cool and in-control, so sophisticated and mysterious, so goddamned old-person creepy? Something really wrong there.

Or something's wrong with me.

She closed her eyes and raised her hands to her face.

Africa. With a wad of cash.

She opened them again, gazing blearily out of the window, and then gasped and stepped back into the shadows. 'Mouse?' she said to herself, 'What the hell?' Standing casually on the grass, hands in his pockets, head thrown back, a smile glinting blue in the solar light. He raised a hand and slowly beckoned, inviting her out to join him.

She shrank back, nibbling her lip in indecision, and then was hit by a huge surge of boredom, a tsunami of what-the-hell. *I hear you, mother. Sometimes I hate this house too.* She swept on her jeans, boots and a black shirt, and crept out past her father's room on tiptoes.

Obviously later than she'd thought. *How long did I stand at the window?* The suburb slumbered around her, a distant scream of car-tires the only sound, two discordant notes fading in the air as she approached. A pause for the crash, but none came. He had lowered his eyes to her feet, and bowed when she stopped.

'What do you want?' she said.

'Couldn't sleep.' Low and growly. 'Kept worrying about these religious lunatics. Crazy stalkers. Thought I'd come down, keep an eye out for you.'

Lunatics. Crazy. Stalkers. 'Uhuh. Any luck?'

'Excuse me?'

'Catch any?'

'Four crusaders. Spies. Gave them a threatening look.'

Now he's seeing crusaders – oh. Joking, a sly little smile and a twinkling eye. *Red, red eyes. What's wrong with him?*

'I saw you standing in the window,' he said. 'All alone. I thought, hey.'

'Hey.'

'All's well that ends well.'

'Yup. What?'

'You handled this crisis so well. Brilliant. Dealt with the problem and came out smelling of roses. As pure as snow.'

'My ... problem?' She paused, and added, 'Mahmoud?'

He lurched forward slightly, not moving his feet, his eyes falling to her belly. 'Tore the body from the soul,' he muttered. 'We were there. We want it ...' He blinked and took a step back. 'We ...'

'We? Who's we?'

He shuffled away, avoiding her eyes, and took a backward glance over his shoulder, at a copse of dark bushes three houses along. 'Nothing,' he muttered.

'No, I want an answer. Who is we?'

'We love you, Ariel. From afar. We protect you. You're special.'

'Not this shit again.'

He laughed, that rich, man's voice, but she sensed desperation trembling beneath it, a note of ... fear? He glanced over towards the bushes again, and said, 'We'll always speak the truth to you. Lies are for these cattle.' A contemptuous gesture at the houses circling them. 'Not creatures like us.'

'Yeah. Us. Look, it's very late, and I don't see any mad crusaders around here, and I'm not going to go, you know, running hand in hand with you through any war-torn streets, a scarf on my head, if you get my meaning. No spring revolutions, no secret societies, no plotting. And no more late-night rendezvous, please. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm *never* going to be your girlfriend. Okay? Never *ever*. You're not going to save me, and I'm not going to bathe your wounds. Do you understand? This may be a shock, I don't know, but-

'Ari, come on. I know this.' He shook his head. 'You and Johnny are destined for each other. I'm just a friend.'

'Well, no. Destiny got it wrong. We broke up.'

‘What?’ He glared at her so intensely she took a step back in surprise. ‘No. No, you didn’t.’ His eyes dropped to her belly again, black and burning red. ‘His people said you’re still together. He’s planning to take you away, when he can walk again. To the islands?’

‘Okay, maybe I didn’t, you know, actually *tell* him yet. I couldn’t, I mean, he was just lying there. Hang on. How do *you* know what his people are saying?’

‘They’re with us. You can’t do this, Ari.’

‘What, break up with him? It’s done.’ She slapped her palm to her heart. ‘Okay, you weird, creepy boy? What do you want?’

‘Just, a, a friend. You haven’t told him yet ... listen, you’re upset, unsettled by the abortion. You’re angry, and that’s okay. It’ll pass. He loves you with all his heart. Give him a chance. Give it time.’

‘Uh, no?’

‘At least think about your future. An opportunity like this won’t come again in this lifetime, you know. Just hang in there awhile. See where it takes you.’

‘Mahmoud.’ She watched as he flinched and bared his teeth, like an animal. A grunt and a growl deep in his throat, but she ignored it, continuing in the same, reasonable tone. ‘You listen to me now. Okay, my friend? I fell out of love. I don’t want to be with him. If he was just an ordinary boy from down the road I might, uh, hang in there awhile, he’s nice, I like him a lot, I like making love to him. But with all this stress and attention, this freak-show stupidity – and you want me to hang in there, *because* of it? Thanks. But no thanks.’ She took a step closer to him. ‘And what’s your game? Hmmm? Who the hell are you ... Mahmoud?’

This time he snarled, his eyes raging. She caught a scent of something burning. *My imagination? I’m crazy?* She stumbled back, scared for the first time. *Played with fire, and it’s out of control.* She glanced back at her house.

The front door slightly ajar.

My father's in there, alone. Asleep. I must lead this mad creature away.

'Manny?' She drifted closer, smiling. 'Are you okay?'

He clenched his fists and nodded.

'I just want freedom,' she said. 'Do you understand?' A step away from the house, then another. He stumbled after. 'Thanks for the concern, though. I do appreciate it.'

'You're welcome.' He took a few more steps.

She broke into a walk. 'Look, the moon's bright. Let's go down to the river.'

'Do we have to?' he said, lurching along. Very unfit, this boy, the way he jiggled beneath his shirt. Already short of breath only halfway across the park, his gait clumsy. She quickened the pace and he fell further behind.

'Let's run!' She took off. As if tied by a string, he jerked and followed. She slowed down as they crossed the road, and then jogged down the dirt path between the gaunt trees. A grunt of exertion behind her, and then a long moan through gritted teeth. As they swerved and burst out onto the riverside path he caught up.

'Ariel!' he gasped. 'Run! Run faster!'

'Wh-what?' She skidded on a protruding rock and lost pace.

He sprinted past. 'FASTER! FASTER!' Then, with his fists pumping above his head, bellowing, leaping into the air, he screamed, a high, shrieking, inhuman cry of pain or terror, brief and terrible. He fell in midstride, folding over and collapsing face-first onto the stones and dirt with an audible thud.

She took her hands from her ringing ears, still standing where she had stopped, and crept cautiously up to him.

He groaned and rolled over. His forehead was torn and blood streamed down his face, but he was happy, a wide, toothy grin, eyes shining and ... clear. Blood black in the moonlight on his dark skin, but his eyes white. *The fire's gone.*

'Mahmoud?'

'Yes! Help me up. Thank you. Yes, it is I. Oh thank you!' He did a sort of happy little jig, throwing his knees up and pirouetting down the road. 'I am free!' He circled round and stumbled to a halt before her, opening his arms wide. 'You called my name. Thank you.'

'A ... a demon?'

'Yes! Sssssh! No, cool, we're alone here. They hate nature, you know. The spirits of the green. Did you see? This is how I defeat him. He had to follow you, so he had to call on me, on my body, pass control to me without warning. Without ... preparation.' He shivered, his face abruptly bleak. 'I threw him out. I know how to do it now. The secret is ... to work out.'

'Yeah, you need it. You look terrible.'

'Of course, that's how he ... enslaved me, made me disgusting. I'm sorry. But Ari? We're stronger, if we want to be. We are spirit *and* flesh. We are willpower. Aaaah, God, it burns.'

'What?'

'The portal.' He patted his stomach. 'I opened it with hate. Hate for Israel. For whites. Forgive me, God. Aaaah! They're trying to get back through. It burns!'

'Mahmoud.'

'I don't know ... how long, listen. You can hide. They don't always know where you are, they can't read your mind unless you let them.' He grinned fiercely, in pain. 'We really screwed them. I was meant to be your friend. Nudge you in the right direction. In their *fierce* anger they will try to destroy my soul, but I will run, and I will fight, oh, God.' He doubled over, hands clenched the bulging putty of his belly. 'Listen. Go somewhere. Hide. Anywhere in the world. They'll find you, they use computers and all that, but they ... they want your child.'

'What?'

'So that you'll follow her. They want *you*, more than anything, I don't know why. Run from this place, this cobweb. Hide.'

'Who are they?'

He opened his mouth to answer and then paused, his eyes staring through her. Then he sighed, a long, long exhalation, and she felt the heat of his breath caress her face. A jolt passed through his body, and red flared in the corners of his blank eyes. She scrambled back.

'We are legion,' he growled.

Then Mahmoud's voice, strangled and faint: 'Run, Ari. And I'm running the fuck the other way.'

They burst apart, sprinting in opposite directions. As she ran, Ariel pulled out her phone to call her mother, whatever the hell the time was.

A JOZI JOL

The plane arched down towards the sleeping glow of the province of Gauteng. Jozi and Tshwane, conjoined cities, like head and pulsing torso, supported by the muscular manufacturing arms of the east and west Rand and the scarred legs of Soweto. It gleams from afar, a thrumming giant, tossing in nightmare before the dawn.

'... it's a bit like a, a plate, turned upside down. There, whatchoo lookin' at now, that's the, whatyamacallit ... the flat part?' The voice sprouted a brown hand, waving horizontally, palm down. She tore her gaze from the blue rumor of light on the gradual horizon and turned, beetle-browed, towards him.

'What?'

'The flat part? Mountains, you know, all around?'

'Plateau?'

'That's it! Plateau. Plateau. You're a clever girl. The highveld. Joburg's in the middle, and to the west ... no, the *east*, you got the escarpment, the bushveld, sloping down to Mozambique.' His voice had grown somber timbre, soap opera poetry. 'That's where the Kruger Park lies.'

'You don't say?' Her phrase was borrowed from some old midnight movie. Bette Davis? But the elegant, ironic eyebrow arched unnoticed by – what was his name again? – Nasief? He had slid into his seat, claimed the armrest, and stared sideways at her, but only plucked up the courage to speak just after take-off, interrupting her enjoyment of the boost into the sky. He had chatted, too eagerly, throughout the evening, oblivious to her signals of boredom, blathering on about import-export and God knows what else, rolling an expensive Swatch around his bony wrist. Eventually she had feigned sleep, and missed the movie.

'Ja, 'strue. And to the souf is 'e Drakensberg. Beautiful mountains. Then Durban. My home town. Warm all year round. I'll take you on a sight-see. Whatcha say?'

She turned back to the window. The edge of the sun had blown a haze of glare over the misty, charcoaled mystery beneath. He was sweet, she thought. Totally disgusting. But this ... pride in his country, this love in his voice? She could not bring herself to be rude. 'Okay. Give me your number. I'm going to a nature reserve in Ma-puma, puma-'

'Mpumalanga. The eastern escarpment. That's where the-'

'Mmm...puma...langa. Okay. Then I'm going to travel all the way down the coast to Cape Town. I'll call you on the way.' More likely to call the moon, but he glowed sweetly, mission accomplished.

The plane shuddered down the first steps of descent, and she remembered something in a book sometime, how the first thing the writer noticed of Africa was the *smell*, rich and red and dusty, singed with fire, redolent with adventure.

And so the first thing she did on African soil – well, African tarmac - was stretch back her shoulders and take a deep, profound breath. Nasief, hovering like a fly at her side, chose the same moment to yawn, and Ariel's nose was filled with his foul night-flight halitosis. She hacked and gagged, staggering away, peering around at her new home through tears of disgust.

'Mama! Food! I want food!'

Ingwe groaned and buried her face beneath her paw.

'MAMA! Wake up! I'm hungry. Wake up!'

Damn brat kitten. Keep you up all hours of the day. Maybe if she ignores ... '*Mrrow!*'
Ingwe jerked as the needle-teeth sliced into her ear. The sunlight screeched into her eyes through the lattice of strangler-fig roots. She batted the cub away, growling in pain, but she bounced back and leeches her teeth in the ruff of Ingwe's neck.

'I `ant `ore `eat!'

She winced, shook her cub off and pinned her down into the soft dry humus, sheathed claws itching. 'What did you say?'

'I want more *meat*.'

'Oh, go ... climb the tree yourself.'

'But mama!' She plopped back on her haunches. Ingwe yawned wide, her tongue curving to an elegant point. She stretched her back and forelegs taut and rolled her head, easing the ache in her neck. The kill last night had been hard, a juvenile warthog that had thumped and gored and refused to die. It had thrust sideways in death-throe and punctured the loose skin above her shoulder. She could not reach to rasp the wound clean. She licked her paw and maneuvered behind her ear, but it was awkward.

'Little one? Come and help your mother here.'

Silence hung like motes in the air.

'Kitten?' She sat up. The cave was empty. She leapt to her feet and tore up dust, then paused at the cracked lip of the edge, staring down.

As an isolated birth-place, the cave was perfect, the best throughout the local escarpment. Two ancient boulders, leaning against each other like whispering heads, had been unearthed by water murmuring down towards the humid lowveld. The space between them was rough and tent-shaped, with a narrow passage to the tangled bush above and a steep drop to the wide kloof below. A strangler fig tree, seeded by bird dropping between the boulders, made a curtain of aerial roots, clogged and etched with detritus, dappling rosette light onto the leopard's coat as she rested, as she watched. But as a toddler's playground it was dangerous. She had stayed here too long.

On the other side of the kloof the carcass of the warthog jammed the fork of a fever tree, alongside the remains of the impala fawn. A hoofed leg-bone turned, suspended by a sliver of dried skin, a slow mobile in the slanting sunlight. Birds discussed the morning in casual song as Ingwe zigzagged down the tumble of rocks towards her cub, who lay on her side, deathly still, eyes closed, on the pebbled slope below.

My fault. I told her. Why did I do that? She reached her cub, picked her up by the scruff of the neck and then dropped her again. *Worse. I'm making it worse.* She licked the little face, her plaintive chirps shivering the air. The birds paused, a hush of cocked heads.

Then she breathed and opened her eyes.

'Kitten? Are you hurt?'

'Mama? The lion bit my bum.'

Ingwe slumped with relief. 'No lion, little one. Mama here. Are you hurt? Can you move?'

'Sore. My legs ... sore.'

'You fell ...' Ingwe lifted the cub's tail. A vicious wreath of dry acacia thorns impaled her hindquarters, tangled in matted fur. She grasped it between her teeth and tugged, ignoring the sting piercing her tongue.

'MROW!' The kitten wriggled away, and Ingwe let go. The twist of white needles, dead and revengeful, was still attached. She tried to get up, but could not bring her trembling legs back.

'Keep still! I have to get these thorns off.' This time she teased the thorns out with her tongue, one by one, while the cub shivered and whined. Her mouth filled with the taste of her own blood. Eventually it was done. The cub labored slowly to her feet, shook herself, turned to the thorn-wreath in a flash of anger and slapped it. Ingwe collapsed as she yelped in circles, sore now on both ends.

She was fine.

'So, little fool. Would you like fresh warthog??'

Instantly recovered, she bounded over to the fever tree. 'Hullo warthog! You're so, so, so *ugly*.' The warthog's spadelike face, stiff with insult, contemplated her from above. 'Bring it down! I'm *hungry*. Must I climb the tree myself?' She scrabbled at the green bark.

With alacrity Ingwe bounded up the tree, tugged it free, and dropped it. The kitten leapt to the attack before it could escape, and killed it all over again.

Later, after the cautious ascent, they lay together, burbling digestion, the cub teasing sleepily at her mother's neck-wound. She slowed and stopped, asleep, her nose clogged with fur. With a snort she slipped her head off and composed herself in the soft curve of Ingwe's throat.

'What's next?' she murmured.

'Mmm?'

'Meat. What's next?'

'Have to see.'

'Something different again.'

Ingwe stroked her kitten between the ears with the tip of her chin. 'I know where to get dog. And goat.'

'Dog? Tasty?'

'Hmm. Not bad. Fun to kill. Shouldn't be allowed to live.'

'Dog, then. Tonight. Can I come?'

'No, you must stay here in the cave. I'll be gone most of the night, because it's far down the valley, past the stinging wires. It's dangerous, a run on softpaws. Promise to keep quiet. Promise?'

The only answer was a gentle, rumbling snore, like a distant thunderstorm.

'STEPHI?'

The house rang with emptiness, a muted bell.

'Not here. Look, um Ariel. I have to ... wait! Maybe she's still sleeping.' Dr Krams scissored off across the somber parquet, corduroys whistling with stress. Ariel stood stooped, her linked hands twisting in the loop of her backpack. She allowed a little birdlike head-turn at the room and then snapped her eyes front as a far door slammed shut. His footsteps came pounding back. He emerged thumbing his phone and slapped it to his jaw.

'Still off. She's not ... look, I have to get--'

'Please, I'm sorry, you mustn't--'

'-work. There's food in the ... the bathrooms there - at the end--'

'Are you sure this is okay? I feel terrible.'

He chilled himself with a sharp breath, clawed the air and Zen-exhaled through pursed lips as he dropped his slender shoulders.

'I really don't want to trouble you,' Ariel continued. 'I can easily find a hotel, it's just for a few days. I'm so sorry, my mother--'

'Ariel, please. You're welcome in my house. Please stay. I've no idea where Stephi is, she ... leads her own life now. I'd like her to meet you, to spend time with someone from home.' He sighed.

'Thank you, sir. I promise I won't get in your way. All I want is to sleep, today, anyway. If you have a sofa, or--'

'No no no, there's a spare room. Please. Come.' He led the way. She followed, glancing brightly and politely at the African art and bric-a-brac. A rushed tour of fridge, coffee, shower, her room. They shook hands and he drove, tires squealing, away.

She took a stroll in the bone-dry garden, munching an apple, the good doctor's spare keys chirping and twinkling in her hand. It was odd, this little walled, parched ecosystem, familiar somehow in the harsh unfamiliar sunlight. Many of the plants she recognized. Global suburbia. Gaunt roses offering rusty leafbuds tentatively to the dry air. Rosemary crouched in stasis by the slate driveway, a conifer shivering listless needles in the sparse breeze. Like Europe if the climate changed, if the Atlantic no longer blessed her land with rain, a dehydrated imitation. Then along a north-facing rockery (she reoriented herself, turning her body this way and then that) a colony of aloe flourished in the midday sun, in rude contrast to the exhausted aliens all around them.

Loud, vulgar birdcall: *Go awaaay*, like Donald Duck caught doing a poo. A gang of large, jaunty birds moved in over the roof, grey, crested, long reptilian tails - *this* was more like it, these were new. Exotic. One bird swooped close, landed on a bare branch and blinked at her, at her hand, at her face again, at her hand ...

'Hey, bird? You want this?'

He flapped. She reached up and impaled the half-apple on a broken twig.

G'waaay, said the bird, so she backed off and sat on a low stone wall, watching as they dropped to the fruit to eat. Then she sighed and stretched and went inside to sleep.

tschid-tschik

She knew that sound. From the movies. The scene when the bad guy threatens the good, or the good threatens the bad, and the threatened guy doesn't immediately obey, so the other guy pulls back the slide *tschid* - final warning! - *tschik*, because it sounds so sexy, so bad - or good, as the case may be. Stupid movies. Means he has, thus far, been threatening away with no bullet in the chamber of his ...

Gun! She lifted her head from the pillow and opened her eyes into a vast black barrel-hole. A gun. A real gun. She shifted her focus beyond (the gun blurred, just like in the movies) to the tanned, fierce-eyed face of a young blonde woman.

'Who the fuck are you, and what the fuck you doing in my house?'

'Aah-'

The blond moved back an inch, quizzically. 'What're you, some kinda junkie? Break into people's houses for a quick nap? You don't *look* like a junkie. Fucken sleeping beauty.'

'No, I, your father ... my mother-'

'*Deutsch?*' She switched languages. 'Excuse me, please. I'm Stephi.'

'Please put the gun down.'

'Oh. Sure.' She averted the unconvinced stare of the barrel and sat down on the side of the bed. 'Anyway. Who are you?'

'My name's Ariel. My mother knows your father. She arranged for me to stay here ... just a few days.' After a careful pause, she extended a trembling hand.

Stephi tucked the gun into the back waistband of her jeans. They shook, meeting each other's eyes, and laughed in unison, like a stone dropped in water.

'Please speak English, Stephi. You seem more comfortable.'

'Ja, but your English are excellent, hey. How come it so good?'

'Reading. A lot. And I watch English TV on satellite. And speak it, every chance I get. I always have, since childhood. And I had an English boyfriend recently.'

'Hmp. I should practice my German. Never do. My Dad made this house rule, only English, and now he wishes he hadn't. I sound like a prrroper Sowf Efrican. Like, A.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Ten years?' Stephi popped another grape into her mouth. 'Since I's eleven. Was I horrified when we arrived? Thought I'd been dropped into the fucken zoo. But I kinda

like it now. There's not so much pressure to wear the right clothes, listen to the right music ... you know? Everyone's different here, they're all crazy. And they're all trying so hard to pull it all together, so it's a great vibe, it's happening, there's a future here, whatever, whatever it might be.'

'Vibe?'

'You know, a thing, a ... energy. The issues, like, *matter*. Every little thing you do, or say, is going to shape the future in some way. It's like, we're making it up as we go along, so how you interact with people, it's a creative thing. A meaningful thing. All those rules on how to behave, *sie und du, Freund und Bekannte*, and don't cross the empty road on red. That don't matter so much here, to say the least. You can be yourself.'

Ariel nodded, for want of a quick response, and rolled a thoughtful grape across the table with a flick of her finger. They followed its moist jig-jag with their eyes, while trying to shape, in their separate youthful minds, the patterns of behavior of entire nations. The grape danced to the tune of chaos, jiggling over a smear of juice, jaggling around a strand of blonde hair, spinning on a skin blemish, its movements too complex to predict. It stood on end and rolled at Stephi, who unexpectedly ate it.

'I don't know,' said Ariel. 'People are people.'

'Sure.'

'What do you do? Are you a student?'

'Uh, no. I'm in the film industry. I'm an assistant for the line – ah hell, I'm just a runner. I've been working on a movie. And I'm writing a script in my spare time.'

'Oh? What about?'

'Well, have another grape? I, uh had this idea ... there's an American, and an Arab, in this parking lot, and they're shouting at each other, like, "you're bad," "no, you're bad," "no, you're bad," you know, on and on and on. Then one of them has an idea, like, "Let's burn everything!" and the other goes, "Cool!", so off they go, hand in hand.'

'... um.' Ariel ate a grape, and then another.

Stephi snorted and slapped her shoulder. 'Needs a little work, you think?'

'No, it's nice. Abstract. Symbolic. Something. Funny.'

'Yeah, whatever. Hey, did you hear that?'

'What?'

'That bird. That strange birdcall.'

Ariel listened. A sprightly cocktail-party of birdcall was tinkling through the open window, almost all of it strange. A turtle dove dribbled a string of low-IQ droplets, and she recognized the raucous swearing of the grey gangsta-birds. 'Do you mean the ... *g'waay?*'

'No, no, that's a grey lourie. The go-away bird. The curse of the great white hunter. Wait! There it is again!' She leapt from her chair and ran to the kitchen door. Ariel bobbed in her wake.

In a leafless, pot-bellied ficus tree sat a gormless, twee little budgie, white and powder-blue bright in the drab surroundings, a film star in a refugee camp. It chirruped a voice warm-up and fluffed its wings – at last, the audience.

'Ag shame man,' groaned Stephi. 'Poor little thing. Must have escaped some idiot's cage.'

'Do you think we can catch it?'

'Not a chance.'

They stood loose and forlorn for a while.

'Well, at least it's free, for a while,' said Ariel.

'Don't be dof. It's going to starve to death, if the other birds don't chop it first.' On cue, the grey louries came back, taking up positions in the trees. 'Uh-oh. Here comes shit. Aa-ction.'

But the budgie was ecstatic, twittering and puffing up at all this birdie-testosterone. It swooped and alighted next to the nearest gangsta. The lourie reared back, squawked a check-this-chick-out to his homies and stabbed the budgie, hard, in the eye.

It screamed.

'AAH, FUCK THAT!' The gun was suddenly in Stephi's hand, and Ariel ducked away as the garden exploded. She turned her head and peered over her shoulder, just in time to see half a budgie, a red-white-and-blue cotton-wool ball, plop onto the lawn. A slow, delicate snowfall of feathers followed. The louries scattered, screaming ghetto profanities.

'Oops,' said Stephi. 'Cut.'

'*Gottes willen!*' Ariel walked over to the bloblet of budgie. 'Good shot!'

'Jeez, I wasn't even sure which one I was trying to shoot. I's just trying to stop ... ag shame. Poor little thing. Just didn't belong here.'

The plate of grapes was swept aside and a bottle of tequila slammed down in its place. Beers appeared from the fridge, gnarled lemons were plucked from the garden, a funky afro-wood salt cellar lined up to join the party. Ariel protested – the afternoon's cherrywood light still seeped through the bars of the kitchen window – but not exactly adamant. This was a day to go with the flow.

Five minutes and three shots later and the room's jostling with Stephi's jerry-built sentences, a crowd of words to chase away the specter of the little bird. Non-sequiturs chased instant idiom around the shelves, dark anecdote glowered under the sink, jokes bounced off the ceiling. Ariel, fuzzy with wildness and giggling with assent, did her best to catch what she could.

A bell bonged. Stephi stumbled over to the small scullery window.

'Ooo. Boere.'

'Who?'

'Police.' She jammed the gun deeper into the top of her ample bottom-cleavage and thumbed her T-shirt taut over the bulge.

Two blue policemen, one white, one black, hulked muscularly beyond the tall gate.

'Yo. Gentlemen. What can we do you for?'

'Good afternoon, ladies,' the black cop, tall, serious, handsome, spoke. 'We received a report of gunfire?'

'No guns here, Bob. Wait ... maybe it was my chorrie.' She pointed towards a corrugated car-port. An ancient, boxy Land Rover, wallpapered with game-park stickers, squatted in the shade.

'I'm sorry?'

'It backfires, stupid. Like a bomb. Filled it up with baked beans this morning.'

The policemen exchanged a jaundiced policeman's look.

'I arrived and she let loose a biggie. A stinker. Isn't that so?' She turned, eyebrows wriggling, to Ariel, who bobbed her head, twinkling innocence. 'See? Sorry to waste your time, gents.'

The black policeman opened his mouth to reply, but his words were cancelled by a loud crack and mutter of thunder. All three Africans jerked skywards, their faces round with delight, business at hand suspended. A mountainous bulge of bruised cloud loomed over the tree-line. There were tiny dots surfing the great, billowing wave. *Swallows*, Ariel realized. *Swifts*. *Catching insects in the updraft*. *Or just because they can*. *What a rush*. *What a life*.

'Oh, cool!' said Stephi. 'Rain!'

'Yeah,' said the white cop, his voice young and excited. 'Can you *smell* it? God, I love that smell.'

'Ahem, anyway,' said the black cop. 'Maybe you should think about getting your car fixed. Stupid. Or better, buy a new one. We have a small thing called actual *police work* to do, you know?'

'Yebo baas. Like, again, sor-ree.'

They separated, three pairs of eyes upturned in devotion, Ariel's level and wide open, absorbing: these straightforward people, united, happy, so excited at the approach of rain.

They resumed drinking, head-tossing and scrunching their faces into slices of lemon. They were bonded now by naughtiness, by outlaw triumph, fluorescent tubes above the kitchen table lending a glow of firelight to the tequila bottle. They had a few more shots, and Stephi talked.

When the first few drops hit, she held her breath, and when the earth plunged into the sky through a great rip of lightning, she whooped like a cowboy and dashed outside, cavorting over the dead lawn, her head back, her open mouth catching what she could.

Ariel followed and watched from the kitchen door. She leaned against the door jamb, arms folded ... this melancholy misting through: not envy at the uninhibited happiness, not alcohol, nor the rain. Here, in this strange place, with strange birds and strange weather, with a stranger as friend, she felt the distant breath of her mountain air, the caress of her lifelong loneliness.

The stinging wires are like a cage, Ingwe realized, and the thought made her spring up and prowl around the den, growling softly. She circled with a sibilant twist of tail, her anger rippling through the air. Distant lightning flickered across the rockface, and then the growl of thunder. Gazing out into the charged sky, she heard the cub whimpering, so she lay down, blinking apologies, and calmed her with a touch of quiet breath.

Thought led her to memory, to the cage. She remembered her mother, her gleaming, fluid back on a belly-crawl to the smell of fresh meat, the pause, the cautious sniff, the lunge - then the thud of the trap-door dropping, the frantic screams as her mother tore and fought, the single, terrible sound of a tooth breaking on wire. Her mother had pleaded in desperate hisses for her to flee, to *run run run*, but she could not, she was clawlocked onto the branch, so she had to watch as the two-legs arrived in the stinking, grass-crushing monster-truck, watch as they stood around the cage, their smoky breath, their voices low, complicated, horrible. She had to watch as they shot her mother with shining fire-sticks, as they tossed the flopping body into the truck. Her eyes, her eyes rolling away, dead, she remembered. She had stayed on the branch throughout the night, surrounded by the smell of smoke and her mother's blood, the smell clogged within her as the breeze gradually brushed the veld clean.

She licked her kitten, and shivered.

The stinging wires are like a cage. Getting in had been easy – a crawl and drop from an overhanging branch – but how to get out? A road of red dust ran flush against the wires. She had followed it one night, the kitten clawing in her belly, detouring only a cluster of two-leg dwellings which thrust out into the bush, and arrived full circle. She had touched the wire, and the sting was intense and unnatural. It frightened her. It frightened her ... like a cage.

But she was leopard, and leopard goes where she wants. She would find a way. She felt she would have to, soon. The prey was aware of her now, and they drifted away in waves which circled around and behind and passed subtle signals of movement through the grass as she stalked.

The kitten was in deep sleep. She left the den and climbed a tall mopani, and gazed out across the valley. The farm, with its cages of meat, lay beyond the wires, beyond the road. It was still lit, still marked by occasional movement. She would wait for the lights to die, for the two-legs to sleep.

She stretched out on the branch, the wind, fresh with the promise of rain, teasing at her fur.

'Does this car-?'

'Shush! She *hates* it if you call her a car. She's a Land Rover. You'll hurt her feelings. Then she'll break down.'

'Oh.'

'And she has a name, you know.'

'Oh. What?'

'Camilla Parker-Bowles.'

Camilla coughed and wheezed and rattled her bones, chugging ceremoniously up Jan Smuts Avenue, but at least her old bowels behaved. She bounced the girls towards a city skyline muscling over streetlight-dusted ridges. The Hillbrow tower, beyond the emphatic block of the hospital, thrust an imperious, phallic head into the trailing hem of rose-tinted thundercloud. Water gleamed the streets. They headed cityward, but not *to* the city – Stephi, for all her devil-may-care, knew that *that* was a little too rough for two single white girls from the suburbs. Camilla turned right into Empire Road, toward the trendy clubs of Melville.

'It's all built on gold. The whole damn place. A hundred years ago there was nothing here. Then they found the surface outcrop of the reef there, there where town is now,' she pointed at the skyline. 'Apparently, a squillion years ago there was this inland sea, with all these rivers running into it, that had gold. The rivers deposited the gold on the edge of the sea, you know, because it's heavy, so you had this long semicircle of gold deposits. The Reef. Then the whole thing got tilted, so now the reef runs deep underground, to sea level at its end. Or even deeper, I think. Best deep mining engineers in the world, our guys, so they say.'

'What do we use gold for?'

'Huh?'

'Gold. What's it used for, exactly?'

'Well, you know.'

'Not really. Jewelry? What else? Dentists?'

'Ja, and ... and. You know. Money. Currency. A safe financial haven in uncertain times.' Her voice perked with quotation marks.

'And this currency. How is it used?'

'Huh?'

'Bear with me.'

'Um ... it's bought. Sold. Kept in vaults.'

'Underground vaults?'

'Whatever fucken vaults. What the hell you on about?'

'It's odd, that's all. This city ... millions of people have been working, struggling and suffering and spending their lives, developing technology and skills, creating an economy, all so that they can dig some stuff out of the ground, take it to other places, and bury it under the ground again.'

'Jeez,' Stephi snorted.

'I'm just saying. Seems there could be more productive ways to spend time.'

'Such as?'

'Oh, anything. Knit. Grow organic food.'

'So, if you had a choice between a bar of gold and a bar of frikken tofu, which would you take?'

'Gold, stupid.'

'Right. We're here. Look for parking.'

Jori nudged Nihil. Nihil nudged Uncle Plastic. The buccaneers gawked at the chick threading her way through the tables. Something about her was different, some glow

that marked her out from everyone else in the club and possessed their shadowed eyes. Jori's hand buckled his beer-can. Uncle Plastic groaned and scratched his groin. A sign above her head like a halo: *Way out of Your League* - but they were fizzing with coke, and anything was possible.

Jori's stare fell by default on the blonde girl. He nudged Nihil, who snarled at the point of the elbow before dropping a rumpled head to catch the words.

'The fat chick. I know her.'

'The fat chick or the phat chick?'

'The ... the blonde one, you retard.' In fact, Jori did not exactly know Stephi - he would have deemed her too fat for *his* precious time - but she had fleshed out a curve in a damp, stoned circle at the last Oppikoppi concert, when he had shown off his skill at conjuring a zol pipe. He remembered her because of her laughter, her mocking voice - the memory cast stone over his sullen face.

'So make an intro, cousin. I dabs the beauty.'

'Y'can have my sloppy seconds, bitch.' Jori rose from his chair, a giant, his monstrous shadow looming over the room, his shadow bulging with self-confidence. As it approached the bar, his shadow was too high to appreciate that he was actually shorter than the stunning, dark-haired girl in his deluded sights.

'Two tequila slammers.' Stephi's voice dropped a decibel. 'And Heinekens to chase.'

The drinks came and they poured the sparkle, slammed the glasses and caught the scrambling bubbles in their mouths. Ariel, with a roll of her shoulders, slammed down the empty glass and burped, to Stephi's swaggering approval. The bar-boy shuddered and moved away.

Despite the bravado, Ariel felt queasy. A thin headache had gradually cracked across her forehead - too little sleep, too much to drink. She wished she hadn't worn her little black dress, but rather jeans, like Stephi, like most of the kids around here. Her fabric

felt too fine, too ... lustrous. The faces along the bar had an edge, a dry roughness about the eyes and jawline, and she knew she stood out. She wished she'd adopted Noodle's tarty ethno-punk, that she'd molded her hair into dreads or something, that her slim shoes were clunkier. Then she thought, *screw it*, and threw back her hair to throw the burn of eyes off her back.

'Hey! Howzit. Remember me?' An overloud voice intruded. They turned towards an unkempt, pimply skaterboy, buzzing and be-bopping at the bar beside them.

'I confess, no.' Stephi turned away.

He cast a desperate glance back across the room and tried again. 'Hey, c'mon,' his voice spiking with involuntary falsetto. 'We met at Oppikoppi. We smoked a neck together?'

Stephi spoke to the bar. 'Why don't you shout that a bit louder?'

'Um c'mon hey, whydon'tyoucomejoinus? Me and my friends back there.' He leaned in closer, over Ariel, who wrinkled her nose and recoiled. 'We got a whole *pile* of coke. Purest columbine. The real deal. How 'bout it?'

Stephi raised an eyebrow. 'Sure. Why not? In a moment.' The boy, nodding and baring his teeth, backed away, turned, and squirreled away through the smoke and dark wood.

'You into it?'

Ariel shrugged. This was not the Ariel Jaeger of thirty years into the future, not yet the mover and shaker, the anti-drugs crusader who would approve search-and-destroy squads and take on, and eventually destroy, the South American cartels and the Mid-East mafia, who would uproot the coca plant and the poppy, bomb the labs, survive two assassination attempts and live to see the jailing of a global chain of respectable business and military leaders, the real bastards, for their part in the trade. She was yet to witness the slow poison drugs dripped into peoples' lives, she was yet to see someone she loved die a humiliating, incremental death. At this stage, she merely

disliked the effect. Dope enveloped her in a cotton-wool tunnel, filled her mouth with cotton-wool, made other people strange. She had tried coke only once before and it felt like too much too strong coffee, running into an open drain of anxiety. But she had no strong objections – hell, she was cool. She shrugged, and repeated, ‘Why not?’

‘Don’t think I’m a druggie or anything. It’s been a hard week at work, and sometimes, you know?’

‘It’s okay. But what do you think those boys want from us?’

Stephi studied them over her shoulder, sipping her beer from the corner of her mouth. ‘That we pretend they human?’

'It's playing with my dad's gun. That's how it happened.'

The story was old news to Jori and Plastic, but the circumstances required compassion:

'Shoo.'

'Blind.'

'How old were you?' Ariel asked softly.

'Seven.'

'Seven? You were playing with a gun? Age seven? Why?'

'I dunno. It was in the cupboard.'

There was a pause in the stagnant air. Ariel shifted her back snuggler into the join of seat and passenger door and frowned at Nihil over her shoulder. Passing headlights danced across the ceiling and caressed the twisted lump where his ear had been.

'Bummer, dude,' Plastic's grinning voice elbowed, mock-American. Everyone squirmed. His face grimaced, a death's head in the pale, flat light, his skin like shrink-wrap. Crooked teeth gleamed.

'You were seven. And you had access to a gun. In a cupboard.'

'Uh, sure.'

'He had *access* to a whole lot more than that.' Jori sniggered, chopping the coke on a ceramic tile plucked off rubble on their meander from the club. 'His mother's pharmacy, f'rinstance.'

'Shaddup.'

Stephi was horribly embarrassed. She sat, swollen with purple silence and clenching the steering wheel, her face turned out, elbow jutting like a barrier into Ariel's space. Her back was foursquare to the tick of blade on tile.

Ariel could see all three boys, shoulder to leather shoulder in the back seat. One wafted a faint, pleasant smell ... jasmine, or vanilla, like a child's whimsy, whispering over the sour bass-note of undeodorized sweat. A strip of inky shadow lay across Jori's eyes ... *see no evil*, she thought.

'RIGHT! Who's first? Okay I'll go.' Jori thumbed a nostril and jammed the blade into his gum by mistake. It bled, and he licked it, then licked the blade. He licked his thumb and jammed it into his nostril again. He dipped a rolled note into the powder and imploded.

'Bombs away!' Plastic grinned his ghastly deaths-head.

Jori arched his neck, artistically. 'And that, my dear ladies, is the *crème de la crème*.'

'Oh sweet Jesus,' muttered Stephi.

'I'll have us some of that *crème de la soda*, my dear sir,' Plastic chuckled. The tile was the subject of sudden, reverent focus, passed parentally from hands to hands. Turned to each other, their faces alive with care, the two boys looked almost normal.

'Let's go to the drag race!' Nihil was unexpectedly decisive. He slapped the back of Stephi's seat.

'Ja, like that'll impress them,' muttered Jori.

'I don't give a shit!' He flashed a smile at Ariel, seeking approval. The other two boys peeked up to see her reaction. She gathered the glances in confusion and turned them to Stephi.

'*Drag* race. OK. What the hell. Couldn't get worse.' She wrenched her wrist into the ignition. 'Where to?'

'Newlands, uh, there by Westbury, I think. There by the Makro somewhere? I heard there's a meet tonight.'

'Char-ming,' she muttered, flooring it off the curb.

'Excuse me, but what's a drag race?'

'The ou's bomb down the drag. For the jol.'

'Excuse me?'

'Speak English, you doos.'

'Car racing,' said Stephi, swooping through a stop sign. 'Illegal. Some folks, they just give up living, and start dying little by little, piece by piece. Some folks get home from work and wash up, and go racing in the street.'

Ariel stared at her in surprise, and answered: 'In ... the backstreets? To the darkness on the edge of town?'

'Absolutely. Can't go to the highway. It's jammed with broken heroes on a last-chance power drive.'

They sat facing forward, smiling, cut off from the shuffling, puzzled boys behind. Then Stephi began to sing, as softly as possible. After the first snuffling line, Ariel joined in:

*One soft infested summer
me and Terry became friends
tried in vain to breathe the fire
we was born in.
Catching rides to the outskirts
tying fate between our teeth
sleeping in that old abandoned beachhouse
getting wasted in the heat, n'all
riding on the backstreets ...
hiding on the backstreets
with a love so hard and filled with defeat
running for our lives at night on them backstreets.*

They could have been anywhere.

The BMW torqued it up to max revs and popped the clutch. Chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected, it stepped out over the line, dragging a snake-shaped tail of black rubber behind. The idea was to hit 80 before ramping a speed bump into the headlights lining either side of the parking lot. The idea was to control the jump, to spit rubber and dust through the crowd – who had their own idea, to dance and jump and try to slap the split-second roof - then throw a handbrake 180 and growl back through applause and drunken jeers, rolling down the tinted windows.

But tonight, tonight, the strip was far from alright. Oil floats on water, and the revving air was fresh with summer rain. A baked winter of tire residue and oil-dribble floated a liquid molecule above the tar, and disaster had to happen. The BMW slapped, spun, veered and yawed. It snapped a leg and shattered a hip. It exploded a crystal star from an Audi tail-light into the halogen air and ramped a concrete bin. Flipping head-high, it clipped a platinum blonde, driving her hairpin bone-deep into her scalp, then landed on its roof on a crest of sparks, wheels up and spinning madly against the night. It slid fifty feet into the darkness, turning twice before the screaming started.

Ariel watched, aghast.

‘WO! Did you see that?’ Plastic bounced up and down like a toddler.

‘I think that guy’s dead.’ There was a whispery twist to Jori’s voice. ‘And that one.’

Ariel shook her head clear and reached for the door handle. She had one leg down when Steffi’s hand locked onto her arm.

‘Wait, Ariel. Don’t go. Wait and see. They gonna start fighting now.’

‘She’s right. Check it out.’

Four cars had broken off from the line of lights and zigzagged fast through the parking lot toward the BMW. They encircled it, trapping it in an inferno of headlights.

A stream of running men flowed towards them. Ariel could see two dark figures inside, upside down.

'I need to piss,' said Plastic.

The back-lit man-shapes converged, arms up and out, faces etched in snarls. A few interposed, shaking upraised palms in opposite directions. A splash of color - a woman in a floral dress kneeling by the window, her arms stretching inwards.

'That's a door,' said Stephi. 'Open it. Walk. Piss.'

A big guy in a flapping red shirt and shiny grey pants strode up to the kneeling woman, shouting. She cowered away. He swept a roundhouse gesture at the parking lot, the glittering glass, the shifting knots of onlookers, the staggering blonde, her hair now streaked scarlet, the bodies on the black tarmac. The kneeling woman turned to him, cheeks shining, reached up a hand, and tugged at the tail of his shirt.

He kicked her.

'Aaah nooit,' said Stephi.

A wall of baggy-rappers had gathered behind the car and they broke in a roaring wave, tumbling around it, swamping him. He went down hard. The youths morphed into a boiling rosette of fists and feet. A hand clutching an iron bar rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell. The woman in the floral dress crawled out, her nose pouring blood, her mouth open in a red wail.

'But this is crazy,' said Ariel. 'Why doesn't somebody-?'

Gunshots punched through the air, flat, hard, dominant. A shock swept the crowd and it splintered apart, splitting and turning, ducking and diving. One of the baggy-rappers grew a red bloom from the back number of his basketball shirt, patted in puzzlement at his chest, staggered and fell. Another, turning, had a splattering red chunk torn from his forehead. Heads bobbed and craned, twisting to catch the direction of the guns. Cars came to life all over in a roar. Headlights swung to the exits.

'Fuck! Fuck! Let's split! Go go go!'

'Wait. Stay low. Keep quiet. You wanna get caught up in *that*?' Stephi pointed at the jumbled gridlock below.

Ariel cast her eyes around. Camilla was parked on a gradient, alongside a vast advertising board – YOU ALWAYS WIN AT GAME! - shining behind a wire fence. A block of raw brick lay shadowed behind them, and movement snagged her eye in the side mirror. A group of men lurked beyond the brick corner, watching, their shifting shapes faintly lit by the backwash of the billboard lights.

'I *really* need to piss.'

'SO GO! Asshole.'

Plastic cracked the door open and ganged out. Ariel watched him in the side mirror as he peered left and right and stumbled in a crouch towards the brick building. She clicked back to the scene in the windscreen.

Most of the bodies were gone, spirited away to back seats. The platinum red-head was hobbling on heels, crippled by her too-tight jeans. She flounced from car to car, lost in the supermarket parking lot yet again, this time in a real nightmare. The yellow-shirt baggy-rapper, and the other, lay dead, Ariel could see, sprawled flat, non-humanly flat, garbage flat, shirts rippling like plastic bags in the breeze. The BMW lay with no movement inside, headlights reaching out.

Cars were beginning to flow now, out into the street. The hooting faded as the thunder of acceleration rose.

'Hullo? Cops? Report an incident. At the corner of ... the parking of ... shit, where are we?'

Jori told her. She relayed his spooky voice into the phone, her own firm and grim. Ariel glanced into the side mirror, then rolled down the window and twisted out to look back. Plastic, arching and holding his dribbling thing, had been joined by another, a tiny, skinny man, swaggering toward him, arms buoyed in ape-like aggression. Their voices reached her.

'Watcha doing, huh? Who said you could do your business here?'

'Huh? Whatsa problem?'

No other men. Ariel scanned around and realized that they must be hiding, waiting behind the small brick building.

'Fuck you! Who said you could piss here?' The tiny man bounced his palms off Plastic's back, the push, the invitation. In confusion, Plastic jerked at his zip and then shrieked as it caught.

'Plastic? That man is not alone. There are others behind the—'

Plastic caught the voice, but not the accented words. The pain in his penis roared through his ears, and at the same time he realized that the lovely, foreign, sweet-smelling, unattainable lady, who had been floating a tantalizing car-seat away – a universe away - and had never quite looked at him, was watching. Watching him! Be brave! He zipped up with a reckless twist and involuntary whimper. He turned to the man – so tiny, so impossibly harmless – and threw a punch.

With a gleeful '*Hah!*' the bait ducked and scuttled and immediately the brick corner erupted. Plastic turned to flee and caught the first blow on the side of his head. He grunted and threw his arms around his face, elbows jutting, bounced off the fence and was surrounded.

'Stephi! *Schau! Schau!*'

Stephi turned and blinked. The boys followed her eyes. Plastic was down, the kicks flying in.

'You boys gonna help y' friend?'

'Urk,' said Jori.

'But,' said Nihil.

'*Mensch!*' said Ariel, and kicked open her door.

'You!' said Stephi. 'Can you drive?'

Jori nodded.

'In my seat!'

As Ariel approached, the men paused, wary as hyenas. They fanned out, watching in a taut, stooped glower, their fists clenched. The tallest took a step forward, his orange-peel, bristly face in an incredulous leer. He looked beyond Ariel as the driver's door opened – another girl – and at Ariel's empty hands.

'Stop this. It's unnecessary. You are behaving like animals.'

A low chuckle traveled around the semicircle. The tall man pounced at Ariel and plunged a hand around her throat.

'Didn't Mama tell ya mind ya own business?' he growled, his breath foul, his face spittle-length from hers. 'Now ya getting the best fuck of your short life.' He tightened his grip, horribly strong in the milk of her throat, and dragged her back towards the shadows behind the building.

tschid-tschick

'Woah, baby. Chill,' said the tall man.

'Let her go. NOW! YOU!' Stephi swung the point of the gun, held high and two-handed, to cover the others. 'HANDS! Let's see 'em!'

The tall man backed off, palms raised and shaking, teeth bared in a dog's grin.

'STOP SMILING!' She kept the gun close and level, sighted by a bright eye. 'I swear. I fucken swear I'll put a bullet through your fucken teeth.'

He slapped his lips together and shook his head.

'Now, gentlemen ... run away, please. The first one to stop gets shot.'

They took off in a spurt, vanishing into the murk beyond the lights. A scuff in the road behind made Stephi spin around - and Jori and Nihil, arriving at last, dived out of the way.

'I told you to stay put. What are you doing here?'

'I thought you needed-'

'Get back in the car! You,' she pointed the gun at Nihil. 'Help your friend. Hurry. We're sitting ducks out here.' She squinted into the darkness. 'You alright, Ariel?'

Ariel, fingers in an exploratory caress at her throat, nodded. 'That poor boy. What is he doing?' Plastic was on all fours, crawling in aimless circles, plucking and peering at little things on the ground. Nihil stood alongside, scratching his head.

Stephi strode over. 'What you doing?'

'I loft my teef. I fink I mufta fwallowed 'em.'

'And if you find them? What're you gonna do? Stick them back?'

Plastic gazed in round-eyed confusion up at her.

'Come. We must go. Can you walk?'

He nodded forlornly, clambered up Nihil's arm and staggered down towards Camilla, now revving loudly. With a last look back, the girls followed. Within moments they were a distant pair of tail-lights, gradually absorbed into the soft black fabric of the night.

A rat emerged, inch by trembling inch, and assessed its world with a quivering nose. It sniffed along the fence and melted through, each tiny, clawed step a conflict between fear of the massive unpredictability all around and the smell of fresh blood. It snuffled the site of Plastic's beating, glances darting, then suddenly squeaked and flashed back through the fence. A cat, stalking, raised its feral head and strolled over to the pools and spots of black glisten. It lapped with careful precision around a tooth and then delicately washed the stain of blood from its lip with a forepaw. It sat back on its haunches and yawned, surveying the parking lot with narrow-eyed contempt.

Camilla idled as they argued.

Ariel listened to Plastic's mushy-mouthed protests, and couldn't understand a word. Accent, slang, the soaked-feather consonants ... but clearly he was refusing to go to the hospital.

'For goodness sake, why?' she asked.

'Moron here thinks they're going to do a blood test and bust him for drugs. Which they're not. Paranoid.' Stephi sat sandwiched in the back seat between a dripping, gargling Plastic and a wan Nihil. She was squeezing herself inwards to avoid touching either, arms straight, hands between her knees.

'Well, let us just take him, then. What else can we do?'

'Take him home, like he says,' said Jori gruffly, lounging over the steering wheel. 'His ma can look after him.'

'Is she a doctor?'

'Uh no. But she's cool.'

'But he may have ... *was ist Gehirnerschutterung?*'

'Concussion,' muttered Stephi.

'Or worse. I don't see that we have a choice. He needs a doctor.'

'If *my* chommie says he wants to go home, then it's home he's going.'

'And if *I* shoot you in the head then we kill two birds with one stone.'

Jori looked in nervous appeal at Ariel.

'You are being illogical. He could die. Please be sensible.'

'O fer futhk thake!' sprayed Plastic 'Thake 'e thoo the hothpithal. I'th gonna *puke* any-a.'

'Shit!' Stephi recoiled away from Plastic, throwing herself onto Nihil's lap. He squeaked like a rubber toy. 'I'll drive!'

But Jori had set his jaw in a grim sulk and, torturing Camilla's gearbox, he drove off.

'Uh Stephi? Miss?'

'What?'

'Could you ... please ... your gun? Its poking my ... you know.'

'What?'

'My dingus! Jesus it's sore!'

'Don't worry. We're going to the hospital.'

'Pleeease ...'

'I'm not sitting next to *him*.'

'Please. I've got a phobia. What if ... what if it goes *off*?'

'Then you'll be a dickless earless cunt,' said Jori, and laughed so hard he bounced a tire off the pavement. Plastic gurgled from far away, ghoulishly. Stephi started laughing too, a giddy laughter that took her and shook her and bounced her up and down, to agonized whimpers from below.

Ariel sighed, rubbed her tired eyes and settled back. Then a hand clawed over and grasped her shoulder, startling her. Plastic's battered, filthy mask followed and he spoke in an inexplicably clear voice:

'You risked your life ... for me, for nothing. For nothing. No-one's ever done nothing like that. I'll never forget it.'

She looked up and saw a tear, a smooth, gleaming globe, glowing passing blue neon, as fragile as light, slide down his blood-speckled cheek.

Jori sat and squirmed in Camilla's driver's seat, wrestling with his conscience.

Astonishing it had survived. Should have been out for the three-count, flat on the mat. It had been throttled and thrown, smothered and bent, smashed against the ring-post. It had staggered and fallen, gouged blind, over and over. Yet here it was again, arisen from impossible punishment, the hero, pinning Jori down in the Milpark Hospital parking lot.

Plastic would give a false name, he was pretty sure. The German chick had flashed – actually offered! – cash from her fancy little handbag, so the hospital would ask no questions. Isn't it? Nihil would sprint and disappear, wise to the score, once he saw the empty parking space, knowing he'd be well rewarded for the long walk home. The road ahead was clear, but Jori was beaten. For three deep breaths his hand itched on the wheel, then he collapsed back and dropped his foot from the pedal.

And when Stephi knocked on the window he awoke from a dream, floating on a gentle breeze through sun-dappled woodland, floating in an endless moment of soft afternoon floating up from a distant, fuzzy childhood. Cradled in the arms of his conscience, tired and warm, he took a coke from Ariel and a long sweet draught of peace.

'The engine's still running! What the hell's wrong with you?'

'Uh ... I slept. Sorry.'

'Why didn't you ... you're coked to the eyeballs. How the hell could you sleep?'

'I ... dunno. I forgot. Didn't notice.'

'Hell. Goofball. Come. Move up. I'm driving home.'

'Can you drop us- '

'Sure, wherever. Plastic's okay, *by* the way. We phoned his ma. She's got medical aid, thank heaven, so they'll do something about his teeth tomorrow. Implants, I think. Poor guy. Didn't want to let Ariel leave.'

'You phoned his ma?'

'Ja. She's coming.'

'So he gave his name?'

'Sure. Plastic Fantastic. Of course he gave his name. Laughlin McLaughlin. I kinda insisted, you know, in case you were stupid enough to steal my car.'

'Oh.'

Stephi noted the note in his voice with a nod to herself. The throttle rumbled contentedly beneath her foot, and tired silence washed over from the back seat. She settled back.

Then the engine died. They coasted, slowed, and stopped.

'Well. That does it. Out of fuel.'

'Oh no. I'm so sorry. I'm such a fuck-up.'

'It's okay. Don't worry. There's a petrol station a coupla kays away.'

They sat for a while in silence, then creaked the doors open and shuffled out.

A half-thawed chicken sat on its frozen tail in the middle of the pavement. It waved its pointless little wings and leaked greasy water.

'Look at this.' Ariel was some way ahead, her legs, toned by the hills and bikeways of Bavaria, unable to be patient with the toiling, sweaty trio behind her.

'Weird,' panted Stephi.

They stood in a puzzled ring around the flaccid, naked mystery. Shrugging, Ariel walked on. She turned back at the queasy sounds of crunch and squelch. Nihil had stuck the chicken on the toe of his boot, and was stomping like a squirting Quasimodo towards her. He made odd, ape-like grunting noises. A pair of headlights approached, and Nihil fainted into the street, ducking back as the car swerved and dopplered past, hooter blaring.

'What on earth are you doing?'

'Playing chicken!'

Stephi growled: 'Oh, for-'

'Hey! Why did the chicken cross the road?'

The chicken squelched, quizzically.

'Cos I had my foot up its ass!'

'Can I shoot him? Please?' said Stephi. 'Look! There's another.'

The second chicken lay as if mugged in the oily street-gutter. Further along there were plastic tubs of frozen chicken liver, scattered around and glowing white in the lamplight.

'You think it's the rain?' asked Jori, scratching his head.

'What?'

'Ja well, sometimes it rains fish, you know. And frogs and stuff. It's nature. I saw it on TV.'

Nihil suddenly screamed, dancing and kicking, flailing his foot in the air. The chicken clung on for a horrifying moment and then it flew, wings flopping, in a high parabola over their heads, over a prefab wall and into a dark garden.

'What happened?'

'It leaked into my shoe! Aaaagh! I can still feel it!'

Stephi turned and walked. Ariel took a second to shake her head and followed.

In a front of small shops – corner café, hairdresser, laundry, copy-and-print – they found the source of the chicken exodus, the coop from where the refugees had flown: a butcher shop with a smashed window. A blackened meat cleaver lay on the pavement outside, next to a haunch of glittering beef. Inside was chaos: overturned, buckled cash register, smashed display glass, formless lumps of meat and sinister footprints all over the floor. Blood oozed between the shards of glass.

Ariel surreal picked up the meat cleaver and weighed it in her hand. She was about to toss it back into the shop when Jori stepped in the way, leaning his head in.

'There's still like lank meat here. Anyone want some?'

'Are you *mad?*' said Stephi. 'What if the cops come?'

'Ag, kak man. The place is already broken. Can't sell this stuff. Come, Nihil. Give us a leg up.'

The boys helped each other gingerly through into the murk inside. Nihil slipped, flailing against Jori's steadying arm. He straightened, flexed and threw himself into a slide, skating across the slippery floor. Jori whooped and followed. They clattered against the meat counter and leaned in, surveying the wares.

'Hey! There's still chops. And steak. And ostrich. Ou's didn't like ostrich. What you want?'

'Come on, Ariel. Let's get outta here.'

They turned to walk away, and saw a gleam of headlights arc slowly around a corner. She recognized the van-shape from the afternoon.

Police.

Stephi stepped back to the broken window: 'Guys! Guys! *Boere!*'

'Wors? Why? There's expensive stuff here.'

'No, you fool! The cops! We're splitting!'

They walked away down the street, the clip of their heels irrythmic, panicky. Ariel felt exposed by the bright shoplights, and suddenly very scared. She broke into a trot.

'Stop! Wait. They're trained to spot body language. Don't run. You look guilty.' Stephi pulled up alongside, her face pale and frightened. She whispered, 'My gun, it's illegal. And ... you. Why the hell you carrying that?'

'Oh God.' The meat cleaver. The sound of the police car's engine drew closer.

'Listen! Ariel listen. Don't drop it yet. They'll spot that too.'

Ariel stuffed the cleaver into her handbag, shielding the move from behind with her body. The weight bit the thin strap into her shoulder.

‘When we get to the corner, run like hell, find a wall and go over. Run through the garden, then over another wall. Then hide. They won’t chase us through all that. Are you ready?’

Tires squealed, the sound of car doors booted open, shouts, a crash, a shatter of breaking glass. A deep voice swept up the street: ‘You two! Girls! Halt! I said stay where you are!’

They broke and ran.

The first house was impossible: vicious palisade with peeling spikes. Then a waist-high wall and bare, paved yard, the windows and door massively barred. The third was ramshackle split-pole, stuffed with dense bushes and topped off with wheels of razor wire. Ariel, gulping air, began to despair.

‘Split up!’ shouted Stephi from behind. ‘I’m going that way!’

Ariel ran faster. Then she saw it: a weak spot. A metal streetlight pole stood flush against a two-meter clinker-brick wall. The pole had two parts, the lower thicker, a thin lip for a foothold. She launched herself, found scrabbling purchase, and climbed, her handbag swinging and bumping against her back. With one bare knee on the rough top of the wall, her back a catlike curve, she paused and looked back up the street.

Nihil with his arms raised. Their eyes met for a brief second as a cop strode up behind him.

She dropped down into the garden.

It was dark and quiet. She had landed in the corner behind a bush on both feet, the impetus carrying her into a crouch. She shifted quickly sideways to look beyond the bush. The scent of flowers, fresh from the rain, mingled with a darker, fouler smell, a familiar smell ...

Oh no. Dog.

A single, bare bulb shone weakly from above the back door of the house. The lawn glittered with raindrops. She sat with her back against the wall and her knees drawn up. The gusts of her breath slowed and quietened. A sigh in the air through the leaves. She waited.

Footsteps came, on the pavement on the other side of the wall, one set firm and heavy, the other a scraping limp. She turned her face up towards the streetlight, listening.

They stopped. 'So where your chicks now, huh, fuckhead?' The cop's voice – must be - dark and soft. 'Left you to be fucked up the ass, hey? Where are they?'

'I don't know ... why are you ...?' Nihil.

'Call them. On your cell phone.'

'I don't ...'

'Fuck you.' The wet thud of a punch. 'You think I brought you here to talk? Think you can run away? Gonna beat you to death now.'

'You can't ...' Nihil was crying. 'You can't *do* this. I got my *constitutional rights!*'

A moist, throaty chuckle and the sound of another punch, then another. Nihil groaned, but said nothing. The thuds continued, horribly close, behind her, on the other side of the wall. Ariel lowered her head into her trembling hands, her eyes clenched tight. Then silence, a satisfied grunt, and a single set of footsteps walking away.

A low growl came at her through the bushes. She opened her eyes. A huge, black dog – *Rottweiler!* - stood on the lawn, eyes glowing red and bared teeth shining, the muscles of its powerful shoulders gleaming. It was staring straight at her. She brought her hands up and the dog broke into a run, fanged jaws agape and snarling, across the sparkling grass.

Ingwe, standing protectively over her sleeping kitten, love and maternal worry aflame in her wild heart, has none of the constitutional rights that floated so high and unsullied above Nihil.

S24 of the South African Constitution is clear: “Everyone” has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being, and to have *their* environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations. “Everyone”, present and future, means one species, people. And only people. You and I. In the eyes of the law, Ingwe is just a thing, notwithstanding the love in her beating heart.

In case of doubt, the drafters of the National Environmental Management Act have fenced her in her place in S2(2), a guiding principle in interpretation and application of said Act, which states:

Environmental management must place people and their needs at the forefront of its concern, and serve their physical, psychological, developmental, cultural and social interests equitably.

People and their needs? As opposed to what? This little dollop of policy, sloshing around in statute, imposes a hierarchy, a comparison of people and their needs with some unnamed thing in the investment and exercise of rights. Some unnamed thing in the background, as opposed to the forefront, of our concern. What could this be, in the field of Environmental Management? Maybe ... animals and plants? Maybe the drafters knew there are loonies out here, who value Ingwe’s life as much (or even more) as, say, Nihil’s. Or the cop. Or the rapists at the drag race ... or you and I.

The Legislature knows what it’s doing. There are priorities: economic growth and development. Animals and plants must make way. People are more important.

And Ingwe has legal protection. The new Biodiversity Act promises a sterner hand than ever before. And even in the old days, the murderers of her mother, in Limpopo Province, would have been guilty of at least three offences under the old Transvaal Nature Conservation Ordinance, unless they had obtained a permit to trap her and shoot her in the head.

A permit was obtained through one of two procedures: either fulfillment of the requirements of the regulations as promulgated by the erstwhile provincial Administrator, or slipping Hennie or Frik a hundred bucks in the ladies bar of the Royal Hotel.

Hennie and Frik are reasonable okes. Fifty bucks and a coupla brandy-and-coke'll do it. They're nice guys. They'd be justifiably horrified if you asked them for a permit to drop a cage on your neighbor's wife, shoot her in the head and leave her infant child to starve to death in a bedroom. They'd regard you as a fucking crazy person.

Had Ingwe's mother's murderers been prosecuted on all three counts, they could reasonably have expected a fine of fifteen hundred bucks a pop. The equivalent of a couple of week's groceries? Or fifteen or so permits, depending on Hennie or Frick's mood.

But they weren't, of course. In fact, her skin lies dusty and beautiful on the bedroom floor of the young son of an Inspector working, occasionally, in the Strontdorp copshop. He was one of the men who shot her.

Her skin lies in full view of any meat-and-beer-fed guest who asks to use the toilet. Sometimes his son plays his fingers in solitary imagination, in fascinated gunshot fantasies, through the frayed bullet holes.

Ingwe stood above her sleeping kitten, love and worry aflame in her wild heart. Her stomach grumbled, impatient. The last lean strips of the warthog burbled in the slow

rise and fall of the cub's tummy. It was time to go. She would have to wake her and let her know. Warn her to keep still, to melt into the leaf-litter. The kitten – no, no longer a kitten, she realized with a pang of loss – had been sleeping a lot recently, stretched out in the den and mewling flights of adventure. You could almost see her growing, night by night. She needed food.

She stroked her awake with her tongue, spoke to her in soft purrs and nibbles and slipped away.

She's a thing of passion and instinct, with a fierce awareness of her environment that could only be dimly perceived, enviously imagined, by everyone, by you and I. On the hunt she lives perfectly in the moment, poised on a sensory knife-edge, as alive as anyone could ever hope to be. And her continued survival is a child of thought and experience in the care of luck. Like everyone. She plans, reacts, avoids ... she thinks about things. Her choices follow instinct and reason, same as us, through a million pathways in the neural and biochemical filigree of her highly evolved brain. And she too can be swept up in temptation, in giddy irresponsibility, and probably could have fed her cub that night from the confines of the game reserve.

But, like all mothers, she was at the stir-crazy stage. She craved a change, a taste of the world outside, respite from the endless weight of care. Just one night, just one night to remind herself of the cat she was before baby came.

And she had to plan ahead. Find some way out, a route. Always, like a worm in her mind, the presence of humankind. The grit of suspended road dust and the thrum of engines in her feet. She caught scraps of their voices riding the wind, sniffed at their footprints in the dust and watched them from the shadows in fear. She knew that if she killed too often here, then the men would come hunting.

Somewhere, eastwards, beyond the fence and the road and the farm, she sensed a vast wilderness, a place where night was lit only by moon and stars, where the breeze was not barbed with their metal stink, where the ground did not tremble with their passing. A place where she could follow her instincts like scent along ancient pathways. Sometimes, as if in a dream, she heard roaring, trumpeting, twists of strange birdcall, calling her, sounds never heard before which awoke a thrill of recognition. When the wind blew from the east, it ran clean. Somewhere there, beyond the crouched, skulking escape of her life's journey, lay home.

When the kitten was strong enough, they would slip into the moonlight, away, away - they would escape from this place, which had promised food and safety but now, like a noose of wire and worry, tightened around her.

She remembered – revisiting the old path, to guide the new - as she prowled down the kloof towards the fence. Her desperate meander, over four hundred kilometers from the scene of her mother's murder, from the baobab and sparse acacia of the Limpopo bushveld into the rolls and fissures of the Mpumalanga escarpment, a journey of just over two years. Memories like nightmares, prowling through crops and farmland and rusty, squalid plots. The bristling towns, the endless plantations of pine and bluegum, the drains and oily wetlands running like dark marbling through bright, sickly-scented suburbs. Always tense, exhausted and hungry. She had been shot at twice. She had eaten cats, dogs, chickens and, in her shame and starvation, people's leftover carrion.

She had been lucky to survive at all. Her first meal as an orphan had been the bait from her mother's death-cage, a blackened goat's leg roiling with maggot. She had gagged on it after a day and a night trembling in the bush, when the gnaw of her hunger was consuming her from inside.

Her second meal – a bloody-pawed day later – was two flycatcher chicks, dry morsels of feather and bone shouldered from their nest by a black cuckoo. Then her first

kill, a dozing puff adder, bitten, by luck or fate, through the back of its thick neck, the blood like the sweetest water. And then the rubbish dump, rats and rot and plastic for two months.

How close she had come to madness during that desolate adolescence. She remembered one night nursing a stinking rat-bitten paw, thinking over and over: *am I a rat? am I a rat? am I a rat?*

She shook her head with a snarl.

Darkness settled. She gazed out across the valley, sniffing the mood of the night. Excitement sparkled in the jittery wind, an ion vanguard from the distant lightning. The farm on the opposite ridge was asleep, snuggled into the land, the day's activity settled like sediment. A single bare light bulb twinkled above the farmhouse door. Time to go.

Churchill just couldn't get back to sleep. He stood in the dark at his bedroom window and watched the sky flicker. He yawned and scratched his lean belly. The foreground of the farm – gravel parking, unkempt garden, the avenue of eucalyptus along the sloping driveway – was flat and surreal, dreamlike in the 100-watt light. He tried to turn his mind to practical things, lest worry overwhelm him, but failed, his thoughts diffuse as cloud.

The farm was so dry it ached, it ached beneath him, and his heart ached too. It seemed to sway on the edge of surrender. The borehole wheezed nothing but a painful trickle now, enough only for the vegetable tunnels and the stock troughs. The grass was dry, the new green growth thin and crackling.

He stared at the invisible cloud in the black sky and listened for its murmur.

A moth fluttered across his face and alighted, with a soft moth's kiss, on his naked shoulder. He lifted his arm, opened the window, leaned his shoulder against the bars and blew, gently. It lifted and flew, swooping away into the night. A puff of wing-powder shimmered before his eyes.

He stood in the darkness and prayed: *come rain, come rain, come rain ...*

She padded along the fence where it ran over the broken rock of the valley, searching for jackal-scratch or warthog-burrow, root-crack or fallen branch. Beyond lay a dry gully, the stones like fossilized bubbles where water once ran, then the tar road. She found a drift of red sand and pawed it, careful not to touch the lowest wire.

Her claws scraped on concrete. She ambled on, whipping her tail, coughs of frustration passing through the fence, over the road and up into the air, caught in the

first freewheeling gusts of the storm. The black baubles of the insulators hissed as the wire shivered, irritating her exquisite ears.

Then she saw it. A pole, almost flush against the fence. She sniffed the sour, rust-pitted metal - she couldn't use her claws. But she was leopard ...

She launched herself, caught the pole with her forepaws and gripped it, tucking her back legs under her belly. Back and front paws strained against opposite sides of the pole, her back taut and quivering, locked with gleaming muscle. She held the grip for a second and then pushed upwards. Scraping and thrusting, inch by painful inch, she moved up the pole until she was above the top wire of the fence. She paused, panting, and shifted the pads of her hind paws, measuring the drop with her eye. Then she leapt, thrusting up and out ... and she flew, power and grace, beautiful against the electric sky.

She landed with a grunt – *there!* - held a brief moment of balance, and in a blink vanished into the cover of the gully.

Churchill hummed and ha'd before his vast, wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, searching for *something* to put him to sleep. Something really boring. Poetry? Poetry'd do it. He contemplated Blake with a dull eye, but then glanced down in shame. Hopkins? Mtshali? Ag, he thought.

Stared at the fissured spine of his old, once-beloved copy of Marx's Capital, leaning on a buckling Satre. Never go *there* again.

He switched to the novels. All these bloody people. Hornby? Amis? Amis? Bellow? Smith? Smith? McCall Smith? He smiled at Ivan Vladislavic. Gordimer? *She* would do the job. She sat primly on an upper shelf, but when he tried to reach up he found his hand somehow just too heavy to lift.

He turned on his toes and wandered back to his window.

The storm was closer now, no doubt about it. It silhouetted the pleasant outline of the reserve on the opposite ridge, flashing tarty winks of lightning: promises, promises. The eucalyptus along the dirt driveway tossed and flounced.

He leant against the windowsill and dropped his head, blowing tension through his lips. No sleep. Wait and see. Pray.

Ingwe danced through the dancing leaves and swaying branches, exhilarated by the gusts of moisture, a sparkle in her paws. She kept low and fast, barely pausing at cover, glancing through open ground for just a slipped moment, a heartbeat, before gliding across. She leapt a three-strand cattle fence when she should have skulked under, and cantered recklessly through a tunnel of undergrowth with no pause to check for snare or broken glass.

Up along the driveway towards the house, on the lee side of the trees, stop in the shadow of the last jiving bluegum. Haphazard slate paving, gravel and jitterbug dust, the red stoep of the house. She slowly lay down, her chin on her forepaws, to watch.

The *smell*, swirling in the wind. Human. Dog. Dogshit. She snorted in disgust and her hackles rose. Peels of eucalyptus bark shifted and snickered. Light above the door splashed her with moments of wild black shadow. Be careful, she berated herself. Be careful. *You are no longer alone.*

All seemed quiet. Shimmery window panes. House dark inside.

A leopard passed before his eyes, and Churchill almost didn't notice.

As it is, he just blinked and stood there. He blinked again, and replayed what he had just seen. Leopard - a flick of living lightning counterlit the flat electric light as it flashed through - no dream. He clicked his tongue and scrambled for his clothes.

'Moshoesh.'

'What ... father?'

'Ingwe.'

The phone breathed and uttered muffled clothsounds. His son's voice came back, awake: 'Where?'

'Behind the house. Come on foot. Leash the dogs.'

'Shotgun.'

'Yes.'

'Up the path behind the kraal.'

'Got it.'

He glided barefoot across the kitchen floor and tipped open the corner of the curtain. The yard was empty. He squinted into the shadow behind the rusting tractor, the jumble of irrigation pipe, the old fig tree. Up along the slate steps to the kraal wall, the interweaving branches solid in the grey, motionless, sepia, nothing. He eased back the five locks on the kitchen door and slipped into the yard.

Where? He hefted his pistol.

She lay where she had fled, flat atop the rainwater tank, and stared at the man ten feet below. His face was cast low, searching the undershadow. He hadn't seen her yet. All he had to do was raise his eyes. His hand – a weapon, she could tell. *Firestick*. There was no escape, except past him. Through him. One chance with that firestick, that was all he needed. She glanced up at movement, and saw her kitten's face in sudden, boiling grey cloud above. Decided: she dies / the man dies. Silently, her muscles tensed and gathered for the leap.

He caught a movement in the corner of his eye. His son emerging from the dark, staring intensely up and beyond him. Spider-tingles branched up his back as he turned - the young man's voice, soft and careful, 'Father, I can't shoot. You're in the way.'

His eyes fused with hers and the sky roared and tore open. A peal of thunder came ripping from her snarling mouth and her eyes blazed with lightning. Then a rolling wave of water hit them and, like fire, she leapt.

When Churchill was called upon to brag afterwards, he made light of it. The people liked his shy shrug, his modesty. For all he had done is topple forward, and she passed over and behind, one claw just tugging at his shirt. He stuck his bum out, and made duck-like diving motions with his hands, and the people clapped and laughed at the picture.

Two things he kept secret. When the leopard landed in a flurry and spurted towards the corner of the house, he turned and saw Mosh tracking it with the shotgun, tightening to a point for the shot as the thunder growled away. He shouted, urgently: *'Wait!'* and his son had dropped the barrel, eyes pools in the pallid rain-streaked light, uncomprehending.

Mosh also said nothing of that. And if he hadn't been there, Churchill would never have spoken of her at all.

For the other: *that* moment, staring into the eyes of Ingwe, was the purest, fiercest, most precious second of his life. He kept it to himself, a secret like a tiny flame in a den in his memory. He had found beauty and time and meaning in the fire of her eyes, a single moment of self-awareness, and he kept it alive for the rest of his days.

It rained, soft and soaking, until dawn.

The black dog burst through the leaf-curtain, smashed into her chest and tore her from her feet, landing abreast as she sprawled. Roaring, teeth bared, boring in, its massive jaws burrowed in for her throat. *Slime on her cheek.* With a shriek she thrust down hard with the point of her chin, trapping the twisting snout, hands scrabbling against hard muscle and smooth pelt. It slipped free of her chin-grip and clamped fetid jaws over her face.

As the first tooth punctured beneath her ear she screamed, a pure muffled note held in a ball of scream inside the jowls of the dog, feeding back into her head like blinding light – *my face my face!* She twisted an arm free of the roiling muscle and clawed her fingers into its eyes.

It yelped and tore away, ripping at her cheek, and staggered off. She sat up, whimpering, hands clutched at sticks and wet leaf-litter, and then found herself standing with the meat cleaver in her hand.

The dog turned. It could see her, still, through eyes weepy, determined and enraged. With a growl it lumbered forward.

She lunged towards it, onto the grass and into the light, swept the cleaver and shouted, '*Ha!*' It stopped, snarling, and circled around in a low prowl.

She circled back, crouched over the blade, offering it.

Something dripped from her face onto her hand. She did not look down. She glared into his eyes.

There was a thump on the earth by the wall, the crunch of dead branches, and a low, pain-filled curse. Nihil emerged, puffy and wan, eyes beaten almost closed, the twisted

scar of his missing ear scraped with blood. He stopped short with a gasp and stared at the dog, moving like dark flame before the pale marble of her outstretched arms.

The smell! Intoxicating. Blood, fear, adrenaline. The taste of her in his mouth. Magnum knew the black blade could hurt him, but he didn't care. All he wanted was a way past it, an opening. But now *two* people - he backed off a pace, and - *there*, his chance, as she turned her head and spoke sharply to the other. He struck low, silently, angling in, aiming for her belly, eyes on the blade of the cleaver as it drifted up with her turn.

Again she reacted without thought, her body twisting away from the rush of dark energy, her knee jerking up into his throat. Teeth snapped at her belly, once, slipping on the wet black fabric, his awful grunt an instant's warmth over her navel. She hopped back on her right leg, swiveled for balance and swung.

The handle was sticky with her blood, a thin stream splattering down her neck, around her shoulder, rivulets down her arm. The cleaver slipped from her fingers and whirled, head-over-handle, up towards the streetlight and over the lawn.

The humans watched it fly, and then lowered their eyes in horror to the dog. But he was hurt, his breathing clenched, the blow to his throat like frying-noise in his head. He flinched away, whining. The cleaver clattered as it spun away through the bushes, and he turned and loped for the house.

Another thump of feet on earth, and Stephi stepped out from the wings, gun raised. All she saw was Ariel standing on the stage of the backlit lawn, head to one side, empty hands flexing in elegant distaste, and the dog moving away, its head held low. Both silent, after all those horrible noises, except for the dog's soft cough. She could not see its face, was it pacified, frightened, hurt, what? She always wondered.

Sometimes the safest place for a girl to be is out in the open. The sun on her back. Swing a shopping bag for all to see, keep the predators in plain sight. Hiding in dark corners brings things, from inside and out, that *like* dark corners, so why go there? Strange as people may be, out there by the mall they must all be nice.

Stephi had also noticed Ariel's cash, so delicately handled, as if she wasn't quite sure what to do with the money.

A spot of retail therapy. That would be best. All things considered.

But first to get her out of bed!

For two whole days she had huddled there. I mean, c'mon, she was *fine* – plasters on her cheek, tetanus shots shot. No infection. She would have a scar or two, probably. She had showered for half-an-hour, and then slept. And slept. And when Stephi knocked today she just lay there, awake but silent, staring, hair in a mess, the whole fucken B-grade melodrama.

Okay, so there was the like culture shock thing. Bit of a dog bite, bit of a scuffle. No harm done. Not *really*. She thrummed impatient fingers on the kitchen table. And she was cool, our Ariel, Stephi smiled to herself. One tough cookie. Whatever had happened in that garden, she had kept her handbag strap over her shoulder the whole time! And had *insisted* on helping the drugged-up, beaten boy over the wall first, her voice quiet and strong, her back to the dark and the dog. Cool. Nice as ice.

But damn damn *damn* Stephi was bored. The movie was stumbling towards post-production, the wages in the bank. Summertime! Yet here she was, at home, no trip to the coast planned, all alone except for recluse over there. Her social scene was a disaster, a bleak landscape, a blasted heath, and all her fault, really. To be honest. The

girls sensed embarrassment and avoided her, and she had managed to scare any interested boys away.

The last pig had been a lanky, softly-dressed, softly-spoken cameraman, who had caressed lingering, sticky glances over her curves and then pinched his gaze in irritation whenever she spoke. She started calling him space-face when he did it, 'cause it was creeping her out, and he got all prickly and offended, so she told him to fuck off.

Which he did. Seven men, two years, none for longer than a couple of weeks.

Could no-one climb the battlements of her attitude, weather the flame of her bullshit-detector? Not that there's exactly incentive, fatty, she reflected, wallowing in the soft over-ripeness of her thighs and belly, her face for a moment numb with shame.

But babe-alicious in the spare bedroom would be a boy-magnet, even with all the plasters and all. And behind the alpha-boy would be a quiet one, maybe interesting, maybe funny, maybe really nice. Anyway, that was sort of the plan. She accepted Ariel's presence in her house as an augury, a sign that fun and pleasure lay just around the corner. Just a feeling. New places to meet, people to go, new clothes to negotiate. She squirmed with a sudden itchy flush.

Enough was *enough*. She leapt to her feet and strode down the passage.

'Hey – oh, you're up.'

The room was dark, a strip of open window glowing late-afternoon light along the drawn curtains. Ariel was seated in panties and T-shirt at Stephi's old teen-pink dressing table, hair brushed but frizzy with sleep, her face turned to the sun. Plasters lay among discs of sunlight on the table.

'Let's have a look?' Stephi pulled up a chair. Ariel inclined the cheek towards her. 'Not bad, looks clean. Gonna have a scar, y'know. You feeling okay?'

Ariel shrugged.

'Well, what are you ... um.'

She paused, and an unexpected shyness descended on them, the morning-after flinch, like the stranger in your bed. They both looked down and away. Three seconds, wasted time. Stephi slapped her legs, laughed and stood up.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Starving!’

‘I’m sure. What would you like?’

‘Meat!’

‘Meat?’ said Stephi, startled. ‘What like a steak?’

‘No, not ...’ Ariel appeared taken aback by herself. ‘I’m sort of vegetar – actually yes. Steak. That’s *exactly* what I want.’

‘Ooooookay! So let’s go out. To a restaurant. Then maybe a club later.’

‘Out?’

‘Yes, you know. Away from here. Beyond these walls. To where other people are.’

‘But I don’t want to go out.’ Ariel spoke in a small, frightened voice, and Stephi, bouncing from foot to foot, sighed and took a step closer.

‘Are you okay?’

Ariel flashed an irritated glance, at the mirror and then at Stephi. ‘I’ve been better. But perhaps it would be sensible not to go out again. Into this crazy place.’

‘But it’s not *always* like this. Sorry, like that. You *have* to get back on the horse.’

‘The horse?’

‘Look, let’s get a video and go buy some steak to cook here and then ... yuck. Also some pizza. Ice-cream. *Two* videos. We’ll stay in tonight and tomorrow see how you feel? Can’t do better than that.’

‘Thank you. But tomorrow I’m going to book a flight, the soonest possible. I’m going home immediately. My father warned me before I left-’

‘Your father’s an asshole. Sorry that didn’t come out quite the way I ... why don’t you give it a couple of days. Have a look at some of the nice places around here.’

'I have already deci- '

'Decide tomorrow! Come on. It can only get better. Couldn't get worse, really, ha ha.'

Touched, confused and habitually polite, Ariel didn't answer. She did not say what she thought, did not utter the curse: *things can always get worse*.

But things got better. While Ariel, well aware that she was suffering some sort of post-traumatic stress disorder, was recalling the mechanisms for recovery, she was swept up in Stephi's special Joburg cure: laugh and scowl and keep on moving. Stephi chattered, facetious, outrageous, playing the clown. She bickered good-naturedly at the DVD stand, accepting Ariel's choice against one of her own: *Lost in Translation* versus the latest Coen Bros. For no good reason and in German she asked the pimply guy behind the counter where he kept his furry little Greek boys, prompting a string of giggles which led them through the parking lot. She retched and staggered theatrically at the Spar meat counter. Ariel, with a shiver, changed her mind about the steak, to the loud relief of Stephi, who would always despair of ever cooking anything without ruining it.

'So. What happened in that garden? The dog?'

Ariel swallowed. 'I have been meaning to talk to you about that. I would prefer it if you said nothing of that night. The whole night. Okay?'

'What? Why?'

'My father ... well, no. Your father knows my mother, so everyone ... I would prefer it if people at home did not know that I was chased by the police and attacked by a dog. Drugs. And that I witnessed murder! *And* attempted rape. Does this make sense to you?'

'Uh sure. If you care. Makes a great story, though.'

'Story? Stories can be twisted, and used against you. Later in life. Please, Stephi.'

'Maybe you're right,' Stephi nodded. 'Okay. I promise.'

A promise she kept, through all the years of mortgage and retirement planning and troublesome teenage sons, when the true story of what happened to Ariel Jaeger's face would have made her a great deal of money.

'So I've promised. Now tell me what happened.'

But Ariel stood up and went to wash her hands.

THE BUSTARD AND THE BEE-EATER

Two weeks later, and Camilla was swinging her iron butt contentedly down the slow lane of the N12 to Mpumalanga.

Stephi was unsure exactly when Ariel had changed her mind, restrained from asking by her own strategy to distract. And Ariel, despite her occasionally trembling hands, went along with shopping and movies and walks in the park, but cowered away from the night, from clubbing, drinking, boys, hanging her hair over her eyes and shaking her head, until Stephi gave up.

They watched a lot of TV, the remote under Ariel's fingertip, blinking past the generic international stuff on satellite and settling on anything local, wacky comedy or horrifying documentary on the SABC. They cooked chaos twice (and then phoned for takeaways), splashed a rowing boat like abject fools around the Zoo Lake in the rain, chatted through the funkier clothes racks at the mall. Ariel fell in love with a pair of black chami boots with a sharp toe, which snuggled themselves to the shape of her feet. She also bought a knife, a three-inch folding blade which tucked neatly behind the buckle of her jeans. And Stephi, after quite some convincing, bought a silky, sentient summer-dress which clung and whispered to her curves, turning the heads of a string of bypassing men.

The point of Stephi's plan – Ariel as boy-bait – was blunted by the passing days. What she really wanted was Ariel, safe under her wing. The scar shrunk and hardened to a vivid rusty line in an aura of blue. They talked in gradual, languid intimacy as the city put its feet up, yawned and stretched, and leaked its people out towards the beaches and the bushveld.

'And on our right somewhere, Benoni. Ta-daa! Where Charlize Theron comes from.'

'Ja? *Giel!* Crazy Monkey.' Ariel turned her head. A long line of ugly-faced trucks frowned over a ramp of furrowed earth. The green of new weeds infused the gnarled brown.

'Jeez! Look at this guy!'

An outrageous figure plummeted along the highway verge on foot towards them, in a ragged old army jacket pinned, for some reason, with scraps of bright paper. He was pushing a plastic shopping trolley. A mud-stained white cowboy hat sprouted a streaming ostrich feather. Lengths of wood and twisted metal balanced crazy angles, a dimpled hubcap flapped, tied to the side of the trolley with string. His eyes bulged with stress and suffering as he shot past, his mouth slack, daft.

'And that was Charlize Theron's ex-boyfriend.'

A moment rolled past.

'Do you think they ... keep in touch?'

'Naaah. You know how difficult it is to stay friends, after.'

'Yes. Also the long distance thing. Never works.'

'Ja, like this kind of sad torture. Always wondering what could have been. Maybe he was the one. Imagining all the hobo bitches he's fucking. Poor Charlize.'

A moment rolled past.

'No, poor man.' Stephi's eyes clouded. Ariel was disconcerted for a moment, and peered out of the window again.

'Sorry.' Stephi coughed, upped a gear and indicated to move around a truck. 'This bloody place. Every time you park, every traffic light, there they are, hands out, gimme gimme gimme. This look on their faces ... like the only hope I've got to live on is *you*, your money. Otherwise nothing. Hopeless. Hands up in the air. So after a while you stop caring, you know? Had your damn *quota* of caring for the day. Run out of two-bucks and now nothing left for the parking meter. You give the guy the last fifty cents and there's this look of ... y'know, disgust on his face, like you insulted him, you

haven't paid him properly for sitting round on his batty on the side of the road all day long with this dumb poes look on his face.'

They passed a man, sitting by the side of the road under a road-whipped tree, his face inscrutable against the shade.

'And *then* I think; he's got nothing – well, just enough to survive, obviously. And if you are used to zip, then you conserve energy. Principle of nature. You sit around. You need resources to rush around and look for a job and all. So they *eke* it out, till the only aim, the only goal, is to eke it out. There's just this fucken acceptance, that you can't survive unless someone else does it for you.'

Morose, Stephi accelerated. 'And there *are* no jobs, for the ordinary guy. Forget it. What can they do? So you feel sorry for them. Until about ten a.m.' They drove for a while. 'So what do you do? Just harden your heart? Just say fuck it, fuck the world? That's *horrible*. I'd rather *die* than become – WOOOOAH!' She ripped the steering wheel as a silver BMW spat across her lane at high speed, slewing through to the slow lane to overtake. 'MORON! Shit! I'm just going to shaddup and drive for a while, okay?'

Relieved, Ariel nodded.

They drove for a while.

'And Charlize Theron is the coolest, hey. D'y'know when she won the Best Actress Oscar for *Monster* – did you see it?' Ariel shook her head. 'Well you should. Amazing. Only a South African could have done it, somehow, the passion, the despair. The *very* next day she was on the plane to bring it back home. She met with everybody, gave them all her time, all these people patting themselves on the back, taking credit for what *she'd* done, asking her for money, who wouldn't have tossed her a buck if she'd landed up on the street.'

'But she would never have landed up on the street.'

'Well, maybe. If life had ... bad luck–'

'No. She would have overcome. Even if she'd stayed in Benoni, she would've been fine. Successful. Life's what you make it.'

'Easy for you to say. You never been to Benoni.'

The highway stretched out as the built environment ebbed away from the last of the passing East Rand towns. Now it was the plots, ramshackle old houses and occasional neat brick. Ariel saw a sun-baked ostrich in a fenced pen. A horse-drawn cart. Stephi sighed and settled her back into the seat, the road clear and straight ahead.

'Wish we had a CD player. Some entertainment.'

'Maybe we should sing?'

'Uh ... sure. If you like. How about some Bruce Springsteen – um. Maybe not.'

'Hah!' Ariel pointed her finger. 'At last. You've mentioned *that* night.'

'Yeah, well.' Stephi grinned. 'You asked me not to. And I got you. No running away now.'

The sign said "WITBANK", but all they could see were mesas of glistening black coal attended by bulldozers. On the other side of the highway grey fields stretched out, flat and barren, to a sky bleached white by the sun. The soft line of the horizon shuddered in rhythm to Camilla's rattle and roll.

'Witbank,' said Stephi. 'Asshole of the world. There's a coal mine here that's been on fire for years. Underground. Spews all these toxic fumes over the township, and sometimes people go walking there and never come back.'

'Why?'

'I think the fire burns a, like a, hollow under the surface, and when you walk on it, it collapses. So you fall through into a fucken furnace. Way to die.'

'So why on earth do they walk there?'

'To collect coal. For cooking and stuff. The poor people, y'know, so no-one gives a shit.'

'Why don't they put the fire out?'

'I *think* the question is, who's they? The company that mined it and started the fire's long gone. The government'd have to take money from the cocktail-party budget or something. Seriously, it's probably just too difficult, or expensive or something, I mean, if the thunderstorms don't put it out, then we probably can't. So it just burns away. Our own little corner of hell.'

'Okay, Steph.' The faint first signals of a tension headache were whispering at Ariel's temples. 'Please cheer up. I'm on holiday. Please tell me something nice.'

'Nice? Okaaay. We're running out of fuel. You're going to have to spend your holiday in Witbank. You're going to have to *walk* to Witbank.'

'*What?*'

'Only joking. We can hitch back to Benoni.'

Ariel leaned over. The gauge hovered at three-quarters.

'Ha ha.'

'Yeah.' Stephi stretched back. 'Nothing to worry about. Not yet.'

'It's so ... so *empty*.'

The passing fields were even flatter now, devoid of any living thing.

'And to think once were trees,' said Stephi. 'Bushveld, animals running around. Elephant. Lion. Leopard. Giraffe against the sunset. Huge, stunning beautiful animals. Strange and dangerous. And the people, strong amongst them. Now you can't even see a bird.'

'What do they grow here?'

'Mielies, supposedly.'

'What are-'

'Oh, sorry. Corn. *Getreide.*'

'So why is nothing growing?'

'Why don't we ask Stephi the farmer-girl? She'll yodel for Hansel. See if he knows.'

They traveled along in silence for a while. Ariel waited for the flatness to end. Mercs and BMWs cruised past like sharks. A red 4x4 tore through, doing 200 easy. Stephi grabbed her nose and glared, muttering *stupid stupid stupid*.

They got onto the subject of nature reserves, somehow – oh yeah, Stephi was talking about the cameraman, who had done a shoot on a tribe in the northern Limpopo who had won a land-claim in the Kruger Park and had entered into a trilateral joint venture with the state and the private sector to manage and develop unique community-owned tourism facilities, or something. There was a change in mindset, he had said, sharing the benefit of natural resource utilisation with the poor rural communities who had, for generations, scratched out subsistence right up to the fence of leafy, meat-stocked game parks. In some cases the communities had incorporated some of their own land into the park, and were getting compensation and loans to develop. It was a win-win. The animals were utilized sustainably, and the people were given a stake in their survival. He had been very enthusiastic, inspired by the press release, the media road-show. A gradual awareness was growing throughout Africa, Stephi reported, that destroying the natural environment merely served to impoverish people. In beauty lay value, wise old heads in their rural kraals nodded, all over the country. Tourism uplifts. Nature sustains.

Stephi kept a note of suppressed anger throughout this speech, and Ariel knew by now this was not habitual. Something specific was pissing her off.

'And your problem is?'

Stephi opened her mouth and closed it again. She sat up and blinked at the road ahead. She was between a choice of holding up the hope in the upside of her story or bringing everyone down. She was inclining towards keeping it light, escaping with a joke, when Ariel said:

‘It is the future you worry about.’

Stephi nodded and settled back. ‘Okay. Yes. The future. It’s not an achievement, not yet, despite all the politico’s patting themselves on the back. It’s only a plan.’

‘And it’s a business plan.’

‘Yes! Right. So you need ... uh, due diligence. Impact assessment, which looks at *ecological* sustainability. Then from that, a management program. Okay?’

‘I’m with you.’

‘Are you sure? Most people find this subject kinda boring. Y’don’t wanna talk about film stars? Men? Clothes? Men? New cars?’

‘Pop music? Flower decorating? Ice cream flavours? Post-post-modernist irony?’

‘God no. How about ... shoes? Botox? Chick-lit? Cluster bombs? Bottle top collections? Really important art installations, like five bogrolls on a stick? Grown men kicking a ball around, for a weekly salary that could save an entire nature reserve *and* the people next door?’

‘Shoes. Let’s talk about shoes,’ pouted Ariel, admiring her new boots.

‘Well, okay. Fine. Shoes, glorious shoes,’ she sang hoarsely. ‘They have heels. They have toes. Are they stinky inside? Nobody knows. You put them on your feet. You jive to the beat. And, of course, a girl can never ever have enou-’

‘Halt! I am *so* bored already, Stephi. Mmm ... horrified, actually. Let’s rather talk about the environment.’

‘Uh ... where were we?’

‘Management.’

‘Okay. So you have to work out the capacity for each species on a given piece of land, an ecosystem. If there is a surplus of, let’s say, kudu, then a few can be shot. Not a problem, you can’t be sentimental. The fundis can even work out the exact number. Then build facilities for the tourists while preserving the sense of unspoilt wilderness. Y’know, tranquility, with danger and excitement just below the surface? Birdsong, sunsets, clean air. Strange, timeless magic, the whole Africa thing. And *everything*, the success of the development, depends on keeping the natural beauty intact. If you chop down the trees for firewood, kill the animals, leave rubbish lying around, then tourists won’t come and the whole venture collapses.’

‘Be positive.’

‘Uh ... y’know, if you look to the future, Africa could be awesome. I *really* believe it could. Imagine a world where everything is dreary, urban, regulated, overdeveloped, plastic. And in the middle of the map, Africa, the ... the playground, with forests and savannah and beaches and all the amazing wildlife. It could become a place of freedom and romance, adventure, a place unspoiled for the whole world to enjoy. And it could make good money. It *still* could. We could do it!’ A dark image flashed through Ariel as she listened, a gaunt hand reaching out from black dust, and she cupped her scarred cheek while Stephi flowed on: ‘And the beauty of the scheme is that nature conservation is so low-maintenance. Apart from the tourist lodges and restaurants and vehicles and all, you don’t need to actually *do* anything. In fact, it’s best to *not* do anything. No farm machinery, fertilizer, pest control, plowing, weeding, all that shit. You just let it be.’

Ariel thought, *not so simple*, but merely said: ‘Got it. Now your down-side.’

Stephi wiped her hand across her mouth and fumbled for the water-bottle, keeping her eyes on the road. She drank from the bottle, coughed and said: ‘Okay, this is just a story. Subjective. Understand?’

Ariel noticed that Stephi's accent had begun subtly to change. From broad, guttural South African, croaking out from her throat (*because the climate is so dry. The words cannot rise*) she heard the lilt and cadence of Germanic vowels emerge, the crisp consonants. *She echoes my own accent? No, perhaps this is Stephi, beneath the armor.* She nodded, accepting the caveat.

'About ... what was it, five years ago? I was with my father, on holiday. We were staying at a hotel at the mouth of the Breede River, down in the Cape. It was so beautiful, Ariel. Can't describe it. Out of this world. The bar of the hotel overlooks the estuary, this huge calm stretch of water, and beyond it the mouth of the river, the waves where humpback whales roll around, protected by the bay.'

She took another sip of water, and sighed. 'Anyway, the barman at the hotel was a cute guy, sort of poetic-loser type, haunted eyes, you know?'

'Hmm.'

'Maybe that's my problem.' The South African accent was back. 'Always attracted to these green assholes. Anyway. I was sixteen and my father wanted to hike around all the time, so I pretended to have a headache or something and went to hang out in the bar. And one day my barman was really angry, not talking, so I asked him what was wrong. He said I wouldn't understand. I said, try me. Baby. And he said there's this porcupine been living in the veld behind the village, and some of the fishermen had trapped it and shot it.'

'Why?'

'Best meat in the world, apparently. Sweet and tender. So he was really angry. Started raving. He said that the veld was dry, desert-like, and the ...uh, community of porcupines was stretched out, each one very distant from the others, and by killing this one the fishermen may've broken the chain, the network, and the local porcupines could well go extinct, just for the sake of one fat-assed meal. He said something, I

remember, he said: "Everyone around here thinks nature's just a free lunch." Anyway, I was about to ask him to come up to my room, for comfort, you understand—'

'Uh-huh.'

'-when these two ugly old guys came in and sat down at the other end of the bar. The barman whispered that he was expected to go chat with them about whether they'd managed to torture and murder any sea-creatures today, and off he went. And after a while he called me over, said I might find this interesting.'

'And did you?'

'Not as such. No. Not at the time. Actually, I was wondering if undoing another button on my shirt would alter the general tone of the discourse. Or if he would just go on rabbiting about frikken porcupines.'

'I love porcupines.'

'You too? So anyway, I went over and the two old guys were also very sad and angry. They pointed to a long sandbank in the estuary, exposed at low tide – we could see two guys poking around in the mud by the river channel - and about waist deep at high. A unique little ecosystem, actually. Interesting. This sand, constantly shifting, but the same as when they were kids. They said these ... shellfish, that look like old straight-razors, you know?' Ariel nodded. 'When they were young the sandbank was full of them, you could see the little breathing holes in the eel grass everywhere. But now there was nothing. Gone. Best bait for the estuary, see. And that sandbank was the only place in the whole river, the sea, the bay, for miles around, where they could live. God knows, they had probably evolved there, for millions of years. Maybe others, other estuaries. I don't know. But what I'm saying is ...'

'Extinct.'

Stephi nodded. 'Then one old guy told another charming story. He's from Port Elizabeth, and said he lived near another river, in the suburbs there. And when he was

young, he would play in the river, and sometimes lie down next to a mudbank that had mudskippers, to watch. You know what they are?’

‘Little fish that can crawl on the land?’

‘*Genau*. Now, I love mudskippers. Little bulgy eyes. Walking on their little fins. Holding a little sac of water for breathing ...’

‘And they are evolving ...’

‘Changing into land animals, like–’

‘Like us. That step.’

‘Yeah. Mudskippers. Amazing. Anyway, the person who owned that part of the river slapped a big slab of concrete right on top of the mudbank. No more mudskippers. The old man was really bitter. He said: why? So the dickhead could have an easier stroll to the river? So he can sit in a chair and fish for a few hours of his fatuous life on the planet?’

‘Property values.’

‘Yeah, so a unique life form has less value than a slab of concrete? Anyway, my barman was drinking this all up. Like, feeding the fire inside him. I began to feel extremely like, not only horny, but intimate, at the same time? Actually upset ... anyway,’ she shook her head.

‘So we drank for a while, talked, played pool. Watched the tide come in over the sandbank. I flirted, it was nice. The old men got all disgusting with me, but they were only having fun. Looking out for me, now I think about it. Then these other two guys came in. Big, loud ugly shirt, all primary colors. Fucken nimrod. Been fishing. They got talking with my barman and then they told him, all proud, all *bragging* like they know what’s what, told him that they had found two razor shellfish, right down by the edge of the sandbank.

‘He like hiccupped in shock, and said “What did you do with them?” And the loud shirt said, “Went fishing, of course.”

'You know that technique in the movies, where you see the fantasy that goes on in someone's head, how he reacts to something all brave and clever or whatever, and then they like rewind and show the scene again how it really happens? I had a moment like that, with him. I saw him lift a whiskey bottle and smash it right through the nimrod's face. Then pick up a pool cue and drive it into his eye. Blood, and screams, and gurgling; it was wild. In reality there was this kind of red wave coming from the barman, but he just stood there, clenching his jaw. The nimrod didn't even notice.

'Then he asked them, in this like quiet, controlled voice, if they had caught anything.

'And they said no. No fish anymore, you know. And all he did was turn around and walk out of the bar.'

'Coincidence,' said Ariel. 'The old men, then the nimrod.'

'Yeah. Funny.'

'But what's your point, exactly?'

'People. Attitude. This attitude now that nature has to pay for itself.'

'Well, if it doesn't, then—'

'Squished mudskipper.'

'Okay. Back to the bushveld. I understand that game animals are quite valuable.'

'Ja, but only in a symbolic way. Some might cost a lot of money, but they aren't necessary. If there is no willing buyer, no tourists, then their value ... '

'Gone.'

'Talking absolutes. Then what are they worth?'

'Meat.'

'Ariel, people are animals. Everything that motivates us – sex, power, prestige, territory, even love – comes from our animal nature. Obeys it. And our instinct is to compete with the other animals, and evolution hasn't given us a brake pedal. We grow to a point of collapse, and consume every living thing in the process.'

‘Well, no. Not always. Look at Europe. We’ve managed to balance—’

‘Europe, please. Bloody garden. Lucky to have so much rain. How many lands in the world were once forest, are turned into farmland, then dustbowls? Or, nowadays, massive urban sprawl. And while it’s farmland it can be great; rolling green hills, cows and sheep and piggies, all that pastoral hippy shite. Feeding off the decay of the real world. Europe, fuck me. Once you used to have lion and leopard, you know? And rhino, and snakes. Bears and wolves. Elk and antelope. Everything. How much is left? From Ireland to Japan. Russia. India. China. The Middle East, don’t make me laugh.’

‘Not much.’

‘You’re an optimist.’

‘No. Yes.’

‘Glad we got that cleared up. Only things that can be eaten, is what. Bunny rabbits, deer. Raspberries. Goats. You tamed nature.’

‘Well, shouldn’t we?’

‘NO, stupid!’ Stephi’s shout punched out of the open window and wandered, lost for awhile across the desolate field, then faded into nothing. A mouse, eyes up at imaginary hawks, heard it, snuffled the air, then went back to mousing about its business.

They drove for a while in recoil. Stephi asked awkwardly for an apple, her voice trembling with both apology and suppressed hilarity. Then she collapsed back into her rave, crunching her words through the juices as if nothing had happened:

‘In a way, okay,’ she conceded. ‘Europe. They have highly organized cities, and distinct rural and wild areas. Lots of man-grown forest. Not that I really know what I’m talking about, having been stuck here in the bum of the planet my whole life and all. But I’m still trying to get to my point.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m stuck here with you. All day long, as you drive at sixty. And all.’

Stephi glanced at the speedo and accelerated. She peered through the windscreen, her eyes apprehensive, then turned to Ariel and said: 'Please. Let's try and finish this. We'll never have this day again, our whole lives. I'm sorry.'

'Of course Stephi. Yes. So far I agree with everything you have said.'

'I'm getting there. Difficult, this subject. Like a word on the tip of your tongue.'

'Because it includes everything. Let me try.'

'Uh ... okay?'

'First principles. Historical context. During apartheid and colonialism, the people were dispossessed of their land.'

'Yup,' sighed Stephi.

'Whites people developed it into farms, game farms and nature reserves, from which black people were excluded ownership. So nature preservation became associated with white privilege.'

'My people starve, while yours sit on the stoep, dopping cocktails. Care more about animals than people.'

'So now some black people find themselves in ownership of nature reserves. Previously their relationship was one of poaching. Now they are given ... what's the word? ... stewardship. Access. If they wished, they could systematically kill all the animals for food.'

'Well, there *are* laws ...'

'But political will? Your story shows that there is a consensus amongst rural people that one can consume from nature with no thought, no responsibility, for the consequences. The doubters are silent, like your pussycat little barman. The enforcers of the law come from that community. And of course there is no developed sense of ecology, little awareness that if one species is destroyed then others will follow.'

‘It’s like a bloody supermarket. Where you don’t have to pay. All you need is a length of wire, go for a walk and lay a snare, go back home and sit around doing nothing. Congratulate yourself on how clever you are. All that meat, for so little work.’

‘And, of course,’ Ariel continued, ‘the makers of policy – civil society, the authorities – view nature as a *resource*, in the context of their primary mandate of poverty alleviation.’

‘If you say stakeholders I’ll throw you out my car,’ muttered Stephi.

Ariel laughed. ‘Okay, with *our* parents ... we both know what I mean.’

‘The line.’

‘Yes. The line. Forgive me, I must use another word: sustainability. This world-view, this concept of integration of the natural world and the human, reconciling each one’s need for the other, is founded on reason. Sustainability. Over-exploitation of natural resource as means of production results in the destruction thereof. It’s integrated into the paradigm.’

Stephi screamed out of the window at a startled passing Uno driver. Ariel laughed so hard she banged her head on the roof. She wriggled around and tucked her legs in, kicking at the windscreen with her brand-new boots.

‘Ohhh ...’ Stephi wiped her face with both hands. Camilla wobbled uncertainly. ‘Whadda load of old bollocks. Sustainability means you kill all the dangerous animals, fence up the others for food, dig up the trees and the little grasses and flowers and insects and stuff, all the wonderful intricate beautiful *life*, and plant crops. If the be-all and end-all is sustainability, why we need the wilderness? It’s not very nice actually living there, you know. Lot of the creatures are really nasty. Go swim in your cotton hippy dress with a crocodile. Go integrate yourself with a pride of lion. Thorns and snakes and parasites. Who needs it?’

‘People who need more out of their lives than living in the city. Only nature, and imitation of nature, is truly beautiful. Tourists. Everyone.’

'But only if the tourist buck is bigger than profits from other land use. Oh, I know there's zoning and protected areas and all that legal stuff. But that can be changed. By the people. This is a democracy. And the animals can't afford a lawyer.'

Ariel frowned and turned away and watched the bleak horizon roll past.

'Hey!' Stephi slapped the steering wheel. 'All this, from two of the dumb-down generation. So cool! Carry on!'

'Well ... all we have talked about is from one world-view. From people, and their needs. There is another which comes from the opposite direction, through the eyes of the animals. And, of course, through those of ... some people—'

'Bunnyhuggers. Naïve green fools, whackjobs.'

'They have no power and no money, yet think they're better than you.'

'Always bring you down. Is why I'm *not* one.' Stephi caught a glimpse of Ariel's warm smile, and turned away.

'Okay, okay. I am. I confess.'

The road stretched out like the future before them, and they lapsed into easy silence, tired now, their thoughts like lapping water at the edge of a deep lake. They hit the tollgate, passed coins to a girl in a concrete fishbowl, and rattled off again. Stephi began to hum, feeling good. Soon the mute exhausted flatness of the eastern plateau would crack and tumble, spilling Camilla into subtropical green in the face of the morning sun.

They opened their mouths together.

'You first,' said Ariel.

'Bitte.'

'Your point, if I may? The wall. The fence. You are talking about the fence. Between us and nature? You're saying it must be maintained.'

'Yeah. Unless we use nature on our side of the fence. Then it can be used and abused as much as you want. I'm not sentimental. Or any other kind of mental. It's logic. The natural world is a treasure, and it must be protected, or it will not survive. We ... we should work out the ecosystem of ... everything, how it all fits together, all the species, and how much land *they* all need. Of *all* the animals,' she slapped Camilla's dashboard. '*All* the biospheres. Then people can have the rest and do what they like. Look how much land we have already. Look. Fields and empty lots and parking and patches of grass and highways,' she snorted. 'You'll see. In the countryside. Huts on top of a hill, all this dry baked useless earth all around, bushes, a few goats, chickens scratching around. It's not *more* land they need. Can't make proper use of the land they already have. They need vegetables, and irrigation, and composting. All that stuff. Bit of knowledge. Bit of hard work. Stop looking over where the grass is greener.'

'I don't know. I've never been to ... wherever it is you are talking about. Whoever *they* are.'

'You'll see. And to make it a *policy* that people hold out their hands to the wilderness for their fucken resources?' She shook her head, and Ariel nodded.

'But ultimately ... why do we need the wild?' asked Ariel. 'All the animals, the plants, the unnecessary little bugs. Why not just wipe them all out, spread out over the earth, keep what is useful. Towns and cities and nice little parks, from coast to coast.'

'That's the question.'

'Look at it this way. Growth is finite. Land is limited. Eventually, we'll reach an end point. It's inevitable. So instead of delaying the inevitable we could draw a line in the sand now, say no further, from here on the land belongs to the planet. *Our* line, not one drawn by geography, by the sea, by the future's history. And turn back inward and

intensify, develop, build cities, industry, agriculture. Take control of our destiny. Guide inevitable entropy to equilibrium through reason and political will, internalize growth. *Create* a culture that is self-sustaining and renewable, human ecology, with the same kind of science you were talking about ... you know, the natural ecosystems, planning, recycling, all that, through rational intention rather than eventual historical necessity, and all *within* land we've designated our own.'

But Stephi wasn't listening, as Camilla was being nudged towards the backside of a treacly pantechnicon by a manic little Nissan bobbing at her tail. The road curved down in a narrow sweep between mottled cliff-faces like loaves of monstrous bread. The valley was fertile, Ariel noted through the dust-speckled glass. A farm cut neat lines of verdant field right up to the dry feet of scree and slope.

Thick bushveld peppered the hillside, the green dark and mysterious in the crevices between the cliffs. *What lives up there, away from the water?* she wondered, *what is left?*

Stephi swore and glared back and forth and eventually escaped through a bypass lane. Sweating, she collapsed back in her seat. 'Ja ja ja, Ariel. Hanna hanna. Blah blah blah. Yada yada yada. Whaaat-ever. We just two punks sitting in a box. Who cares what we say? Make no difference. And what are you saying, anyway? You want a planned economy? What *are* you?' She glanced over, eyes wide. 'All the fancy words. And in English too! What are you? A communist?'

'What is that? What does sustainability mean? We need capitalism to fuel growth, but growth is finite. What's the end game? What's the plan? What else can there be, but some form of communism? Or eventual disaster.'

'I don't know. I just love the bush. The plants, the animals, the soft feel of the air at night. The way the air itself seems to be alive.' Stephi spoke softly and slowly, each word placed just so. 'I don't want people to fuck up any more of it, Ariel. I don't know about you. I don't know you, really. We'll see if you can ... love.'

They came to a fork in the dirt road and slewed across the sand-ripples to a halt. A cloud of dust billowed up from their wake and past the open windows, a bridal trail the color of old blood. Ariel puzzled between a map book and the print-out of hand-drawn directions. She tapped the spot with a fingertip as Stephi rolled into the shade of a road-side acacia and eased up the handbrake.

‘Here we are. We go right.’ She offered the map and looked around. ‘Surely there should be a sign post?’

‘There she was.’ Stephi pointed to a splintered wooden stump within a haphazard ring of car-glass. The road to the right was less traveled; drifts eased fingers of sand into the two rutted tire tracks. Dust settled about them and teased away in the soft breeze. A bird called, dropping a note of query into the rumble of Camilla’s idling engine. A monarch butterfly fluttered by. Stephi rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder, stretching out the tension, while Ariel tugged her jeans from her crotch and flapped the hem of her sweat-damp T-shirt against her throat.

‘Can you smell it?’ Stephi stretched back, eyes closed, and let the scents of clean bush flow down into her. ‘*That’s* what I’m talking about.’

Ariel rested her eyes on the plants negotiating space in the undershade an arm’s length from her open window. No longer a green blur, the intricacy and the slow, interlocking courtesy of each trembling leaf hung in delicate focus. She savored their strangeness, wondering: *Who are you? I know none of your names. Like a baby. Circled by living things whose names I don’t know. Here, I’m so ... I’m so ignorant.*

As Stephi dropped the handbrake a bird’s head popped out from behind a spiny bush, ogled Ariel with one luminous, golden eye, and disappeared again.

'Stephi, wait!'

'What?' She stamped on the brake.

'Something there. A bird. A *big* bird. There.' She pointed. 'Behind that bush.'

'Which bush?'

'You see the fence? Three wires?'

'The cattle fence.'

'Just in front.'

Stephi nodded, gave a spurt of reverse for a better view and cut the engine.

For a while nothing happened. Then, dignified, self-conscious, slightly loony-looking, a large bird stepped out. It stood over five feet, a long neck, head held high, a hairstyle of swept-back black feathers bobbing back-and-forth as it paced towards them, its ochre beak a jabbing arrow-tip in the direction of the right fork. It stopped and stared back with a not-quite-there air, and said, *wum wum wum*.

'Bustard.'

Ariel turned her head bustard-stiffly in mock-affront. 'Excuse me? What did you call me?'

Stephi snorted. 'Not you, stupid. The bird.'

'The bird's a bastard?'

'No, man. *Bustard*. Kori bustard, actually. The largest flying bird in the world. Lemme introduce. Bustard, meet the bitch.'

Ariel nodded, stiffly. The bustard ogled.

'Shame, hey. They've been shot out like almost everywhere. Like big weird turkeys. A few left in the Karoo, I think. And the Kruger Park, of course. Probably where this one came from. Might be wise to get back home, big birdy.'

But he continued his stately walk. Then from beyond the cattle fence a tiny jewel fluttered through the clearing and alighted, twittering frantically, on the bustard's back. Stephi gasped and sat up.

'Oh *cool*. I've read about this.'

'What?'

'That's a carmine bee-eater. They have a symbiotic ... um-'

'Mutually beneficial.'

'Right, right ... relationship. Specific, between two individual birds. So actually more like a friendship, y'know? The bustard kicks up the insects as it walks through the grass, and provides a walking platform for the bee-eater to catch them. The bee-eater buzzes around, warns the bustard of danger ... *look*,' she whispered.

The bee-eater was fabulous, all jujed up in a powder-pink vest and little sky-blue breeches, a foxy little cobalt eye-mask. She was throwing a hissy fit, flapping wrist-bones, a hue of just-so midnight blue on her wing feathers like some utterly flutterly headdress. The bustard persevered its slow, butch strut towards Camilla, his eyes fixed on Ariel, and said, *wum*, again. The bee-eater, ditzzy with exasperation, flew up into the bush, screaming, *terk? terk?*

'The bustard,' Ariel spoke soft as a puff of dust. 'It's ... communicating?'

'Yeah? Odd girl. Listen, let's go. I'm dying for a shower.'

Ariel dropped her feet from the dashboard as they turned into the painted-slate driveway, counting paper with her fingers without looking down. Two gates, in and out, a brick-and-glass cubicle straddling an island of aloes between. Four creosote bluegum A-frames, lashed at the tips by metal cable and clamped by a six-foot crest of assegai and shield, sported a neat cut of thatch and stretched over the gates from one electric fence to the other. Strelizia along the drive hinted color, the cranes-head flowers bowing like cartoon bustards. The wind gusted through their open windows. A young woman with an enormous backside stepped out from the cubicle, dressed in a starchy maroon uniform, very military. She saluted resignedly with curled fingers as they sighed to a halt.

Stephi leaned her arm out the window. 'Jislaaik! They make you *salute* people?'

The woman flashed a grin, bright in the shaded black.

'You salute me again I'll report you to the manager.' Consternation twisted her face. 'Only joking, man. I mean if I reported you for, then ... ag, never mind. Just don't salute me, okay? Please. I'm not your baas. Papers.' She flapped a weary hand at Ariel.

'Word, sister,' said the guard, swinging open the gate with a flourish. 'Go on down to the office, where the paper people are.'

The road felt hand-made under Camilla's creaking shocks, designed to make speed crawl, slope and turn and abrupt little speed-bumps. Brass arrows showed the way. Reception was the size of a barn, rawstone-and-thatch, sheets of trembling plate-glass around the open front door. Side-windows glittered pretty handpainted stained-glass; sunbird, hoopoe, blue crane.

They stretched as they climbed out, shaking fatigue from stiff fingers. A jacaranda above jangled the last of its flowers in a freshening breeze. The path was carpeted in purple bloom.

'Good afternoon, ladies!' They turned to a big, nice-looking man smiling down. 'I trust you had a safe trip?'

'... safe,' said Stephi.

'My name's Bob.'

Stephi said nothing. 'Hi, Bob,' said Ariel.

'Welcome, please. Don't *hesitate* to give a shout if you need anything. I'm the manager.'

Ariel glanced at Stephi. Her cheeks were glowing pink and her lips smiled half-agape. She nodded wide-open blue eyes.

'Just a word,' Bob continued, clasping his hands together. 'This is a safe place. No big five. No lion leopard buffalo rhino elephant. The animals here are not supposed to be dangerous. You're free to walk. But,' he raised a blunt, dirt-red forefinger and twinkled a sun-seamed eye, 'it's not safe in the bush itself. Do you understand? There are snakes and spiders, kudu and warthog. Giraffe and zebra. They do *not* like to be disturbed. Please stick to the path.'

'Got it,' said Ariel.

'Enjoy your stay.' Bob turned awkward and abrupt and strode heavily across the drive. Past the trunk of the jacaranda he hovered and lurked, and watched their asses as they walked up the stairs. They slid behind the shimmer of glass and he doubled up, fists pummeling his thighs, with a pressure-valve moan, '*ee-eeewhooaaAAAH!*' Hot damn! He didn't know which one was *nicer*, the pale foreign Goth-in-civvies hanging her hair over her face, or the shy curvy blonde. Both! At the same time!

He staggered away from the tree and saw a reflection of himself, bent forward, thick arms hanging, flabby muscle clenched, big fat gut distended by the warp of the glass. A *gorilla!* He straightened up so quick that something snapped in his lower back. A crackle of pain swept up his spine and down his left leg. He limped off as fast as he could, fixing his balls with one hand, clutching his back with the other, grimacing and grunting with pain and lust.

Damn teeth hurt as well, but that was low on the list. He had ten minutes to pick up Savannah from holiday day-care and drop her off at Kay's, then shoot to town to buy an inlet valve for the sewage pump, fix the damn thing, wash, get back to the kitchen and check on the motley Shangaan, Zulu, and Swazi who ran the place. He bundled his backside into the cab of the HiLux and dragged his legs in with hands under his knees.

The road was negotiated in mental automatic. In the car, Bob liked to sit and think, driving familiar thoughts through a roadmap of cliché. All things considered, life was good, at the end of the day. Give credit where credit is due. He had given a hunnerd-

and-ten percent, got his act together, and today was the first – *ow* – day of the rest of his life. He had a good job, he provided for his daughter (*keep the promise*); he was good friends with his ex-wife. Well, not exactly friends, not with Kay. But *something* was changing, some thaw in her attitude, maybe one day – God above, let it be soon – he might, ah ... consummate the rest of his promise.

He accepted a flicker across his mind's eye, a gossamer apology for his misplaced lust - a memory of Kay, dancing over raindrop grass on bare feet, happy, so beautiful - then focused on driving. The wind swirled a twister on the road before him, a fey, gyrating funnel of sticks and leaves and a single white feather. He cut it in half.

The girl at the gate saluted smartly, laughing. He ducked his head and tucked a tuft of graying hair behind his ear in sort-of response. Hated that shit. Saluting and uniforms and *ja baas nee baas*. Humiliating. All because of that asshole, *Mister Stein*, his boss. Baas Stein. Oh ja, that was the other thing. He had to meet Stein "after dinner, if you please, Robert". *Bob's* not good enough, *noooo* sir. Asshole.

He reached for a cigarette and then put it back.

Savannah was seated alone on the low wall outside the school gate, separate from the knots and eddies of the other kids. She held her case to her lap, arms straight, head down, skirt smoothed out. She recognized the sound of his engine and raised her head.

He squared his shoulders and sat up straighter, everything subtly clearer. She always did that. He thought: *my life hangs by the string of your love* then shook his head, *pow*, startled by originality. He geared down and braked, sweeping to a big, macho halt. She always loved that. The faint glow about her smiling eyes, *this is my Daddy - you better watch out!*

He frowned. Most days she would be swinging her bag in circles and skipping towards him, but today she just sat, head turned aside, as if even standing up would be

just too upsetting. His back groaned. He touched a finger to the hooter, sighed, opened the door, grunted his legs out and hobbled over.

'What's wrong, Sav?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh yes? Then why-?' Then he noticed the smear of blood on her collar and bent closer, ignoring the pain in his back. Red dust traced a mottled pattern over her shoulder, more dirt on her back. He read what had happened: she had landed flat, and hard, and then rolled away. He brushed away a shard of stone, trailed his fingers through her hair, and cupped her chin in his palm. A punch, he could see, to the side of the nose, bruising on her nostril and under the eye, little thumbnail-scrape on the upper lip. Just a punch, not a beating.

'Who did this, Sav?'

'Nobody.' She curled her lips. It was a familiar response to Bob somehow ... then he placed it. Dog in fear. He had seen it on Savannah's face recently, this trembling twitch of her upper lip, baring the front teeth.

He let go of her chin. Fear?

'Come on. Tell me. Who did this?'

'I had a blood nose.'

'And fell down on the same day?'

She considered him, calculating. 'I fell down on my face.'

'You fell down flat on your back. After a punch on the nose.'

She smiled and closed her eyes. 'World's greatest detective, right?'

'Right. Could have been.'

'Don't be disappointed, Daddy.'

'Oh, Sav,' he tried to hug her but she slipped out and ran lightly across the dust to the car. But the door was locked, so she stood there, straight-backed and slender and shading her eyes with her hand, squinting reproachfully while he fumbled for his keys.

Cripey! He was fuming. Have to settle him somehow.

'Daddy? I have to tell you something.'

'What?'

'Please don't be cross with me.'

'With *you*? Why would-?'

'I hit the other girl back. I hit her very hard and made her cry. Then I chased them all across the field.'

'You did?'

'Yes. Please don't be cross.'

'Why, you know I don't approve of violence.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'It's better to turn the other cheek.' He settled back and wheezed, smiling like a sunflower.

Yeah, right. She turned her head to cut the conversation. Outside flowed past like a green river on the TV-shaped window. She thought about the lie she had just told. Imagine if she *had* hit back, chased those beasts around. She pictured it, running hard and strong, throwing Fists of Power! Then she thought that this ... *fantasy* could take the place of what had really happened, of *reality*, in her memory. It offered itself, like a band-aid. Felt like cheating, like remembering TV as your own experience, and only weird kids did stuff like that. She let it slip like rubbish out the car window, hugging herself, miserable as the f-word.

'We're going to the Principal.'

Oh no. 'No, Daddy. I ... I dealt with it.'

'Yeah? And tomorrow? This is assault. What if the other girl goes to him first? Or lays a charge? I suppose ... you're only ten. But still ...'

'But no-one knows.'

'But what about the other girl?' He glanced sharply over, and she flinched from the fierceness in his eyes. 'You chased them? *Someone* must have seen. What if she's speaking to them right now, laying the blame on you? I should turn around - damn! No time!'

Savannah couldn't stand this anymore, feeling so frightened, so scared, so small and scared and scared and scared and now she had to be frightened of her daddy because he was going to find out she lied with all the fierce questions and she was *so* tired. The tears rose like wind within her, burning through her dust-reddened eyes, and she collapsed in on herself with a desolate cry. Bob stared, stamped on the brake and threw his arms over her small, curled-up body, twisting his body right over.

They lay in the hug for a while as she wept. Bob replayed what she had said and how she had said it, and worked out the lie. And *why* she had told it, what the lie said of her character. He had to restrain himself from hugging her tighter in pride and gratitude and kissed her hair, fiercely. After a while she grew still, and stiffened, and he could sense she was uncomfortable, that she wanted him off. He lifted himself up and then froze in place.

'Daddy? Get off me, please?'

'I ... can't.'

'Daddy, really. I'm okay. I'm fine now. You can get off me, *please!*'

'My back ... can't move.'

'What?'

'I ... mmm*trying.*'

She squirmed away a few inches to get a look at his face, but could only see his knotted old brow under wisps of thinning hair. It hung purple and sweaty and reminded her of a baboon bum. She started giggling.

'Not ... funny. I can't move.'

'Are you serious?'

'No, playing the fucking fool! Sorry. Sorry, munchkin. Give it a second. Sorry.'

'Just don't die on me, okay? That's all I need.'

'No ... just cramp. Seized. Wait, lemme try again ...' He eased himself up and then bellowed King Kong breath all over her, a faint poo-and-yoghurt smell as he fell forward again. He hung on, one hand hooked on the cliff's edge of the cubbyhole, the other a ham around the headrest, not touching her anywhere. She curled, incredulous. Their noses pinged once, like a doggie hullo.

'What if I tickle you?' She smiled brightly up. He coughed a laugh, then found he couldn't stop. Each laugh hurt like hell, but each was sure as hell on earth worth it.

'Sav, my love. Unlock your door. You can slide out.'

She glanced out at the jungle outside. 'No, daddy. If something happens you can't help me.'

'eeee ... ah, reach into my jacket pocket. Cell. Call y'mom.'

So she reached up and tickled him, and he whimpered like a dog in winter. She made him say, 'please,' and then, 'pretty please,' and then, 'pretty please with knobs on.' Eventually she had mercy and tugged out the phone, her tongue peeking out from the corner of her mouth.

'Can't I not help, somehow?'

'Don't use no double negative.'

'Help *you*, you silly man.'

'Maybe. Prop up my chest.'

She could only get one forearm in, and the pressure unbalanced him. 'No, sweetheart. Not working. Take it away.' She sighed and rolled a drumbeat on the seat with her fingers.

'I know! Let's have a conversation!'

'... nnnnggg ...'

'Come on! You can do better than that!'

'Ohhkay, whadja wanna be when you grow up?'

'You *know* already. A doctor. Bo-oring. You have no conversational abilities whatsoever. You're like a totally whack dad. The mayor of Sucksville.'

'Thanks.'

'Hmmm. Let me mop your fevered brow.' She tugged up the corner of her shirt but could only reach his nose. She dabbed away the pearl of sweat dangling at the tip and wrinkled her own. He was beginning to smell really, really bad.

Her bare belly disturbed him, and he told her to pull the shirt down. He slowly tried to twist his torso back, but the pain cramped him again. He squirmed and tried to roll away, but his fat hips were wedged under the steering wheel and his right foot caught under the brake. He eyed the leather edge of her seat and wondered if he could drop his right hand in fast and prop himself up. No, too risky. Might fall on her. He silently cursed his fat stupid belly, his lazy uncut arms, a litany of swearing as form to the miasma within him – the pain, the cry to the betrayal of his youth, upped and gone and left him broken, the chained-down fear of a crippled old age. The incoherence of the swearing picked up a rhythm, a beat, a counter-curse which formed into words: *None of this matters. Savannah matters. Only Savannah matters.*

And as for Sav down there, she had a moment, a very important moment. It was a good moment, but she didn't know that yet, as it came to her with gifts of revulsion and dread. She grasped, in a visceral heartbeat, her father's mortality, the weakness of his flesh, how his stinky body suffered to carry his soul. Daddy wouldn't always be there. Daddy often couldn't help. Daddy was only human. She felt it to be the end of something, some part of her life forever lost, but it was also a beginning. She became

angry with him, but from that day on she took control of her life, grew smarter and harder, made alliances with the other clever kids and dealt with her enemies, despite everything that happened that summer.

A car pulled up alongside, blaring Green Day. Bob hoped it wasn't the cops - *this'd* take some explaining. But it was Kay's shocked gasp. She cracked open the passenger door and he creaked his head up to once-over her snug jeans. Looked pretty fit from where he was hanging.

'Bob! What on earth are you doing?'

'Sav. Explain.'

'I ... I told him I won a race, and he hugged me, and his back went kaplooney!'

Upside-down Mom took a step back.

'Don't worry. He's not gonna die yet.'

'A lot of things he's not gonna do,' said Kay, and burst out laughing. She stepped forward and whisked Savannah out with one fluid pull. The child dusted herself off, raised her arms and howled '*Freedom!*' at the sky, hopping from foot to foot.

'Okay Bob! Thanks for everything. See ya!' Kay was still laughing.

'Fffff ... funny.'

'Have a nice day!' Her voice receded to the front of the car.

'Wait! I got money!'

Rapid footsteps and the driver's door swept open.

'Hmmm. Only fifty bucks for the massage.'

'Done. How much for sex?'

'*That's* going to cost you. In exercise, healthy eating and a positive attitude. Now shush.' She placed a cool hand between his shoulders blades and then gently moved it down.

Was that a yes? A maybe? His balls stirred, painfully, squeezed between his thighs. She began kneading his love-handle by his spine, muttered, 'Knotted here,' his skin heating under her hand. After a while she grasped his shoulder and pressed into his spine. 'Okay, bring your leg ... here. I've got you, Bob. Just relax.' He found himself turning and then seated again, waves of pain pulsating through this beast of a body.

'You sure?'

'Absolutely. Don't worry. Under control. I'll drive back and put some ice on this.'

'I can't help you tonight. Got a meeting. Thanks for the maintenance.'

'I gave you an extra five hundred.'

She lifted her eyes to his. 'For Sav, right?'

'Right.' He lowered his face and started the engine.

Savannah was already in the car, eyes shadowed by her hand, don't-talk-to-me face on. She looked dirty, hot and thoughtful. Kay let her be. She had her own thinking to do.

Kay's thing was, she worried all the time. About everything. Worried morning, noon and night. She worried in her sleep and worried when awake, worried herself into her clothes, poured worry in her cornflakes and brushed her teeth with worry, staring emptily at worried eyes in the bathroom mirror. She knew all the moods of Worry, the tentative, absent-minded, angry, anxious, passionate. He even lent her fleeting moments of happiness, came into her bed at night, worried her rough on the kitchen table, sensuous in the bath. Only death could do them part, and they worried about that too.

And they had found their vocation: professional worriers employed, for a very worrying single salary, by the Environmental Conservation Society of Southern Africa. He walked with her in public, honed, fierce and fearless, charming and positive,

articulate and well-informed. Many a developer had withered under Worry's fire at public participation meetings, many a doubter swayed to their cause, and they knew a lot about biology, ecology, climatology, geohydrology, chemistry, energy, mining, the local environment and the law.

But now, driving carefully down the road with most of her awareness in her hands, feet and eyes, the pre-Christmas lull sultry in the air, Kay only chatted with Worry, about the new maid, and whether she should leave Savannah alone with her. And then about the electricity bill, the widget for the cistern, money, this rattle in ECSSA's high-mileage Mazda, enough time for a shower? She interrupted and turned to Savannah.

'What do you want?'

Savannah shrugged and wrinkled a hidden nose. 'I dunno. Garden salad. Have we still got ostrich steaks?'

'Yes.'

'I'll make it, Mom. Don't worry.'

Kay touched her arm and geared up out of a corner. 'Stupid meeting. Waste of time.'

'You go, mom-girl,' faintly. 'You blow them away.'

Kay began to worry about the regional board meeting, the glint of knives at her back. Last week at a seminar the chairperson had approached her, a thin, khaki-dapper little white man, and he had mumblingly interjected, with a prim smile and sliding eyes, that she was "going overboard" into chitchat about the society's objection to a proposed toll road. Was the hint ambiguous? A threat to her job, as in, walk the plank? – Savannah coughed and blew her nose, and Kay gave an impatient shake of her golden, leonine hair.

'How was your day?'

'Great! I played soccer, and I fell down, and I whacked my face! And I nearly scored a goal.'

'*What?* Are you—'

'Fine, mom. I'm fine. Don't worry. It's spank to be outside, getting exercise, very healthy. Better than school. Mom?'

'What?'

'What's got sharp teeth and a long tail and comes out of your bum?'

Worry leapt to attention again.

'A kakadile!'

And Kay laughed and relaxed and lived, for a while, in the moment. That was Savannah's gift today, best of all: a little earthy joke.

An inlet pipe to the vegetable tunnels from the compost sump was blocked below the filter, so Churchill dug into the soft red clay. The blade of his spade overturned an earthworm and he tossed it to an attendant dog, who snuffled in disgust and wandered away. The worm raised a blind, quizzically-pointed head, swaying in all directions. Churchill clicked his tongue and strolled over, scooped it in a gentle claw and dropped it onto a potato bed.

A good day. He hummed in satisfaction and spat on the ground. A good, hardworking day. He had put his back into it alongside his six men and four women, and they had responded cheerfully and done all the day's jobs. Leaves had been swept up and hoarded in compost, another bluegum cut down and cut up. The mango trees had been sprayed and the cattle ambled back from fresh new grass in a gut-swinging loiter. He began to dig again and then paused, turning towards the approaching noise of Kay's car. He smiled and wiped the dirt from his hands.

The girl came running first. 'Howzi Church!'

'Savannah Tohill!' Kay strode cheerfully after. 'Good afternoon *Mister* Ngcobo, please. Sorry. Gets her manners from her father.'

'As well as her surname, Mizz Quail.'

'Mister Ngcobo!' Savannah sketched a courtly bow. 'Most noble landlord, and well-read guy. What's the quote of the day?'

'Let us see. Love may fail but courtesy will prevail. Kurt Vonnegut.'

'And what are you reading?'

'Very interesting poems, young sprat.' He pulled a wad of fourway-folded paper from his shirt. 'Women's prison poetry. Printed from the internet. Please. I am done.' He handed it over and she took it the polite way, two-handed, no racial irony in the gesture of respect.

She sniffed and unfolded importantly. 'Amateur?'

'But heartfelt. The third one is very good.'

Kay averted her smile and her delight away. Two women, walking back to their quarters, saw the tableau, the frame of the black man and the white woman, just so around the child. They paused and watched, their murmurs like honey in the air. A wind gusted through, rippling their skirts, and they moved on.

'Here, Churchill. I brought the rent.' Kay handed the wad over. He tucked it into a pocket without glancing.

'Are you,' she said, and paused. Always, this pause after business, a courtesy before even, unhurried conversation, where both understood the value of listening. Wind stirred the afternoon air as it softened toward twilight. He put aside the spade, his dignity carried lightly but self-consciously, and Kay liked how her eyes deferred away from him. *A leopard*, she thought again, glancing up with pleasure at his small, shaved, pointed head, penetrating gold-flecked eyes. *This is his territory. I respect him with my eyes.*

'Are you ... um, planning anything for Saturday night, Church?'

'I ...'

'I wondered if, would you like to have supper with us? Sav 'n me?' The words were blurted, for this was the first such invitation, ever.

'Yes. Sure, Kay. Yes. Thank you.'

'You wanna bring someone?'

'I have no-one. Perhaps my son?'

'Perfect. About seven?'

Churchill smiled and met her eyes. 'Thank you. Um. How's Blessing working out?'

'She's totally useless.' Oops. Also blurted out. The new maid was a relative of Churchill, and she had collapsed into Kay's place with a pleased, infantile lethargy. Blessing ate and ate and slept on the job, and sat staring at nothing while soil and lost objects crept at her ankles and the dishes piled up. Kay had seen how Savannah was erecting a universe of silence into the small domestic space between herself and Blessing, and how Blessing didn't give a damn. It was like, Kay's the mom, Blessing the surly big sister, and now she had *two* kids to look after. Worry, awake and in a nasty mood, hovered at Kay's shoulder. *And* she had embarrassed Churchill.

'Anyway, see you.' Kay stepped aside, flustered. 'Sav!' Girl had disappeared again. She looked one way, then another, and then felt Churchill's fingertips on the back of her hand, just a touch before they lifted away.

'Kay. Don't worry so.'

'Ah ...'

'I saw her go into the shed. Listen, I want to say something.'

'Hm?'

'Blessing, she means nothing to me. If she's useless, we can fire her. I mean, I will, if you want. This situation here,' he gestured, 'I'm the landlord and you're the tenant and also the only white people on the land. The way it is ... my people on one side and you and Savannah on the other ... it's just not *like* that. Okay? I'm trying to say that ... I ... value you,' his voice as soft as the wind. 'A lot. We all do. It feels like, *you're* the blessing, ahaha.'

'I ...'

'She's a child. Needs a kick up the backside. Be good for her to get fired. I'll find someone else.'

'No, just leave it, Churchill. I'll sort it out. And thanks-'

'MOMMY! KITTENS! KITTENS!' Savannah came hurtling from the shed.

'Oh no,' said Churchill, clutching his forehead. 'Sorry. I forgot.'

'Sav, you know we can't-'

'Just come and *look*, Mom. Don't think. Just come.'

'Well, okay.'

And when Kay saw their big-eyed, furry loveliness, she just didn't feel like fighting anymore. Savannah rubbed her sore nose and eventually chose the half-wildcat, cradled cute as a button-nose in the crook of her arm.

Churchill galloped down the steps past the goat kraal as if a thousand eyes were upon him, giddy with bashfulness. Then he slowed down and grinned at the sky. He'd said it at last, and she had heard. *And* she asked him over. Should he not have touched her? He shouted '*Hah*' and put a spring in his step.

He fetched the delivery note and unlocked the front door and then the security gate. Mosh was waiting in the Toyota bakkie, the back piled with boxed fruit and vegetables and newspaper-wrapped herbs.

'Hurry up, father. I'm late.'

'Here. Go. Go.'

He was so proud of his son. His pride followed the boy down the dirt driveway, waving and wishing him safety. Worked hard at the farm all afternoon fixing and learning the machinery, did the deliveries to the hotels and lodges, and then worked all night as a security guard at the game lodge on the other side of the public road.

Churchill paused, closed his eyes, said a brief prayer, and went back through the open front door.

About Moshoeshoe there's little to say. He was only nineteen that year, offering himself to the world with hope and energy, not knowing or caring if he'd live or die today. The future lay utterly unknown. He was privileged with education and skills, but still just a farm-boy. He was thinking of a career in tourism, and the job at the game lodge was a good step – next year, maybe college. Then maybe a Black Economic Empowerment deal. He had the collateral, or rather Dad had. More than half of his father's land was virgin bushveld, over there below Kay's cottage, and his father had raised the idea of joining it with the adjoining private game reserve, a hundred hectares between the farm and the Kruger Park. But he didn't think about it all too much, for now. He liked girls, and soccer, and music. He read books, though. His father was Zulu and his mother a ghostly Shangaan, and from both he had inherited a smidgen of centuries-old Arabic blood, almond eyes, a slanting, aquiline nose above his meaty African lips, within a blankness of face which bespoke no great crisis or suffering in his youth. From his mother he was tall, from father, powerful. The interest from the women was intense but reserved – he was still just a boy – and from the local girls a lot more active.

Mosh drove slouched back, elbow to the wind, and he was a lunatic at the wheel. Other drivers had wished him death, and he was clueless how often he brushed close to it. He had heard a young Springsteen once, on the radio, when parked and feeling empty, and loved him. He spun through the Y-fork past the broken sign and caught the eye of a girl, the gate guard coming back early from her shift, walking slowly along the dust-red verge. She saluted him, and he frowned.

The bustard, hiding from the girl, watched him speed past and tut-tutted. The carmine bee-eater flew out towards darkness as the girl looked away at the speeding bakkie, no headlights in the gloom.

Cell phone rang. 'Yebo!' he shouted, blocking the right side of his vision with smooth knuckles.

'Mosh? Bob Tohill.'

'Mister Bob!'

'Just Bob. Listen, when will you get to work?'

'About an hour?'

'Could you pop past the owner's suite after you've checked in? Speak to Stein? He's not answering his phone and the girls are busy at reception.'

'Yes sir. What must I tell him?'

'I've ...' muffled, 'hurt my back. Can't move. Won't make it. Tell him I'll speak to him tomorrow.'

'Yes sir. Is that all?'

'Yeah. Sure. Fuck him and his problems. I'm going to bed.' The phone went dead.

'Thanks, boy,' in a disapproving hiss.

Mosh stepped back from Stein's door as it closed, and gave what must be that shudder thing he had read about. Ugh, Stein was so ... *creepy*, so bald and old liver-spotted dead skin, eyes hollow and glinting with malice. Mean muthafucka mlungu. Old, but strong-looking, like a baboon exiled from his tribe. Like a vulture. Fucking snake-man.

He shuddered again, just for the feel of it, contorting his back like a breakdancer as he loped across the night-black lawn, and then whistled a chirping, three-note kwaito tune.

One more chore, the bowl of welcome-fruit to the two new guests at number 23, and he would begin his prowling, slipping through shadows from one end of the buildings to the other, waiting silent and watching for movement along the line between human territory and the bush. He loved the solitude, the quiet ... how dangerous he felt.

He knocked, and Heaven itself opened the door.

Ariel was flooded by this beautiful, beautiful boy, a rush right through her. Blood flowed to the tremor of her extremities, and she took one dizzy step forward. Smell rose all about them, like clean wet earth, like flowers, like fruit. Both mouthed a silent word as their eyes joined.

'Ari?' Stephi's voice came from far away. 'Who is it? Please, always make sure you know who it is before you open the door.'

But it was far too late for that.

‘Ssshhhh. Quiet. Now crawl.’ Ingwe watched her kitten from the corner of one eye and then twisted in irritation, hissing at the whimsical, white-tipped tail. ‘Tail down! Down! Ears flat. Look sharp!’

She threw back a nonchalant kid’s glance, like, *whatever*, then scratched at the grass, signaling her presence with a shiver of stems and a toss of russet fronds. Infuriated, Ingwe snarled and bit, releasing only when the young cat growled in pain. Then she pinned her down with one paw and spoke:

‘Child, you do not know these creatures. Terrible, terrible monsters. They hunt us. They hunt us. You think you are safe with me. You are but a baby. We are in danger, danger, danger ...’

‘I understand, mama.’

‘Now crawl. Quiet ... become the rock, the grass, the night.’

They crested the small koppie and snaked onto a flat, splintered rock, shaded from the moon by a crouching thornbush.

The leopard’s rock, only twenty meters from seven linked face-brick units, was a good hide for observing humans in their natural environment. The wind ran their scent up to the rock. A stream gleamed between them. The young cat saw, for the first time ever, several of these two-legged creatures in thatched, open caves, moving slowly about or sitting with staring pudgy faces awash in flickering blue light, or talking, yackety-yak. Fire trailed smoke, the embers like evil eyes in squat, black metal. She whimpered with fear and curiosity, her snarl glistening in the flat glare of the unnatural light.

‘Can you smell them?’ Mother’s breath, close.

'... no. So many smells ...'

'Search for the animal.'

They breathed for a while.

'Yes. Got it. Black flowers. Piss. Fruity. Not warthog? Monkey? Smells tasty.'

'No! When you smell that, hide! They are terrible!'

'They don't look like much,' she sniffed. 'Like they can't run or climb or fight. And look! You're right. Such small teeth. What is she *doing*?' A woman was laughing, head thrown back.

'I don't know. They kill from afar. Change the colour of their skins. Ride inside monsters. They point ...' she thrust her nose forward, '... they can kill from afar ...' but Ingwe's language could not describe the firesticks, or any of it.

'Look, mama. *They* are dangerous.'

Ingwe followed her daughter's eyeline. A male and female were padding slowly across the dark cropped grass, lithe as cats. She hadn't noticed their approach, and grunted her agreement. They stepped light, aware, creatures of the forest. One was white-faced and slender, black-haired in the moonlight; the other a black-head in a skin of a hideous maroon color. They moved quietly, voices barely carrying. Ingwe could see what they were up to.

'That man is their fighter, and guards against us. I know him. He is worthy of my fear. He has found a mate tonight.'

The two humans reached the water and paused, swaying together in a strange dance of opposites, he stretched up and pressing his shoulders into her aura, she a bending reed, swaying away, past and around his advances, her hands trailing free as feathers. The cats could both distantly remember this dance, flowing unchanged for millennia from these two ape's ancient, naked ancestors.

'Aaaaah mama. They are so beautiful.'

'Yes.'

'Why do they hate us?'

'Perhaps *they* don't, kitten.'

The child touched her head chakra to her mother's chin. They lay and watched, faintly thrumming with soft, feline pleasure.

Then two children broke the spell, shrieking and laughing up the stone path. The young leopard immediately tensed into hunting mode (but popped her fool head up too high) and snickered with excitement. Her tummy rumbled.

Ingwe calmed her with a breath. 'Let's go back. I will hunt.'

'Yes. I'm hungry now.'

Ingwe could not let her child feel how worried she was. If they had to make a dash through the human territory she wanted her fresh and mobile, not weighed down with dread, tharn with the unnatural light. The kitten *would* be careful not to be seen now, she had heeded the warning, but she also needed the wind of adventure to carry them through and over, under, any way through the gate and out.

But not yet, not yet. Still much too young. She should not even be walking this far, or anywhere near these monsters, but Ingwe's constant state of anxiety was infused with urgency. She knew, she knew, she had to get her ready, and fast.

They would remain hidden a while longer, two more turns of the moon, they would feed carefully. They flowed in fluid unison along hidden paths through the undergrowth, down the valley under the wide plateau, like one golden creature.

He hadn't tried to touch her yet, and she was glad about that. But she also kinda wanted him to. But this was – whew – only the first night she had met him, and after what had happened to her before, no way! Then again, why not? This ugly uniform, that's why not. She let her glance travel down his lean torso, then felt eyes on her back. Turning, she saw two children, a boy and a girl, watching them, little fists clenched over their mouths. They shrieked with happy fright and scampered up the path, laughing and waving their arms. She watched them run, took two steps away from Mosh and folded her arms.

She'd lost the meaning of his words as they blended with the babble of this odd little river and he looked surprised at her sudden departure and stopped talking. Just right. She peered into the dark bush, up towards the top of the hill where a thornbush crouched and stretched bristly arms over an empty backwash of stars. A strange thought, through her mind like a single word, a pure note farewell ... the soul of her unborn baby had at last let go, and was now drifting out and over this wilderness with the wind.

She thought about Mahmoud, the demon, that night. *That was real*, she told herself, but now the memory seemed absurd. Just a deranged lunatic with a delusion so strong even she'd bought it. That's all. *No. That was real*. Chill came off the water. She jogged on the spot, away from him, and he kept quiet, waiting. She shivered.

'I must get back. My friend ...'

'Oh.'

'I'll ... see you?'

'Every night except weekends. I'll be right outside your door.'

'Oh no. How am I going to survive this?'

'How long are you-'

'Here?'

'Uh huh.'

'Two weeks. Then I'm going back to Joburg for a while? Then probably Cape Town for the new year.'

'Oh.' He bit his lip and looked away.

'Well. Bye.' She turned away, awkward and elegant.

'I'll see you.'

'Hey!' Stephi was toweling her hair. 'Whatsup? Where you been?'

'Checking the security arrangements.'

'Hah! I knew it!' She stamped her foot. 'You *are* a politician! Been having a quickie, haven't you? You, you ...'

'Slut?'

'You said it. What's he like? Can I have a turn?'

'No! You're terrible.'

'At least I not naaing no *black man!*' Stephi started jiving her towelled hips, shaking her pink booty.

'Oooh, but he's *nice*, Stephi. He smells like heaven.'

'Well, you sure as hell don't. Why don't you have a shower?'

Ariel sniffed herself, hunched in dreamy pleasure. 'In a while, maybe.'

She went out again a little later, still unshowered, but the spaces between the buildings were empty. She breathed the air and then tensed. A strange, scary scraping noise came from her left, followed by a deathly thump. Scrape thump scrape thump, like the undead, or a giant, crippled bat. The newborn swamp thing. She stepped behind a blue plumbago and grew still.

Bob appeared, limping, dragging a leg, hunched over, wincing his big old face. She watched him with unblinking grey eyes as he dragged himself past.

He'd just got a very dark, whispery cellphone summons from Stein that frightened the living bejusus out of him. Terrified for his job, he nevertheless walked nice and slow, and in truth the walk, the fresh air and the quiet rustle of the bush all made his back feel a bit better.

He even took the long way around, along the murmuring watercourse to the reed-fringed dam. He dawdled a bit, staring out into the bush and breathing hard, to say fuck you to Stein to himself. A monkey or bird or something called to him from deep in the impenetrable black. He raised his eyes to the cold stars, said a wordless prayer, and continued on his way.

'Come in, Robert. Sorry to have to drag you out of bed.' A weak, nasty smell hung about the old man, and Bob slid as far away as he could around him. The place was dark, and he noticed with revulsion a new decoration, a warthog's mounted head on the wall.

'Ja sorry Mr Stein. Did my back quite badly today.'

'So you said. But I'm afraid we have something of an emergency. Pleasse sit.' He motioned to a murky sofa.

'If you don't mind ...'

'Of course, of course, your back. I won't delay you longer than necessary. A drink?'

'No really, I'm fine sir. Don't mean to be rude.'

'Very well. The situation is this. We have a leopard in the reserve. I believe it is trapped inside.'

'Really? That's wonderf ... uh, where?'

'The ravine opposite the farm? The boulders?'

'Uhuh. Good spot. There's a cave there.'

'Quite so. Now, this obviously presents us with a problem.'

'The guests.'

'Yes. We market ourselves as benign. Ssafe to walk. The risk of this kind of liability is the last thing we need.'

'There children here.'

'Exactly. Go to all our guests tomorrow and inform them that, until further notice, it is forbidden to walk in the reserve. Please don't tell them why. Tell them we have a team of scientists doing research or sssomething.'

'But why, Mister Stein? We could take them out there in their cars. A leopard! We should hang onto it as long as we can. Hell, get a permit, make it a permanent attraction. A small electric fence around the camp?' He drew a circle with his forefinger. 'You know, we had quite a few sick buck this year, and we're at carrying capacity, in my opinion. The bush and the grass are suffering. I mean, I found an impala that had a broken leg, looked like it had been trailing it for days, poor thing, and I thought at the time—'

'No, Robert. Impossible.'

'Ja, I suppose. But still ...'

'I have alternative plans for the leopard. One that involves,' his sagging features morphed into a parody of relish, 'a more immediate return on our investment.'

'Sir?'

'I took the liberty of contacting a certain hunter I know, and he expressed an interest in dealing with our problem.'

'I'm pretty sure that's not exactly legal, sir.'

'And in respect for the grey areas of our law, this is a private arrangement. In cash. Your end will be thirty thousand, for taking our client on the hunt.'

'Thirty. But my back. I can't go hunting a leopard right now.'

'We'll need a few days to make the arrangements. Plenty of time to heal, young man. I had hoped that you would be keen to join the adventure!' He bared orangey old teeth.

Jesus! *Keen!* Weird old man. Bob summoned up a shaky grin. He was white South African male. He knew he had no choice in this matter. Guys like Ssstein? His reputation and eventually his job would follow his refusal.

'Anyway,' Stein turned away dismissively. 'All you have to do is drive. Take the client down and then drop him off. He wants the authentic experience, to stalk the leopard himself.'

'But what if somebody sees?' Bob thought of Kay, and really started to hate this smelly, shrunken, grotesque old bastard.

'The hunt will be at night.'

'Oh yeah? How?'

'He'll have a night-vision sight. And goggles. You'll carry a rifle too, of course.'

'Oh well, that's nice and fair, I suppose.'

'Robert? Is there a problem? What choice do we have?'

'We could phone the provincial guys to come and dart it. Take it to the Kruger. Or phone the De Wildt people, ask them what they—'

'We'd probably have to pay *them*, for God's sake. And it would take forever, you know that. Filling out damn forms in triplicate. And in the meantime our guests are in danger.'

'I could speak to some people. Have it done tomorrow. You said it'd be a few days ...'

'No, Bob. It is arranged. That is all. I'll give you fifty thousand. Fifty-fifty on the total. Can't say fairer than that!'

'Aaah Jesus. I don't know.'

'Very well. Shall I take my offer elssewhere?'

'No, Mr Stein. I'll do it. I'm going to go back to my house now. Sorry, your house. Back's in agony. Sorry, sir.'

I could give it to Kay, thought Bob. All of it. Imagine how happy she would be, fifty G's for Christmas, a nice little shoebox with a little red bow, hidden away from the taxman and the goddamn banks. Help her communicate, research, travel, do her thing. Save the planet. And then he thought how guilty he would feel, handing that blood money to her, of all people. A taste of foul corruption in his mouth, and he spat onto the ground. He limped the long way around again, looking out into the bush, imagining Ingwe, feeling like shit.

Stein kept two secrets in this deal. The first, predictably, was that fifty thousand was actually twenty-five percent. The second was that this Bob Tothill cocksucker was involved in only half the job, the dangerous part, to help kill the mother leopard and hump the body back for stuffing. Client would meet him and recce the terrain tomorrow, and then drive to Nelspruit to bribe some paperwork together. The hunt was planned for Saturday night and then on Sunday, Bob's day off, Stein and Mr Humperdink would drive back into the reserve and dart the cub that Stein had seen flickering like a ghost in his night-vision goggles, tranquilize it properly, crate it and send it off to a brand new life in a steel cage in a row of steel cages in Humperdink's private zoo outside Dallas, Texas, America.

Ariel awoke to the smell of fruit. The bowl he had brought, with a little assegai-and-shield *welcome* flag peeking out from the fleshy curves of mango, grape, prickly pineapple. She turned to the window. The sun had not yet risen beyond the hill and she imagined, resting sleepy eyes on the greenery through the dew-spangled glass, that she was floating on a bright blue-and-white ethnic-design real-linen cloud, just above the treetops. Drops of sunlight arrived, trembling at the top of the glass. Beyond, a hawk lay on a bed of air and then fell beyond the hill. She breathed in the smell of fruit again, and remembered her strange thought the night before, the soul of her dead child floating free, like ... like a little pearl of shining light. No, was that from some movie? *I saved her, Mahmoud*. She sighed, stretched out and tried to remember her dreams, and could not. She felt rested for the first time in months.

Stephi's snore rose like engine noise. Ariel smelled her own body odor as she rolled over. Time for that shower.

As she dropped her feet she glanced to the floor and screamed. Stephi threw herself upright and said: 'Okay! Put it on, Captain.'

'Huh?' Ariel giggled and curled her feet under her legs, bouncing on the mattress in horrified fascination. On the floor between the beds a wasp, thrumming with blood-lust, was dragging a dead pyramid-backed spider half the size of Ariel's hand across the slate floor. *No, not dead*, she thought. *Paralyzed*. The wasp would bury it, probably in a sealed cell in the roughstone wall. Lay her egg and the grub would eat the spider alive.

'Oh, gross,' said Stephi, flopping back into bed. 'Way t'start the day.'

'What should we do?'

Stephi peeked a bleary eye over the duvet. 'I'm not getting involved. No way. Let nature take its course.'

'Agreed!' Ariel laughed, and leapt off the bed towards the bathroom, sun-streaked skincolor over the gritty little drama on the stone below. The wasp buzzed up as she flew past then buzzed back to its ghastly business.

'Frisky bitch,' muttered Stephi. 'I swear to God, if I don't get me some *sex* soon I'm going to put a bad hurt on someone.'

The door ratatated. Stephi groaned and flopped her arm out and then jerked it back, staring in befuddled fright at the floor. Empty, except for her shoes. And socks. And jeans. She gingerly poked her jeans with a flinching hand. The door knocked again, softer, querying.

'Wait! I'm coming.' She reached again for her jeans, dropped them with a shake of her head and walked puffy with sleep over to the door in her T-shirt and tiny panties.

She peeked through the peephole. *No way. Way.* The big semi-handsome guy, what was his name? Bob. Holding a clipboard. She smoothed down her hair and dithered, glancing down at her clingy fabrics, her sleep-creased skin, thought, *if not why not*, and opened the door.

Bob groaned and nearly fell over.

Now convention states that Bob should control himself in this situation, deliver his message like a professional even if he blushes and his pants start bulging. But he could stand it no more. He lurched forward and, voice like gravel and sweat, said: 'I can't ... stand it no more. You're so fucking *beautiful*. All I wanna do is fuck you right here, right now.'

Stephi slammed the door and opened it again. Bob had recoiled and was stumbling back down the path, his big hip swinging oddly, his face red.

'Bob.' He hesitated, so she slipped out into the open, grabbed his wrist and led him back. She pulled him gently inside and closed the door and kissed him, lips as soft as peach, and whispered, '... *yes.*'

The bathroom door opened and the Goth, draped in a white towel, drifted out on a cloud. She blinked at them and smiled at Bob, her eyes startling, powerful, cheek slashed with a vivid red scar, then floated away, wings of white mist trailing from her naked back, into the small bedroom.

I died during the night, that's what this is. The blonde kissed him again, and he tasted the corruption, the morning's breath, delicious flesh, the smell of fruit, and for a while he lost himself to his senses. *But heaven or hell?*

The scary goth appeared again in jeans, boots, a denim jacket. Bob lurched back and wiped his mouth.

'Also. Aufwiedersehen. I'm going for a walk,' she said, brightly.

'No! You CAN'T!' Bob bellowed, clutching a pen as if thrusting a crucifix at a vampire.

The girls glanced at each other, eyebrows raised.

'No, I think she wants to, Bob. She would like to go out now, yes?' Ariel nodded vigorously. 'Why, dear Bob. Are you demanding a little threesome in your forceful way?'

'Huh? No! NO! That's why I came here, not to ...' He waved his clipboard-and-pen hams around. 'You know.'

'No, I don't. Maybe you think we'd star in your private porno fantasy?' The blonde – hell, what were their names? – was angry now, and pretty damn frightening.

'NO! Dammit! That's not, you're not *allowed* to walk. That's what I came here to *tell* you.'

'What? What on earth you talking about?'

'There's a leopard out there! In the bush! Oh shit. I wasn't supposed to tell you that. I was supposed to tell you that - I believe I'm subconsciously trying to lose my job. Really. I am. With all this.' He gestured at the two girls, young enough to be his daughters, and his crest fell.

Stephi came closer again. 'A leopard?'

'Yes, a leopard. Please understand. Leopard's one of the most dangerous animals of all. Silent and strong, sometimes unafraid of us. Might actually hunt you down. And it's out there somewhere. I think it's stuck because of the electric fence.'

'Can we see it?'

'No! God no. I told you. You got to keep this a secret. Promise. And whatever you do, *don't* go walking in the bush.'

And so of course, fifteen minutes later, after Bob had crashed out and staggered off, his fly a wigwam, Ariel and Stephi went walking in the bush.

Halfway up the hill Stephi collapsed in a trembling panic-attack onto a rock. She gazed longingly back to camp, fanning her pink face with both hands.

'Hey c'mon. Someone will see us.'

'I dunno if I can - hah - do this. I need breakfast.'

'I have apples and energy bars. Water. C'mon. Just a short walk.'

'No. Forget it. I'm going back.'

And so they separated, Stephi trudging down to eat and watch for Bob, who came back ten minutes later. Ariel strode on alone.

She wandered far, lost in time, with no watch or phone. She followed a footpath through the bush, aware of the parallel dirt road further down the slope. A car-noise went past, and she slipped behind a ragged aloe bending erect from curves of stone. Although she was gifted with lines of weight in her mind, with south, north, east and

west, she marked a magnificent tree that lorded over the rim of the high land, and kept it at her right hand. All she would have to do is keep it on her left on the walk back. She walked carefully, lifting and dropping her feet into sandy patches between the scrubby grass and strange plants that crouched and reached and spiked, secure in attitudes of ageless survival. Everything alive here was so *tough*, so beautiful. She walked in the veld, and slowly her mind grew still and wordless.

She walked past kooboo-berry and hairy vitex, lavender croton and bead-bean, all nameless to her. She paused by a caterpillar-pod tree, its pea-shaped pink flowers interspersed with golden-haired caterpillars, or so she thought before realizing they were young seed pods. 'Clever,' she said aloud. 'Seed-eaters think caterpillars. Caterpillar-eaters realize seeds.' Her voice rang a note from a nearby rock-face.

Once, she skipped to avoid crushing a small, unknown relative of the euphorbia peeking out from behind a lump of damp scree-rubble. There are only two places in the whole wide world where this plant grows, on the spit of hillside where Ariel walked and a patch right in the path of the proposed toll road so hated by Kay. No-one knows of its existence. It's never been given a name. And no-one knows that if you inject pure sap from these tiny, fleshy, ancient little leaves directly into the human bloodstream, it will cure all known cancer within a day.

She came to a ravine, a gash shearing the escarpment above and widening out into the valley below. She raised her eyes to the other side, past the electric fence and the line of the public road. The bushveld shimmered around a farmhouse set within eucalyptus trees, outbuildings, mesh-covered plant-houses and terraced pasture. The ravine was choked with bush so she had to descend. A concrete bridge spanned the ravine and she paused, then slipped across.

The young cat spotted her movement first, a flash of faded blue through the green trunks of the fever trees. She signed to Ingwe, who crawled to the strangler-fig roots and lay still, watching. A twist of the human's fruity smell wafted down with the wind.

'Their fighter's mate.'

'Yes. She is hunting?'

'What?'

Ingwe shrugged and thought, *probably us*.

Ariel glimpsed a white thing wedged in a fork in a fever tree, a sharp line against the smooth bark. She walked closer and saw a bone, a thin legbone bleached clean by sun and air. She plucked it from the tree and dropped it.

Then she felt eyes on her back, and she turned and locked onto a strange tree that flowed like wax between two great fists of rock. She stared for a while and then decided to walk back.

Later, lying languidly on the bed, shaded from the midday sun and touched by breeze, she turned to a hot, sweaty, grinning Stephi and asked: 'You know that feeling, that someone's watching you? When you *know* someone is watching you?'

'Sure.'

'What is that?'

'What's what?'

'How does one know? What's the ... mechanism? Sometimes you turn around and catch his eyes,' she snapped her fingers. 'Like that. How does it work?'

'Good question.'

'Honestly. I mean, our science, our ... construct to explain the world, there is no explanation for that thing. Everyday telepathy, *etwas*. Is there? Yet everyone knows the feeling. Everyone's experienced it.'

'Maybe movement in your peripheral vision?'

'No, it can happen in a crowded room. Especially. On a bus. Anywhere. If you stare at someone they become self-conscious. Sometimes, not always. Not often. They know they're being watched. How does it work?'

Stephi stretched back on the bed. 'Aaah, who knows? How does the hair on your arm know when to stop growing?'

'What?'

'If you cut off the hair on your arm, it grows back to the original length, and then stops growing. How's it know when to stop?'

Ariel snorted a laugh. 'Magic.'

'Yeah. Not supposed to understand magic. Just let it be.'

On the second night it rained, sultry, balmy squalls spilling over from the west, so they stayed indoors. Stephi thumbed through the channels, an explosion, a car flying over dustbins, a lacquer-shined steamy chicken, models playing bank tellers selling smiles, talking heads, talking heads. She watched for a while as a giant spider leapt from a rooftop onto an athletic blonde bombshell and then exploded into pixels of green goo. The blonde pumped her shotgun one-handed, shouting, *'Everyone! To the mall!'*

She switched off the TV and stood restlessly up. Ariel was leaning at the window, watching the tree-line dance in the dark. Stephi flopped onto her bed. 'It'll stop raining, maybe soon. Then go find him.'

Ariel drifted across the room. 'No, Steph,' she sighed. 'I don't think so.'

'No?'

'I don't want this. This holiday romance.'

'Y'sure? He's hot, and into you like crazy.'

'I must be careful.'

'Aaah, please-'

'No, another time, a boy ... never mind.'

'Um. Okay.'

'And woman of Europe travels to Africa to *bumsen* black man. It's disgusting.'

'It is?'

'I remember once on the U-bahn, I saw a couple, German woman with a Nigerian? You know, big, muscles, shaven head. Very sexy. And she was all over him, in front of her friends, hands all over him, stroking his head. Pinching his cheek. Showing everyone that she ... *owned* him.'

Stephi nodded.

'She had this, this smile, no *leer*, like look everyone! He was humiliated. Ashamed of himself, for allowing her ... I saw his face. Big proud man, sitting there, so far away from home.'

'Money.'

'Yes. And she didn't notice how he was feeling, or she didn't care. The disrespect was—'

'Sick is what it is. But it's not like that with you, Ariel.'

'No?'

'No, c'mon. I saw you when you met that boy. Real, man. Two young people, like *pow!*' She clapped. 'Black and white didn't matter, or maybe just added flavor, y'know? Like, zest. Young love and all that. Shit, nothing wrong.'

'But I leave in two weeks. It can't be love. It would be love denied.'

'Oh, break out the cello.' Stephi balanced a pillow on her forehead. 'You should just go with the flow here.'

'Well, I can see him, I suppose. Why not? But no sex. No touching.'

Stephi chuckled wickedly.

Mosh waited in the shelter of the thatched stoep of an unused unit, watching over her rain-shiny door. He too felt hesitant and uneasy, unsettled by the longing in his virgin heart. He touched the memory of her face with his fingertips, a phantom in the rain. He knew, somehow, that he shouldn't knock tonight, and waited outside her door, a dark-eyed cat-angel, until the dawn.

The next day was warm and fresh, the sunshine cheery. The girls went for a stroll along the little reedy dam, following the road over the earth wall to the gate, which was chained with a heavy padlock. They climbed over and continued along the narrow footpath through the bush. In a clearing beneath a great vault of branches they

stumbled right up to a giraffe, almost within kicking distance before Ariel's brain sorted out the mottled lines of leg and neck from the background of the trees. It was so magnificent and unexpected that she just stood there, staring up into the huge laconic eyes. Stephi skidded to a halt, swore and skedaddled backwards, tugging briefly at Ariel's arm.

'Did you see her eyelashes? Fantastic!'

'Did you see the size of her balls?'

They ran past an equally indifferent impala ram, which shied away in bored instinct then settled back to chew the cud. At the water's edge they slowed to a walk, startling a six-foot monitor lizard which splashed off a half-submerged log. They found a bush-wood bench overlooking the water and sat down, their backs to the wild.

'You think we should be scared of the leopard?' asked Stephi, scratching her leg.

'Whatever.'

'Wonder what they're gonna do about it. I mean, they have to get rid of it, right? Everyone's stuck here.' She pointed at two families on the safe side of the dam, the adults standing aimlessly around, the children throwing stones into the water.

'Should we ask the manager?'

'You read my mind.'

But first they chilled awhile longer, looking out over the water. *This is where I evolved,* thought Ariel, *this birdsong is almost music.* She tried to follow, to give rhythmic shape by tapping her fingertips on the log. Stephi glanced down, thought it impatience and stirred reluctantly, so Ariel let her hands relax. The birdsong seemed to swell louder. *There's a lourie.* Something crackled in the bush behind them, and then all was still, just the constant ripple of the water and the music. Life enveloped them, and even the occasional noises of human activity – voices, a door slamming, a truck swishing through on the road, the drone of a distant airplane – seemed to belong. After half an hour they rose, feeling cleansed, and strolled back.

They wandered along the angled stone pathways between the red-brick walls, nodding an occasional greeting to other tourists in the over-full, restless camp, up the road to the central block. Tennis courts, a shop, an enclosed swimming pool, lots of reluctant activity. The main building was three stories high, reception area, pool room, bar and restaurant, then offices above, and beneath the peak of the thatch a single room running the length of the building, with balconies on either side. At reception Stephi grew shy, so Ariel asked for Bob. Off sick, so the day turned into a loiter, hanging around the pool room, going for an icky swim and a balmy cold shower, reading, talking, waiting for the employees.

At dusk they wandered over again and finally saw Bob, up on a balcony, standing with another, shorter man in khakis, shiny boots and a big cowboy hat. They were looking out over the bush of the western valley, drawing lines in the air with their fingers, peaks, valleys, the road. Bob said *there* with a jab, and the other man nodded.

'Romeo!' shout-whispered Stephi, with a quick, birdlike whistle. Bob looked down and grinned. The other man continued to gaze out over the bush, his face bathed by the dying sun. 'Wherefore art thou doing tonight?'

'Be with you now-now, Miss,' he said in his best official voice, and winked.

So they loitered awhile longer, circling the building so Ariel could look for Mosh, but it was still too early. They hung back outside the plate glass at the entrance, in the dark beneath the thatch eaves, and saw Bob limping down the stairs into the ambient light of the foyer, still talking to the other man. His face was tense and stormy, and he stole a hard sideways glance when the other said something, then forced a smile.

'Bob hates that guy,' said Stephi. 'And look, he hasn't even noticed.'

'He's VIP,' said Ariel. 'Rich.' Medium height, medium build, smooth-shaven. The cowboy hat now hung on his back, revealing a neat, mid-brown haircut. Easy smile, perfect teeth, very tanned. Ariel said, 'American?' and Stephi said, 'Uh-huh'. The American spoke again, laughed and slapped Bob on the back. Bob winced, turning to

hide his face. The receptionist glanced up at them, blinked and then darted to the back office.

Stephi drifted out to the doorway so Bob could see her. In a second he was stomping over. The American was a bit taken aback, but then he hurried to catch up. They met outside on the broad sweep of the first step.

‘So what can I do for you, Miss?’

‘Problem with my unit.’

‘Your ... unit?’

‘Yeah, needs a service. Good evening,’ Stephi said to the American. ‘Please excuse us, if you don’t mind.’ She turned her back, beckoning Bob to follow.

So Ariel was left standing there. She glanced up into his gleaming, wide-open eyes. *Oh no. That* look, the creepy middle-aged nimrods like this were the worst. Meant as a smitten, love-at-first-sight, bring-on-the-chemicals look, but really just desperation, a plea for recognition as a sexual being. If she didn’t return it, he’d try the next girl. She swung her hair to hide her distaste as he took a hesitant step forward.

‘Hi. I’m Skeet.’

‘Uh, Ariel. Hi.’

‘Sorry. Rude to stare. You’re ... you’re real purty, that’s all.’

‘Pardon?’ She flicked her hair back and found his eyes intent on her dog-scar. She raised a hand to cover it, *what the fuck?* He dropped his gaze to her breasts and swayed even closer.

She was turning to walk the hell away when Stephi called out, ‘Hey, Ari? There’s an outside bar down there. We’re getting a drink.’ She set off with Bob without waiting for a reply, and when Ariel followed Skeet fell into step beside her, his hands linked behind his back. *Oh crap, it’s a blind date.* The two couples strolled down the winding path to a lapa, a stone-wall circle with chairs around a fire. A little black man served their drinks and vanished. Stephi led Bob to a rail overlooking the wilderness, a hand reaching out

to him then dropping back. Only rosy fingerprints of the sun remained in the darkening sky. The stars had come out, and the fire threw sparks out to dance and die between them.

'Man,' sighed Skeet. 'I love Africa. It's so beautiful.'

'Yes,' Ariel had to agree. 'You're American?'

'Yeah. And you're, uh ...' He shrugged, 'European?'

'Yes. German.'

'Ah. *Guten tag.*'

'Howdy.'

'You're on vacation?'

No, duh. 'Yup. And you?'

'Just passin' through. Sightseeing. A bit of hunting.'

'Hunting, really?'

'Yeah.'

'But why?'

'Why?'

'I'm just curious. It seems strange to me, taking pleasure in killing some poor animal?'

'Oh. Well yeah, you're right, in a way. The last time I didn't even take the shot. I just let him walk free.' He made a broad, sweeping gesture towards the bush.

Was that a lie? 'So ...?'

'Okay, I'll try and explain it. Deep inside, man is a hunter. It's our DNA. The act of huntin' brings me closer to who I am, as a man. No offence, but I don' expect yah to unnerstand.'

'No, it's interesting, I suppose.'

'Thanks. You see, it's not the killing that matters. It's the hunt itself. Stalking the critter, getting close, making sure the wind is right, keepin' as quiet as possible. It's a ... spiritual thing, you become one with nature. Maybe it's just a man thing.'

'Perhaps. But I find it just by observing, by being still. I don't have to-'

'No, I think, maybe the act of killing completes the experience. If we were truly one with nature, then we'd *have* to kill, to survive. And there's nothing wrong with it, in principle, I mean, I play a role, a predator, taking only one from the herd. All part of the cycle of life. Are you with me?'

He asked the question with a dark intensity, staring into her eyes, and she had a moment of dislocation, as if he was really asking something else. She blinked and shrugged, already far more involved than she wished. *I wonder where Mosh is. Should be on duty by now.* In the dark beyond the lapa some creature shook the branch of a tree from side to side, and a bird swooped by, flying low and in a rush, late for its bedtime. Skeet was waiting for her reply.

'I suppose.'

'Okay.' He was visibly relieved. 'And there's another thing. When I go huntin', I pay good money for it. Real money. And that's for nature conservation. Hey, Bob?' He raised his voice. 'How much more does a hunter pay, compared to a normal tourist?'

Bob strolled back. 'Hunting's not allowed at this reserve, sir. It would be illegal.'

'Of course, of course. Just tryin' to convince mah gal here that I'm not a monster.'

'Sir?'

'Ten, twenny times more? Some places wouldn't survive without us.'

'That's true, sir.' Bob's face seemed to darken again in anger.

'Isn't it a sign of psychopath serial killers,' asked Stephi, looking Skeet up and down like he'd just smacked his lips and said how yummy the pus in his glass was, 'that they start off by killing animals?'

There was an awkward silence. Skeet sneered over the gulf of class at Stephi, with her uncombed hair, faded shorts and old AC/DC T-shirt. She met his eyes, raising her brows. He blinked and turned his head disdainfully, then flicked a fallen leaf off the shoulder of his crisply-ironed brand new bush-khaki. The tension was awful, so Ariel's mind rushed in:

'That's interesting, actually. Some types of serial killers may merely have a ... predatory instinct. Some genetic response to the environment, which is human overpopulation. I mean, in nature, if one species grows without check, then another evolves to prey on them, right? If there's a food source, then nature steps in. Hannibal Lecter understood that, fashioned philosophy and decadence from dark instinctual truth, maybe it's the root cause of Ted Bundy's biting frenzy.' *Oops*. They were staring at her. She wrapped it up. 'Maybe some killers are just predators, shaped by evolution.'

Skeet said, 'So now *you* sayin' I'm a serial killer?' with a crooked grin.

'And you saying it's natural?' asked Stephi.

'In a way, of course. Humans are animals, made by the world, so all their behavior is natural.'

'Come on, bullshit, dude,' replied Stephi. 'Serial killers are sick freaks. Twisted right round. Like, the opposite of natural.'

'Sure, okay, I'm talking about cannibals, not normal predation. Maybe because the prey in their environment are all human. Maybe thousands of years ago they would have been great hunters, heroes, dragon slayers. My point is, they're driven, you see? By a compulsion, one we don't understand. Or do we? Maybe society's fascination with serial killers is like prey animals and their natural predators? The same awareness, the same fear? The same relationship? I'm sure compulsion is close to instinct in the brain.'

'But bent.'

'Yes of course, blind, confused, no place in the modern world. And ineffective.'

'At what?'

'Population control, of course.'

'Well!' Bob clapped his hands, a loud retort. 'Nobody mention the war!' They looked at him, nonplussed. 'Ahahaha. A rather nice, cheery little chat we're having, here by the fireside.'

'Sorry,' Ariel giggled.

'She's always like this,' said Stephi

'You're always like this?' Skeet murmured. He was standing close, his eyes on her scar again, but she didn't care. She'd spotted Mosh on the stone path leading down to the lapa, a lean, sexy silhouette against the lamplight, just standing there, watching her, waiting. *Oh no. Oh yes.* With a flick of his head, motioning her to follow, he loped back up into the dark.

She felt Skeet's breath sway her hair as he came even closer and danced away, saying, 'Excuse me,' with a bright smile. In a twinkle she was off up the path.

'And me too, I'm afraid, sir,' said Bob. 'I must attend to our guest's unit. It was a pleasure meeting you.'

'Of course. Likewise. See yah round.'

'I still think you're a psycho-freak,' said Stephi over her shoulder. He watched her walk from the fire with no expression on his face, then left up the path Ariel had taken.

Skeet had never crossed the line with his thing. His perversion. He'd never taken a slave hostage, truly held her against her will. Because if he kidnapped some slut for a night of fun and games then he'd surely have to kill her, and if he started killing women then maybe he'd like it. Too much. He liked killing animals, and he also liked enslaving them, breaking horses, bears, his big cats, and he enjoyed his women slaves, even on this side of the line. So far it had been enough, skyping the twisted bitches in the slave-dog chatrooms, paying his coin and BBMing grubby task-lists, instructing them to clean up their tacky little apartments and trailers on their hands and knees, his choice of her

self-abuse the reward. And you'll find hundreds of women who'll play slave games for free, who love submission and humiliation, but those cunts really disgusted him, and not in a nice way. So far it was enough, the elaborate fantasies when he was in bed with his clueless wife, the whorehouse outside Vegas which catered for his specialized tastes. But all bought, or sick, and all fake. And then afterwards the cleansing hunt, the fresh air of the wilderness, oh man, the kill, a rush better than any climax. Very real, even in the glass of his telescopic sight.

As the years wore on, the sense of his absurdity came more and more often. Paying someone for slavery was just plain wrong. The bitch actually inviting it was even worse. The truth was, his whole life he'd been searching for the One, a wild mustang who would run and fight, so he'd have to cage and tame her in his basement, even if it took years of correction. And in the end, she would love and obey him, accept her God-given place in life, and they'd be free.

And then, maybe, he wouldn't have to kill.

He followed Ariel through the dark. Although an expert hunter, he found it difficult to control his breathing, which came in ragged little gasps. His heart hammered inside his chest. He let her drift up ahead along the winding stone path, starkly visible as she passed through the occasional patches of lamp-light. At each intersection she glanced to the right, smiling. He followed on the grass, slipping from cover to cover, lifting and placing his feet carefully so not to snap any twigs. At a garden of aloe she paused and looked around, as if sensing his eyes on her back, so he slipped behind the cover of a brick wall. He leaned against it, giving her a few seconds, and realized his hands were shaking. *She ... she understands me?* This was a brand new feeling, a brand new Skeet from the moment he'd stepped outside and was swamped by her beauty. *Ariel*. The submissive way she hid her face with her hair, like a natural burkah. That scar – *she's known pain, and become more beautiful* – and that amazing little speech, about ... *about me!* *She understands*. He risked a glance around the corner.

The path was empty. *Where is she?* In any approach he would be seen, so he circled around through the cottages, trying not to look furtive as he strolled past windows and open doorways. On the other side of the aloe garden, in a private space between two trees overlooking the water, he found her, and stopped dead in his tracks.

She was standing with a security guard. A *nigger* security guard, one of her elegant hands up on his shoulder, a flirtatious twist to her hips as they talked. Skeet felt sick. As he watched, the guard leant forward and kissed his Ariel, gently, on the lips.

He couldn't have been more nauseated if he'd found them fucking. He staggered back in the direction of the camp, overcome by betrayal. He couldn't think straight, and broke into a run up to his VIP room. All night he masturbated and fantasized about her, punishing her in his big old house until she loved him back, but it was all just a tissue of make-believe, a salve for his pain and loss and anger, he knew it. Impossible to snatch her. Too complicated, totally unprepared. A foreign country. He'd just have to swallow the foul taste of disappointment and settle for the goddamn leopard.

The kiss evolved, relaxed. Ariel barely held on, floating in his strong arms, her fingers lace on his neck. It was his night off and he had sneaked into the camp in his civilian jeans-and-T-shirt, the cotton soft against his skin, his muscles subtly shifting, his lips smooth and slow. She smiled in the kiss, remembering the first face-fumbling peck that she had bestowed on him for his quietness, his dark listening, after she ran from the fire to him four nights ago. And then their first real kiss, so thrilling and new, so right. Now she felt she had known his lips, like forever.

He swelled and pressed tighter against her tummy and she palmed his shoulders and slipped away. He sighed, clenched his fists and strolled after her, scanning through the gaps between the twilight-lit buildings, checking they were not being watched. A cicada trilled in a tree above, warming up for the night.

'It's Saturday. What shall we do?' She entwined his arm.

'Come. I wanna show you something.'

'What?'

'My home.'

'Oh. Your place?' She frowned.

'No, not like that. You can see it from up there.' He pointed to the steel rim of a water tank above the roofs of the service buildings. 'Let's move, before it gets too dark.'

At the road he touched her hip, and they stepped back behind a white-painted corner. The grind of a gear change, first to second. Bob's Hilux drove slowly past, a big hat bobbing in the passenger window.

'Your American friend again. He came back.'

'He's no friend of mine.'

Mosh shrugged. 'It's okay. I like Americans.'

'You do?'

'Yeah sure.' He crept to the corner and checked around. 'They mostly polite, friendly guys. See them coming a mile off, they smile so much. Okay, let's go. Coast is clear.' They ran lightly across the road 'No, really,' he continued. 'Some of the guys round here make out like they evil, y'know colonialist imperialist blah blah blah, but they never even met one. I like 'em, mostly, the American guests. Good people. No racist vibe or nothing.'

He led her to a wooden gate inscribed STAFF ONLY in a hedge of pink oleander and opened it quickly with a key, glancing side-to-side. Inside, a grove of mango trees rested neat and trimmed, the purple fruit like high-tech pods on long, hanging filaments. They slipped down the path hand in hand, silent in their soft-soled shoes.

'Oh, wow. You live there? How beautiful.'

On the narrow platform, backs to the tank, knees up to the east, sharing a beer. The sun gradually lifted from the roof of the farmhouse, touching a last caress to the branches of the surrounding trees.

'You see the long building?' She nodded. 'That's the worker's rooms. Just beyond that, there's a little house? That's my house.'

She remained quiet and kissed the back of his hand gently, thought, *so what? In a week I must leave. I can't, I can't.*

'Ja, it was called the boss-boy's house. My father was the boss-boy, back when Swanepoel owned the farm. So I lived there my whole life. But you know what? Swannie never actually called him "boss-boy".' He chopped quotation marks with four fingers, hip-hop style. 'He was A that way, different. My dad was the Foreman.'

'How did he become the owner? Was it land restitution?'

'No, that's quite an interesting story. Swanepoel got old, and his children all died or went to Joburg or something, disappeared, and I remember him staring at me and my dad when we was fixing a fence, me just a boy, and the next day he brought a guy to make a valuation on the farm, and he sold the farm to us for half the valuation.'

'Really?'

'Ja. Amazing, hey? Said we deserve it. I think he used to get lonely, checking all the black people and their families out. And my father educated me like crazy, y'know, and old Swannie took an interest in that. Paid for me to go to the model C school in town. I speak better English than Zulu.'

'Your mother?'

'No, she's gone. That's another story. I'll tell you sometime.'

No you won't, she thought sadly.

Then Mosh spoke of his plans for the day when the land would pass on to him, the tourist lodges, the fancy hotel, stretching a young patrician hand out over the whole valley, ready to grasp. He sketched the options in the curves of the sunlit clouds to the east, while Ariel's silence grew.

'All you need is a good woman at your side,' she said eventually, with a tight smile, and he paused, unsure what to say. The moment passed quietly into darkness.

They kissed again in teetering positions. This time a sharp metallic tang to his lips. The black became absolute, the stars a black haze, the sickle moon a claw-scar in the vast, empty sky.

Headlights jerked and swept down into the reserve.

'Who's that?'

'Bob.'

'Where is he going? At night?'

Mosh sniffed. 'Probably taking your American friend out for a hunt.'

'What? But hunting is not allowed here, surely?'

'Uhuh. Right. Sure.'

She bit her lip as they watched the light, which winked out behind a low promontory.

'Oh no. It must be the leopard.'

'The leopard?'

'Stephi tried to find out what they are going to do with it. She's been ... y'know, *seeing* Bob.'

'She has? Ahah.' He chuckled. 'Ja, baas Bob.'

'He refused to say anything more about the leopard. Made a big fuss about keeping secret, which is why I haven't told you. Oh no!' She suddenly remembered the odd, hesitant intensity of Skeet's question, by the fire, and her distracted reply. 'How could I? Come on! Perhaps there's time.'

'For what?'

'To *stop* them, of course! Come on, come on! We must find Stephi, drive down there!'

'I've seen it, y'know. Before. The leopard. But listen, I can't get involved, Ariel. I'll get fired.'

She thrust urgent, furious eyes sharply into his. 'You've seen it? You knew? And you knew it would be hunted?'

'No. Wait a minute. That's not fair--'

But he protested his innocence to the empty air.

In the last split-second Ingwe felt the burn of eyes along the back of her tail and twisted round. The bullet tore into her stomach, through a taut rosette just below her ribs, ripped open her small intestine and out the other side. She thought *death-blow* as she leapt from the branch and ran as fast as she could down towards her cave.

Skeet clicked his teeth, grinning as it vanished from the sight. Now the hunt was on! He stood up, snapped on the safety and strolled back down towards the car. If it hadn't turned at the last moment, he would have got it right where he was aiming, right in the asshole. The bullet would have travelled through and burst its heart and the trophy would have been unmarked. But no problem. More exciting, this way. He knew exactly where she was headed.

Stephi was playing pool with two shy boys from White River in the main lodge when she heard the distant shot. She balanced the cue and peered through the plate glass and then saw Ariel sprinting, looming fast out of the darkness.

'Oh Stephi, oh no,' Ariel panted, hand clenching a stitch in her side. 'I think ... too late.'

'What's going on?'

'That American. Hunting the leopard. Now.'

'Of course, that's why ... what can we-'

'Stop them! Come on! Maybe he missed. Oh no, oh no, how could I?'

'Ariel? How can we stop him?'

'Come on!' She grabbed Stephi's hand and pulled, hard, turning away up the path. Then her grip slipped, she twisted awkwardly and fell to the stone ground.

'Shit! Are you okay?'

'Oww, my ankle. I've sprained ... come, help me up!'

Stephi took her hand and helped her to her feet. She took one tottering step and winced.

'Hey, forget it. You're hurt. Let me—'

'No! Fetch the car! Come back and pick me up! Go go GO!'

Stephi burst off, running as fast as she could.

Bob raised his eyebrows as Skeet slammed the door.

'Missed. Gut-shot it.'

'Gut-shot it? You mean we got a wounded leopard running around out there? Now that's just great.'

'No problem. Drive down to the gulch. She musta gone to the cub.'

'Cub? *What cub?*'

'Jus' get going!' Skeet snapped. 'I'm not payin' yah to ask questions.'

'Motherfucker!' shouted Bob, and punched the windscreen. A thin crack appeared, glittering in the faint moonlight. He graunched the ignition, spitting stones as he turned back up the road.

Ingwe hesitated at the entrance to the cave, trembling and coughing, the bitter pain of the wound like wildfire on either side, a dull throb in the middle. It was hopeless, she knew. Dying ... and the kitten, her wide-eyed helpless kitten, everything she lived and breathed for, her kitten, her kitten was doomed too. She was too young, she would starve here, die slowly among these rocks.

'Mama?'

'Not ... a cage,' coughed Ingwe. 'We are still free. We can run.' She lifted the kitten by the scruff off her neck. Pain blazed as her muscles tightened with the sheer weight of

her, the little tummy taut with dassie meat. She grunted, dropped her, lifted her again with a snarl of stubborn rage, and loped off along the ridge towards the human habitat.

Now the one thing Stephi hates is running. The bits jiggle and bounce. She feels all floppy, gets all pink and sweaty. Her hair shrinks into a feathered skull-cap. She slowed to a walk to give the matter some thought.

Firstly, the freak had a rifle. With night vision. He could pluck her like a fruit.

She had this crappy pistol, which jammed all the time.

It was dark.

He was doing something illegal.

She would be like apprehending him in the commission of a crime, or whatever.

In the dark.

He was a freak. Thrombosis. Zoid.

And he hated her guts.

She didn't like these odds at all.

'There! There she is! No! Go right down there! Trap her against the fence!'

'Fuck!' Bob twisted the wheel, shocks bounced over rock, slammed the brakes.

'She's gone. You missed 'em, y' godamn idjit.'

Now Bob used to be a Joburg cop. And before that a cocky joller boy, a Bronx menace, a Boksburg bomber. He had mixed it with the best of them. And never before had to take kak like this.

'Whadid you just call me, boet?'

'Ah -'

'Did you see she had a cub? Did you see? You *knew*? What's wrong with you?'

'How dare-'

'JUSTICE!' Bob shouted, and punched him on his moisturized jaw.

But it was only a middle-aged punch, weighted to shock and awe and satisfy, but not to break. Skeet was bruised and outraged and all that, but who gives a rat's ass.

Ariel closed the door with a tug. 'Okay? So let's go!'

'No.'

'No?'

'Look, I'm sure the gate is locked. It's dark out there. Why's this our business?'

'Just because. Come on. Please?'

'No dammit. Got a bad feeling. I'm scared.'

'Look over there. Mosh.'

A glimpse of him loping along the path, shoulders low, by the reeds of the dam. He stopped and hopped high, to peek over the reeds.

'Drive down to him. Please?'

'Ja ja ja.' Stephi jerked the handbrake.

'I've seen her!'

'Where?'

'On the other side of the river. Waiting in the bushes. Still there, I think. Ariel?'

'Ja?'

'She got a baby. A cub.'

'Shit!' said Stephi fiercely.

'Come, switch off the engine. You'll scare her away. Let's go.'

Her back legs trembled, and she couldn't stop it. She whimpered, and the cub mewed in reply. It was hopeless. Couldn't trust her legs to make the leap over the river. And she had brought her child to *them*. She could see the monsters from where she lay,

talking, drinking from cans, sitting stupefied by the blue light. She hissed her hate, teeth daggers at the light, eyes blazing green and gold.

And then beyond this, the river, the houses, the people, the gate? Road and wire and light and guns ... her legs trembled. She could not weep, but she knew despair.

Then her eyes met Ariel's.

'Oh my God. What is she doing?'

'Shh,' said Ariel. She spoke to the leopard. 'Come.'

The fighter-male was there too, but wore a new skin, blue, showing his natural shape. Somehow this decided her. She lowered her eyes to her cub and licked her with a snort of pure, desperate love, gathered up the folds of fur and skin behind her perfect little ears, breathed a moment's prayer at the ground, and stood. She ripped spouts of earth and leaves with her hind claws, stared at Ariel, and ran.

'Oh my God! She's coming she gonna -'

'Quiet! The *people*. Yes! That's the spot. She's-' and for a moment the two cats were suspended in the air, disconnected in an arc of grace and beauty, lit by lamplight against a backdrop of black, their limbs floating ... flying.

Then Ingwe and Ariel both saw - she was not going to make it.

She landed *oof* on a submerged log, smashing her chin, clean water splashing her face, her eyes the skin snaking between her teeth she bit down, too late, clean fresh blue blue remember the sky blue ... *kitten!* She ripped at the water, fought and thrust, and took a deep deep breath of air.

The current turned the cub on her back and plunged her under. Ariel marked the fluffy tail with her eyes as it twitched past, sinking beneath the water. She took off,

ignoring the shriek of pain from her ankle, parted the reeds at a run with a winging sweep of her arms and dived.

Ingwe dragged herself out onto the concrete path, silver with water, and shook a limp spray from her sodden pelt. She stared at the two crouching humans, coughed and staggered past them downstream.

Ariel arose gleaming moonlight, the kitten in her arms. 'Stephi *back* off. Give her space. Mosh go to the gate the *main gate run!*'

Ingwe snarled, pawing at the reeds.

'Ariel! She's injured. We have to shoot-'

'NO! They're after her. She must run! Go! The gate! GO!'

And against all reason he left her, and ran up the hill towards the gate.

Ariel stretched out her arms, offering the kitten, who suddenly uncoiled and raked her claws across Ariel's face. She shrieked and toppled backwards and they fell into the water again.

Ingwe grunted, leapt, grabbed her cub and ran.

'Ariel. Oh my God! Are you okay?'

'I can't see.'

'Oh no.'

'No it's fine, I think. Just blood.'

'*Jus ... come! Can you get up?*'

Ariel sat up, her back slurping. She spat a gob of goo. Her cheek – the other cheek – was ripped with three deep scratches, and blood flowed down from a nick in her brow. She rubbed her face and made a dog's breakfast of mud, blood, hair and reeds.

'Come. Can you stand up? Let's get you inside.'

'No! The leopard. We must follow.'

Ingwe dropped down behind a plastic dustbin. She lay still to check out the gate. It shimmered and warped and the lights pierced her eyes. The trembling had spread throughout her body now. No time, no time. She dropped her head to her forepaws and snuggled her kitten.

'Why did ... you scratch ...'

'Monsters, mama.'

'No, no, she will feed you now.' *Yes.* Ingwe knew it to be true. *She will follow. I must find a safe place, away from here. A safe place ...* she stood, and saw the gate had been opened. The boom was up. The fighter-male crouched away from it, watching ... *such a pretty skin, so blue, blue ...* her heart shuddered, and almost stopped. Breathing deep, she stood and lifted her child again.

She had no strength left to run. She walked with slow exhausted dignity out onto the tar, under the bright electric light, past the man and the metal bars of the gate, a trail of bloody water behind her. In the shiny cubicle a woman sat, bug-eyed with fright and wonder. They watched her walk slowly past.

At the road the darkness invigorated her. She crossed at a trot, vanishing into the bushes of the wild side of Churchill's farm.

A great day! Kay swung the clattery old Mazda luxuriously into the uphill driveway, grunting its poor suspension. She whistled some pop song or other. Late for supper with Churchill, but maybe *just* in time, if Blessing had cooked the potatoes and cleaned up and set the table, as asked to do way back in the early morning. Her foot tapped lightly on the gas past the farmhouse. There he was, fiddling with the lock of the front door, in a funny old shirt - too big - dear sweet thing. He sketched a shy wave as she passed, barely glancing up.

‘Sav?’ Quiet. Zonked out. The way she can kip anywhere? Like a soldier.

Amazing day! That fat farmer at the weekend imbizo, the public participation meeting, appearing out of nowhere, ranting and raving about the destruction of the environment around the new road, threatening to use *all* his money to sue the Department! Yeah! And the whispers of support behind Kay as she stood from the floor and spoke, the acoustics lifting her voice into every corner of the school hall, the air ringing with notes of reason which everyone had heard, faces dipping and eyes softening as they listened. Sav, rapt. The dismay on the pretty features of the department politico, little metropoof in his slick suit, all puffed up with secret knowledge of the money shenanigans behind this deal, all sly and smiley with self-importance, watching his one-eyed road-show unravel.

She broke creak-voiced *dum-de-dum* into the chorus of the unknown pop song, singing at the new moon through the bug-smearred windscreen.

They bounced along the wonky veld-road and Savannah woke up, burped and unrolled.

‘Hey, superma. I’m hungry. And you stink. You need a shower.’

True! Kay hadn't even noticed. Her shirt was crusted with dead adrenaline. She glanced at the clock and started structuring the task-drama of the next half-an-hour, her role, Savannah's, Blessing ... Churchill in ten minutes ... she rounded the last corner and saw with a shock that all the lights in the cottage were off.

She cut the engine and let the car roll, slowly notched up the handbrake, took out her pistol and eased one into the chamber.

'Wait here ... keep y'eyes open. If I'm not back in *two* minutes phone Bob, then the police, then run to Churchill. He's on the way. Got it?'

'Mum. Let's just go fetch him. Or dad. Then come back.'

'No, I'll be quick. Don't worry. Probably the trip switch. Prob'ly nothing.' And she was gone.

Savannah sat and watched the cottage, shivering. She waited. A chilly wind shook the trees. Then lights came on and her mother appeared, slamming open a window, fanning the inside air out. Savannah got out and pocketed the phone as she scampered up to the stone steps.

'What the hell are you doing?' screamed Kay backwards, opening the front door. 'Are you sick?'

'... fell asleep, madam.'

'Asleep? When? Are you - here! Check *this* out! Pick it up! Start cleaning! Oh why me? Dear God in Heaven above!'

Savannah picked her way through - under mother's bewailing arms, past a Blessing ablundering from one side to the other, hands aflap, face bloated with panic and sleep - and skipped for her room.

'*Sav!* Come here. Get started on those dishes. Hey, young lady. I have spoken. Right. No potatoes. No roast potatoes. We have Impala steak, nicely marinated and gravy, frozen veggies. No potatoes. Pap? *Pap?* Oh my God, do you realize I'm gonna give my

African landlord pap porridge and meat? Pap-en-vleis? Do you realize?' she shouted at Blessing. 'Maybe I should just give it on a tin plate! He can eat in the kitchen! Rice! Hallelujah! Lovely Basmati! Quick, the kettle.'

Blessing suddenly noticed the evidence of her slothful day; a coke can, sweet packets, two grunge-encrusted bowls on the arm of the sofa by the TV. The cushions had a Blessing-shaped subsistence. She lunged, knocking the can flying. A bowl teetered and Savannah caught it with a flip of her passing wrist, but the spoon clattered to the floor, spraying globs of coco-pops all over the wall.

Churchill burst in at a run. He read the situation and relaxed.

'Sorry. Heard you shouting.'

'Oh no, Church. Nothing's ready.' Kay palmed a wisp of hair from her eyes. 'Right ... a drink while I cook?'

'Beer?'

'Love one, thanks. Ha ha ha! Wonderful. Are you ... alone?'

'My son has some young lady, God alone knows. He's in a dream world. Hi, Sav.'

'Mister Ncgobo.' She sketched the curtsy.

'Would you care to join me for a drink on the verandah? While your mother prepares our meal?'

'Certainly. I'll have a beer too, thank you.'

'Oho, I think not. But first I'd like a word with *this* young lady, the daughter of my cousin, if you don't mind.'

'Please do.'

Churchill gave Blessing a little shove on the shoulder as she scuttled past. He spoke to her outside in low, angry Zulu words. She mumbled apology, hands clasped contritely, and ran to the sink to wash up with tense, world-excluding focus.

'Hey! The kitten. Fattened up. What's its name?'

'Shoulder Thomas.'

'That's ... oh, I can see why.'

The little half-wildcat curled into its favourite spot around Savannah's neck. It glared fierce green eyes at Churchill, then winked, purred and snuffled her hair.

'Strange day,' said Kay, settling onto the top step. The steaks sizzled inside.

'Yes? Me too. Optimistic, then very anxious.'

'This supper, I suppose.' She leant her head back and let waves of beer flow down her throat.

'Different level.'

'Yes.' She smiled.

'Well I think it's great,' said Savannah brightly. 'I love having Church around. He knows so many interesting things.'

'Thank you. Listen, Kay, I've told Blessing she's fired. She'll clean up and pack her things tonight. Tomorrow I'm sending her back to Kwa-Zulu.'

'Sorry, man.'

'Hey, c'mon. We've spoken about this.'

'Yeah. Well!' She slapped her knees. 'Let's eat!' She went into the kitchen and looked at the sink. It was astonishing. It gleamed, like she hadn't seen for weeks. The poor girl had washed up everything, cleaned the surfaces, swept the floor, thrown away and packed up, all faster than Kay would have thought humanly possible.

Bob tracked the spoor, almost overwhelmed with dread. Droplets of blood arrowed straight towards the camp. Saturday night, still early enough for women and children to be outside - children *playing*. He stood carefully upright, bracketing his back with his big hands, hurried to the car, to the silent, glowering Skeet, and flipped the phone.

'Mister Stein? The leopard's injured. Escaped. Heading straight for camp.'

The phone squawked.

'Shaddup and listen. It might still be stuck on *this* side of the river. Go to the bridge. Get the shotgun. Got it?' He snapped the phone shut and the gear into first in one punching move. 'Now listen, you. Keep the guns hidden. We're driving straight through to camp, sweep that first. Look for places where she might be hiding. Y'listening? Then we come back here, see if she's in the bushes around here.'

'Dead already. You mark m'words.'

'Shut the fuck up. Give you such a beating you shit in a bag your whole fucken life.' He slowed down at the bridge. The gate was closed, but not locked. 'Get out. Open it.'

Skeet did as he was told.

Ariel jogged up to the main gate gingerly, to rhythmic protests from her ankle. Mosh and the gate-guard stood at the roadside, arms loose at their sides. He turned and walked slowly towards her, his face lit from within.

'Where is she?'

'Over the road, straight ahead. Wow. That was ...'

'Okay, I'm going after--'

'What? No way!'

'My love, listen to me. She is almost gone. I can feel it. It is the child that the men are after. I have to catch it, before they do.'

'But *leopard ...*'

'There!' She pointed at lights flickering through the reeds below. 'They're coming. Close the gate! I hope they don't see this blood ...'

'No, I can't let you—'

'Please listen. She's almost gone and I ... she ... *knows* me. I'm in no danger. With you, she might still fight. Hide away, don't let them see, come after. Please, I ask you.' She broke away from him, eyes beseeching, into the night.

Stephi stepped out into the road, glared by Bob's headlights. He slammed on the brakes, and she walked stiff-legged round to the window.

'Oh no, Bob,' she puffed. 'It *is* you.'

'Um, listen, miss,' Bob said loudly, in the direction of an old man, holding a shotgun and shuffling down the road towards them. 'There's been an unexpected emergency. Please go back to your room.'

She leaned over and whispered into his ear. 'Fuck you, Bob. You shot a mother leopard. I should ...' Her fist clenched.

'You've seen it? Where?'

'There. Back the way you came. Ran back into the reserve. Nice hat, nimrod.'

But Bob glanced uphill, and saw the boom descending, the gate closing, and knew that she was lying. He floored the gas up the hill.

*

The land rose in tangled bush beyond the road, but there were no caves, no rocks, no place to hide, and halfway up the hill Ingwe died, the blood draining at last from her

brave heart. Her soul lifted up out of her body like a breath, separated, but still part of this world, still part of our sky. She gazed down at her cub and her disembodied heart still pulsed with pain.

She rose higher, higher into our air. Her eyes could see differently now that she was dead. The bright night sky shimmered midnight-blue geometry, while below threads of soft purple light ran through all the plants, through and between them, pulsing clear, glowing energy. A web, a network of life, she could see now, strands of ancient understanding between tree and bush, climber and shivery electric impatient grass, a glowing, living fabric over the whole hillside and beyond. Animals, skimming and twitching on the skin of the deep, deep earth, shone their own lights here and there, sharp, flickering reds and yellows, dark charcoal green, their souls dancing and licking and teasing like flames entwining the life-lines of the plants.

Her kitten shone clearest for her, of course, a bundle of embers huddled beside the fading blue of her own broken body oh mouth agape in death-snarl, torn, so shamefully dirty. Her soul shivered with fear for the kitten, pity for herself.

She saw the wet flame of the human-woman stooping through the trees towards the two cats, one alive one dead dead dead ... and lifted, her fear dissipating towards the journey, her face turning towards heaven, her love eternal.

A truck snarled over the road and into the bush, a shard of dead black and red like a knife into the life-net, trailing poison mist, and she looked down again. The two men - aura of killer-red slammed doors puff of death-green – firesticks - striding up the hill, *fast* gaining ground.

No! Her kitten had bolted from the noise, away from her body, scampering through the undergrowth, whimpering for a place to hide. Ingwe's soul sank downwards as she clawed against the blue. Beneath her, the waterflame-woman stumbled up to the dead

leopard, confused, blind, jumped back. The kitten mewed and the woman turned, holding out a streaming hand.

One of the red men stopped and lifted his firestick. He scanned a quarter-circle directly beneath Ingwe and stopped abruptly, pointing it at the woman with a gasp of some strange, sickly-sweet human emotion. He said something to the other man and pointed his right hand straight at the cub. The dull-red man grunted. They started up the hill, skirting away from the woman and converging on her little kitten, her kitten, so *alive ...*

Ariel crept closer to the body and touched her, the softness of her in the faint reflected light, the gleam of a tooth, utterly still. She tried to peer through the bushes but could see nothing. The crunch of boots behind, a low word.

‘Dear God,’ she said aloud. ‘Please help.’

And the soul of the woman flared up into the sky, a smooth, stretching stream of soul-light, at its tip a silver pearl. It wavered, hanging in the air above the hillside, the shape of a single flame. Slowly it began to separate, to cleft in the middle. Ingwe drifted closer. Between the two long petals a shimmering space appeared, blue and fresh and empty, and with a sigh she swept down.

She set off at a crouch, hands waving to catch the sharp branches, her teeth gritted against the pain of her ankle, her face numb, a scary feeling. She wondered how bad the damage was this time. Seemed to be able to see a lot better now. She dripped with sweat, slippery in the chilly air. Some impulse, some instinct showed her a path, a tunnel under the acacia, and she ran through, bowed over. Then dead ahead, the men shouting:

‘Go around! No around, dammit! Okay, there. Grab it!’

The kitten yelped.

'Got it! Aaah! Shit, she scratched –'

She started forward, into a face-full of leaves – a twig snatched at her cheek, ripping across the claw-scratches. Eyes watering, she peered up at the branches of a tree above, one branch reaching down over the long wall of thicket bush between her and the men. She stretched up, pulled herself into the tree, and crept carefully along the branch.

'Feisty li'l bitch.' Skeet's voice, low and chuckling, beneath. 'Daddy's gonna teach baby some manners.'

'Shaddup.' Bob whispering. 'Girl's still there. Let's get the hell *outa* here.'

'Here, hold it. Fuck. Ow. Here. Hold the mouth. I'll look.' And he lifted up his night vision straight into the eyes of the mother-leopard, blazing hate above him.

Bob saw the shape at the same moment and his cop training, his buddy instinct, reached out and slapped the rifle aside with one awkward-stretching hand. His back locked with abrupt, grinding pain, and he stumbled and dropped the cub, then froze in upturned shock at the sight of Ariel, leaping through the air at them, hands clawed against the stars.

Skeet whipped the rifle back and fired as she fell to the earth.

'Hola! What was that?' Churchill pushed aside his plate and strode to the window.

'Rifle,' said Kay.

'By the road? Sounded damn close.'

Kay reached for the phone. 'I'm calling the cops.'

Ingwe landed hard and went down, ripping gunsmoke into two tattered wings, then thrust up fast from her crouch, tearing her claws at Skeet's neck. He staggered back, and in one agile flurry Ariel clamped a hand on his gun and drove her knee deep into his groin. He screamed and jerked forward and she head-butted him sweetly on the nose.

Blood burst and the gun clattered from his flopping, nerveless hands and he was down. She crawled over him, kicking and clawing, hands-and-knees towards the cub.

Bob backed off, hands up, barrel up. She crouched with death in her eyes, gathered her child to her belly and with a snarl leapt away.

Sounded like a herd of buffalo were coming from below, smashing through the bush. Bob peered back into the dark, scratching his head, then clicked his tongue and picked up Skeet's rifle. The gun was slimed with spots of blood. He pressed the stock to his cheek with a grimace.

Stephi, stumbling, waving a pistol blindly around. And behind her, lurking, careful, Mosh.

'Wait, girl. Slow down.'

'Bob? You piece of shit. What's happening?'

'Under control. Calm down. I've got his gun. Everything is settled.'

'Where is she?'

'Who?'

'Ariel, dumbnuts. Whoa. Someone handed this guy a beating.'

'Yeah, she did. Justified. Self-defence. She took the cat. I witnessed.'

'So where is she? C'mon Bob. Hurry.'

'Gone. I dunno. That way.'

'Let's go.'

'No, have to take him to hospital. Private doctor! Oh God, Kay! This is Kay's place. Sssh!'

Stephi took a step back and squinted at her lover, trying to make him out in the darkness. He held both rifles, barrels up, arms aside as if lightly crucified. She darted forward into his space, into his face, sniffing, whispered, 'Lover, you look like a dork, with your toys. I could put a bullet in you so quick ...'

He grinned down at her and inclined a toothy face at kissing angle. Skeet coughed.

'C'mon baby,' said Stephi. 'Let's just go.'

'... y'lissen,' said Skeet.

'No, Steph. I have to get this guy out.'

'Who, this guy?' she danced forward and swept a casual boot into Skeet's gut, hard. He whimpered and rolled. 'Seems fine to me.'

'Enough! What's wrong with you?' Bob strode forward to Skeet to pick him up, but his hands were filled with guns. He glared at them, then at Skeet, then at the guns again, then thrust them at Stephi. 'Here, take these!'

'No thanks.'

'No-? Fuck! Mosh! *Take* them.'

Silence from downhill, then a mutter, mumble mumble something job description.

'C'mon Steph. Please help. I must get him out. Please?'

'Wait.' Skeet's voice came like the underdog from down below. He rose from the dirt on one elbow, head held high. 'Ah'm ... nod ... done ... yed! Fair chase. ... the cad is mine. We go on. Y'hear me?'

'Where is she, Bob?' Mosh, from the dark.

'Ran off that way. Towards Kay's.'

With a swirl of leaves he was gone.

Kay put her hand on the back of Churchill's shoulder, just below the starchy collar, and leaned over him to peer out of the window. The diamond mesh of the fence suddenly jumped, down at a bushy corner beyond the stretch of lawn where the light grew dim. The fence shivered along its length.

'Some animal. Can't get through.'

'The hunters must be behind.'

'We must go and—'

'Wait, Kay. We are directly behind it. In the line of fire. If we go out ...'

'Damn! How dare they?'

'... *and* we might scare it back. Towards them. You phoned the police. Sit tight.'

Ariel crouched down at the border of light and dark, peering through the wire at the pretty little house nestled amidst trees and walled by a fractured outcrop of rock, the tip of the small plateau. The ridge behind was washed by light. Her eyes focused with amazing clarity. Places to hide in those rocks, behind the house. She sat, undecided. Fragments of dark voices from below littered the soft wind. No time, no time. She shook the fence again, and then dropped her eyes.

The cub lay still, her eyes darting everywhere, uttering little throaty sounds and snuffles, her whiskers twitching in the diamond mesh light, as if she were talking. Her mother smiled down in delight, cradling her child in her lap.

The stars circled above like spots from a mirror ball. His nose throbbed and his balls burned and his jaw was sore and his gut ached, but Skeet couldn't *believe* how lucky he was. To survive a full-frontal attack from an adult female leopard, here in darkest Africa – wait 'til they heard 'bout *this* back home! He cupped the liquefied gristle of his nose – *musta bin clash o' heads, is all?* - as he forced himself to his feet, and began, already, to graft it, molding it in his memory; maybe he had held the big cat by the throat, wrassled it, kicked it or somethin'? Maybe a bush-knife deep into its heart? He patted himself all over, puzzled. No bite marks, no serious injury that he could feel, no scratches beyond a sticky trace of fire around his neck. Talk about lucky!

As he rose he tried to utter a primal roar, a gut-wrenchin' *yee-hah*, to show he's one tough cowboy, to let the nigger know - gone up ahead, brave boy, probably trackin' the cat for him – that he would join the hunt soon. Alive, *yee-hah*, alive.

But the cry crawled out strangled and odd from the bloody hole of his mouth, the voice of a wild thing long accustomed to captivity and torture. It twisted discordant in on itself and jumped high, as if repelled by the life-force that webbed the hillside, a leap from hell into nothing. Bob and Stephi shrank away and towards each other, staring through the darkness.

A whiff of their fear. Time to take control.

'Righd, Dodhill. Gimme mah gun.'

'... you mad?'

'Finish the hund. W'all musd hund id down. *Kill* id. Ged the gub. Now!'

Bob and Steph exchanged horrified glances. '*Bosbefok*,' she muttered.

'She got the cub fair and square, sir,' said Bob. 'It's over. Let's go.'

'Bud whad iv id injuz someone? D'gub'll staarrve. Id's our responsibildy.'

They stared at him.

'C'mon! Gimme mah gun!'

'You're irrational, sir.'

'No, wait, wait ...' said Stephi. 'He's confused. *Haha!* Thinks the leopard took him out.'

'Oh? Oh right. No, you're mistaken, I'm afraid. She's still dead. Ariel did this to you.'

'Y'got your ass whupped by a girl!' said Stephi, mock-American, grin gleaming in the starlight, the glint of her pistol hanging casual at her side.

They couldn't see his face in the dark, or the snaking glow of his soul-rage, the sick fury as realization sank in. *Betrayed, betrayed again.* Anger ignited and swirled within him, feeding power to his flesh, but his body stayed stooped. He remembered two truths now; woman leopard woman leopard. Betrayed again, why? Why? She had lied ... bitchfuckin'bitch! He glared at Stephi ... that kick, remember. And Bob, that punch. Balls and belly ached. Jaw was sore. Payback was definitely due. He trudged hopelessly towards them while he schemed.

'A-ariel?' he quavered.

'Yeah. Don't you remember?'

'Bud how?'

'Now *that's* a question.'

'She doog the gub?'

'Yeah. Sorry.'

'No, no, ids prob'ly for tha besd.' He smiled weakly up at the giant with a rifle in each hand. 'Id's sorda beaudiful, y'gnow? Habby ending.'

'Uh, yeah. Sure. Listen—'

'No.' in one smooth move Skeet reached out, snatched the pistol from Stephi's hand and flashed it up into Bob's face. *'You listen.'*

'WO!' Bob took a step back.

'Safety's on,' said Stephi.

And Bob did a silly thing. Instead of clubbing this creature, he tried to put his right hand to the trigger of the gun in his left hand, but his right hand was holding a gun. He crossed and clattered, barrels jabbing at the sky. While he wrestled his armful of guns Skeet slid over to Stephi, the little pistol to her temple, safety clicking off.

'Drob 'em.'

'Okay, okay.' The rifles thumped onto the dark grass.

'Now stand together.' He fumbled in his little backpack with one free hand and pulled out a roll of zip tape.

Ingwe shivered, growling as she realized her host's intention. She didn't want to climb this fence. People on the other side, humans, watching, waiting. The twitch of a head at the window. But to the right lay the farm - and to the left the road. Through the fence, beyond the woman-smell house, lay wilderness, pervading this mist of faint human senses. She grasped in sorrow that she couldn't live there now. She squirmed inside the tight false skin chafing real skin strangely slippery naked, no more no more summer breeze through her fur ... and marveled at her fingers, so long and clever and intricate in her kitten's fur. She worked her jaw, too weak to carry ... drifted awhile ... glanced up at the fence and listened to Ariel.

But *how* could she climb? The fence was high, the top twisted Y-shaped wire thorns. One arm to carry her kitten ... even with these fingers, this monkey body, couldn't do it, could she?

Sound from behind, feet through grass.

She hissed and stretched out with one hand, rising up, the cub's hind legs swinging awkwardly at her hip. The fence warped and bent out along its length towards her, poking wire thorns at her face. She dropped back into a crouch and broke into a cautious, limping run. The farm it must be, then.

'There! It's running.'

'What is it? Tall. See the head –'

'Jeez, look. Look. It's a person, not an animal. Long hair. A woman. With a baby?'

'Then this is *murder*.' He stood up, bumping Kay's chin with his back. She stumbled backwards and caught him, regaining her balance. 'Sorry. Y'know, this makes the situation even more dangerous.'

'Yeah, but now we *have* to get involved.'

'Ariel! Hey! Wait!'

Her fighterlover. Her blue-skinned beauty. She stopped and stalked back, a snarl rumbling in her ragged, panting breath.

His shape came striding, fighting branches with swats of its arms. '*Eish*, woman! How y'move so fast?'

'Run. Hide.'

'Hey, don' worry, honey. It's over. Whew. You did a *number* on him, hey?'

She blinked down the hill. 'Are you sure?'

'Ja, ja. Bob's got it under control. Whassis in your hair? This is Kay's place. She'll help–'

Then from down below came a long, terrible, wailing scream, a woman's voice – *take it off take it off take it off* – breaking into sobs. It was underscored by a deep, harsh grunting, fading to nothing.

'Let's switch off all the lights,' whispered Churchill, crouching at the open doorway. 'Equal terms?'

Skeet wiped his hands and set off, moving fast over the ground, pausing only to snatch a glance of infra-red. The lights ahead blinked off, bathing the hill in black. He grinned blood-etched teeth, not breaking his stride.

In Ariel a shriek of conflict, a tearing between fight and flight. The awful echo of Stephi's screams lingered in the sudden dark. She staggered, limping, down the hill towards it, gasping as her ankle twisted a flare of pain. The cub squirmed in her aching arms, bristling and chirping. A branch bumped her head and she jerked back.

Mosh followed. 'KAY! SWITCH ON THE LIGHTS! *Wait*, Ariel! Don't go, shit, he can *see* in the dark! KAY?'

'Moshoesh?' His father's voice. 'Is that you?'

'Wait father, wait. Ariel, come,' he whispered urgently. 'Come!' He leaned to her, to the pale, floating ghost of her face - and the bullet spat past, ripping thunder through the air where his head had been.

He dropped boneless to the ground.

'No.' Ariel ran forward. He stared wide-eyed into a pair of dark feline eyes, fierce and tragic in the starlight.

'I'm okayGO! GO GO!'

Skeet jerked in response to prey behaviour, tracking Ariel's back as she ran - but no, the dream of love and slavery would end, now, if he fired. The cross-hairs dropped back to the buck-nigger struggling to his feet, and he giggled in mad glee as his finger tightened on the trigger.

Churchill ran swift and low across the lawn. Kay kept her finger on the light switch of the outside spots and pressed as he dived behind a tree. Light flooded the garden. He squirmed into position, bobbing his head out and in, then pointed the revolver and fired four quick shots through the fence, sparking the gleaming wire. A shriek and a crackle of undergrowth came from beyond, then two rifle shots, spitting splinters of bark just above Churchill's withdrawn head. He pumped the gun empty, hand over root, unsighted. Shocked silence fell over the hillside, then the sound of boots through undergrowth, legs and arms crashing through branches, away down the hill.

The fence shook and bent in, and Kay hugged Savannah closer as the woman rose above it, a leopard cub – Kay saw with astonishment – squeezed in the crook of one arm. She thrashed forward over the top, screaming as the wire ripped under her arm and along her side, catching her jeans as she toppled over. Kay caught a glimpse of face through the nest of sticks and black hair; deathly red mud-streaked pale, teeth bared, eyes like black fire ... utterly insane.

'Mom! A LEOPARD!' Savannah's fingers bit an instant bruise into her mother's arm, and she lunged forward to the door. With a grunt Kay jumped, and tackled her to the floor.

By the time they both got up, the crazy leopard-lady had disappeared.

Alone in the darkness of her small servants-quarter room cowered Blessing, clutching a quaking blanket over her head. She listened, then whimpered at the sound of uneven footsteps, heavy breathing, outside her door. The door rattled and then burst inwards; splinters showered the bed from the shattered lock. She screamed and screamed into the blanket and felt something thump onto the bed beside her, something *growling* and then strong hands, seizing her arm, pulling her up. Then she was thrust, squealing and stumbling, outside.

The door slammed shut.

And slammed open again, and a creature from her nightmares stepped out, a thing of mud and leaves, murmuring a string of soft alien sounds back into the dark room as it gently closed the door. A water-reed entwined wild hair and arcane patterns of earth-red decorated its pale, inhuman face. Blessing swam backstroke along the passage. She collided with the wall and screamed again. The witch-creature shuffled forward, limping, one hand stretched out.

Kay's head popped out of the kitchen window, a cell phone to her ear. 'Yes. Got it. Hurry.' She snapped the phone shut. 'Good evening! Blessing, shut up.'

'Hullo. My name is Ariel.'

'Kay. Shut UP, I said. Where's the cub?'

'In there,' she pointed. 'Sorry for breaking the lock. I'm in a hurry – my friend ...'

'You have a reed in your hair. Wait there.'

Ariel fumbled at her hair and pulled lumps and strips of mess out with her fingers, then shook like a wet puppy, flinging fragments and a spray of rusty drops. She stared downwards, breathing deep. A jumble of grunge-splattered plastic pipes dropped into an open drain at her feet. It burped a dank stink of mould and rotting food. *Clean this first. Lots of disinfectant. Get a cover, some paint ... but what ... this cave ... cave? This room ... is already taken.*

Blessing cowered as the creature slowly raised dark eyes at her. A faint snarl hung unmistakably in the air.

'Ariel?' Kay appeared at the corner. 'Come. This way. Bring the cub with, if you wish. You're both safe now.'

'No, I must go. My friend was screaming.'

'I know. Come.'

'Wait.' Ariel turned and limped back down the passage to Blessing. 'Please go away.'

Gnawing her knuckles, Blessing nodded. Ariel coughed a short, dry laugh, and weary dismay passed over her face. 'Please. I mean you no harm. I'm sorry. Why are you so frightened of me?'

'Take a check in a mirror,' mumbled Kay.

Ariel noticed a child, huddled up behind her mother's legs, staring fascinated eyes at the door. She stepped forward to block her view. 'Would everyone please go *inside*,' through gritted teeth, hovering within leaping distance of the door, eyes fixed on the dark, silent bush beyond the fence.

'Come,' said Kay quietly to the children, rounding them up with her arms. 'We leave the leopard be, for now.'

'But ma ...'

'Quiet. Ariel? You know Mosh?'

'Yes.' Ariel lagged behind as they turned into the glare of the lawn and ran up the stone steps to the stoep. 'He and I are ... you know.'

'Oh, it's you! I see. Pleased t'meet ya. Please come inside. He's gone with Churchill, his father, to get the bakkie with the spots and his rifle, and the shotgun then they gonna go round by the firebreak and up to where your friends are. They know the terrain. So we wait. Okay? Blessing? Make tea, please.'

'What is bakkie?'

'Huh? Light ... you know, you know, truck! Anyway, we must wait. Mosh said so. Said it was your friend out there. And someone else, he wouldn't say who.' Kay frowned, disturbed by the memory of evasion in his voice.

'My friend, Stephi. And her lover, Bob.'

A chill passed through the room, and Ariel glanced up at the mother and child, as still as portraits. 'What?'

'Did you say ... Bob?'

'I KNEW IT!' Savannah screamed, startling everyone. 'I knew it. He's dead, Mama. He's dead.' Tears dropped from wide-open eyes. She ran at her mother, arms wide.

'No. Of course not.' Kay gathered her. 'Stop it! We don't know ... y'sure Bob? Big guy, nice? Blonde hair, a bit bald?'

'Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't realize.'

'Fuck this!' Kay swept the revolver from her waistband and strode over to the door. 'Blessing, Sav, stay! Do *not* move! Y'coming, Ariel?'

'Yes. Let me lead. I can see in the dark.'

The police van prowled past on the road, idling along in first, sand and stone crunching. A torch flashed by over Skeet's head. He squatted in the shadows, his face resolutely imitating actors imitating soldiers, the soldier he never was. *Chased away by a nigger with a hand-gun, boy*, sneered a voice. His father. *Loser*. The cops rolled out of sight around a bend. He waited, listening.

Something, something big, moved behind him, the crisp sigh of something brushing against the leaves. His spine spawned a rash of goosebumps, and he turned slowly, breath catching, squinting into the dark.

The cops swung a u-turn, and headlights washed over the hill. Skeet saw the outline of a big bird, big-eyed stoopid upright head like a periscope. *Motherfuckin' turkey!* He brought the rifle up in fury, and the bird squawked and clattered away. With a bite and shake of willpower he withdrew his finger from the trigger, hunkering down as the cops drove past, then listened with surprise as the engine-noise moved away, crested the escarpment and faded from the valley.

He waited a while, stood and scanned for the turkey, but it was gone. He turned towards the lights of the cottage above. As he took his first step he heard engine noise again, from inside the farm, and saw the stab of a spotlight. With a foul curse he turned back to the road.

Huh! See in the dark indeed. Damn crazy hippie, that's all I need. Kay tried to ignore the twisting thread of dread and certainty worming inside - *something terrible, Sav.* She unlocked the gate and stood back to let Ariel pass through.

And she vanished, silently, into the bush. 'Wait!' Kay hissed. 'Jeez. Slow down. You know where they are?'

Ariel waited, and then pointed at the silhouette of a bulge of canopy down the hill. 'There. The big tree.'

'The marula?'

'I don't know. There.'

'Wait. Listen. Ya hear that?'

A soft, rhythmic sobbing drifted up from below. Then they saw the bakkie's headlights turn from the farm road to the firebreak, bouncing speckled light through the trees.

'Let's go! Lead the way.'

Father and son, loping swiftly up the hill, found them first, and Churchill bent and separated them with five grunting flicks of his penknife. Mosh knelt and gently rolled Stephi, stiff and cocooned in a mantra of weeping, away. She snorted and clawed the gag from her mouth, gasping at the touch of his hand on her matted hair. She reached for him and they embraced, and Churchill turned away from Bob and saw age settling like dust over his son's young face.

Ariel appeared in the clearing and then stepped back into the shadows. Kay tottered past her, muttering '*no no no no no no*', her voice creaking, unhinged. She fell to her knees, reached out and drew her hands back, shaking. Then she sighed and fumbled at the knot of the plastic bag stretched tight over Bob's head, trying not to look at the

weird brightness of the plastic – *Shop Where South Africa Shops OK!* – or the awful hollow, the gray outline of his gaping mouth.

‘No, Kay.’ Churchill reached gently for her shoulder. ‘Don’t touch it. Forensics.’

But she did not listen or could not hear, and peeled the bag back and tossed it away. Weeping, she gently closed his bulging eyes, but left his mouth open, open to the living air.

SECRETS AND MYSTERY

The image of the Summer of the Leopard will be relished by our future historians, a pastoral episode of piquant romance spicing many a best-selling biography, and it will settle into global mythology in the ensuing centuries. Three generations of woman, one symbolic baby animal, brought together by a kindly fate. Oh, that glorious southern summer, so many years of change ago, when Ariel Jaeger and Kay Quail stood in humble poses on the hillside, their hands out and open to our world, when they forged the embryo of their friendship and germinated the World Constitution, the brilliant conversation, flowering in eloquence and wisdom with each revision.

And ascending, little Savannah, a reminder of how fragile we are and how potentially divine. Madonna-in-dungarees cradling the infant animal messiah. She sits high in the background, legs drawn up sideways on the green grass. No matter the amazing things she'll do in her life, she'll be a child forever, a quiet and child-wise eye to the storm of moral courage gathering around.

The truth is, of course, somewhat different to all that hoopla. Not one of the three will ever really speak of that summer, for very good reasons. It won't be discussed much in interviews during their lifetimes, because at first the media won't give a damn, and later there will be other, more serious stuff to talk about. The occasional journalist, post-crisis, may well tilt a human interest-type angle at the aging stateswomen, but will wilt under their legendary bullshit-detectors: such frivolity, such personality-worship, at the time, so twentieth-century and so uncool. He'll bow his chatty head and not dig deeper, unaware of the trick of gravity.

The real story will be spun right out of existence by this coven of wicked realists. And so the people will never know that the summer of our salvation was also a summer of sacrifice and terrible secrets.

And Bob's murder? Noted, indeed, by the odd historian, but even he will shoo away, with a flap of a neat academic hand, the messy fog of grief that covered Kay's cottage that summer. Grief - anger, anxiety, confusion, denial, guilt, hormonal change, oversleep and undersleep and perpetual exhaustion, all those ups-and-downs - deemed in the future imagination for lesser mortals.

Enter into the record: one six-inch article from a local Mpumalanga newspaper. The reporter, drunk in his car, heard from the police that the killer(s) were foreign, and a bridge blipped out the word "American" on his cell just as the car radio said "Mozambique". The historians will also never know that he also misheard - just another down-bringing murder story, after all - the policeman's justification for why they'd not arrived until six hours after - "we was told they was only poachers" - so for all human time his killers will be Mozambican poachers, a sad but random footnote indicating that once in Africa there roamed savage gangs of human animals, how different from now.

And no connection between Bob, the poachers and the leopard will ever be made. The leopard will always be simply "found", orphaned, the fiction a banal gloss on a strange, complex truth. So no description of Mosh and Churchill breaking virgin bush-
earth with picks and shovels, nothing of the circle of people, black and white and intergenerational and adorned with a beautiful stranger, like somber petals around the mother leopard's body; nothing of Savannah's transient wildflowers, the last pretty flourish through the breeze as they fall, the ineffable moment, the drop of liquid time, the sad, shared peace.

And not one official document re Bob's death will ever be uncovered, no death certificate or notification or autopsy report or police docket, all presumed sucked into the maelstrom of loony admin thenabouts.

But actually, if truth be told, the docket took a hike into a rubbish bin, after a late visit to the investigating officer's small, impoverished semi-detached house by one Mr Stein, who arrived with a fat envelope and left without. So, for what it was worth, Stein had a sense of closure, of dignified balance, of debts paid and clients accounted for, for what little was left of his miserable life.

And, by the way, after four months, twenty-seven phone calls and eight visits Kay managed to get a duplicate docket made up, from her own copies of statements and forensics and such, and a promise from the detective – for mercy on his descendants, his name also lost to history – that he'd follow up the American embassy and the airport and the fire-arm registry and all.

But the next day he tossed the docket again. Indifference echoed through the ages.

And everything dies, even justice, even lament. Everyone's forgotten, or reborn in our imagination.

But now, Kay's cottage, this summer, Bob is everywhere. And opposite, fading, the mad American. There is fear in the wind at night, and weeping in the fresh evening rain.

She snuffled in her dream, the cool smell of the rain outside. Even in her sleep she hated these other smells, this soap and disinfectant, old paint, the tin of the drumming roof. She dreamed of her mother, who stroked her whiskers and then loped away into the green as the raindrops faded. She hated this locked door, the walls and sagging ceiling, this rumpled, smelly bed. In the moldy chipboard cupboard her keeper's backpack and all its intricate scents.

Knowledge squeezed at her heart as she awoke and briefly listened for her mother's soft footfall and heard only engine noise, footfalls, inexplicable gurgles, human voices. No dream. They were back.

She lay, listless. Chopped ostrich fermented, sickly-sweet, and her tummy burped sadness. A big-shouldered robber-fly tapped the closed window above, in time with the slow incessant beat of her heart.

The tick of shoes on concrete outside, light feet, the child. The wire latch clicked, the door creaked and she trudged in. Other kitten, balanced on her shoulder again. The leopard hissed and bared teeth, but with no conviction. Other kitten blinked frantic submission.

The child sat on the floor cross-legged, hands cupping her face, and wept for a long time. The rhythm of the weeping made the leopard even sicker. She stretched out on the bed, to give the awfulness in her tummy more space.

Little kitten fixed eyes on big, expression half recognition, half fearful wonder.

The leopard stared back: *This is not always. I'll kill you one day.*

Shoulder Thomas averted his green-gold eyes: *I too lost my mother. I too am alone. Perhaps ... comfort?*

She rolled away in embarrassment.

'Was my father's funeral today,' Savannah's words began. 'So many people. I thought he didn't have any friends. Most of them, they didn't care though. Could see it in their eyes.' She wept, slow and aching. 'Aaaah, God, God please help. Let me go.'

The house alongside shuffled, the tread of passing feet on the wooden floor. Otherwise silence.

'My mom's gonna worry,' she sighed. 'But your mommy?' She blinked bleary eyes. 'When we buried her there it was so sad. That's where I wanna b'buried. In the roots. In the bush. No fucking headstone.' She crawled up to the bed, seeping tears, trailing smothered hiccups, and the leopard sighed as she curled around and drew the blanket over their bodies. Shoulder Thomas fidgeted at the outskirts, eventually settling into Sav's hair.

They drifted down into sleep.

A dream of Ariel, on the bed beside her. Like reflection in glass she saw Ingwe, her mother, a faint ghostly etching around the woman.

Thus Ariel found them. She tiptoed back to Kay.

'Asleep. In my room.'

'Thank you. Thank God she's asleep. The whole night she was walking around. You think the leopard could hurt her? I mean, it's at least three months old now?'

'No, they lie together,' Ariel entwined her hands. 'Sibling behaviour.'

'Silbl -? That's lovely. *You're* lovely. Look at you.'

In a little black dress and little black boots, hair combed, Ariel stepped back, like *what?* Kay blinked her bruised, red-rimmed eyes. She was getting used to the scars, the disjointed, eye-catching angles. Amazing, really, how the knotty lines of raw tissue drew attention to Ariel's eyes. The fresh ones, three sharp parallel scratches, were healing nicely. Not so deep. Perhaps they would fade in time.

Another tear hovered in Kay's eye. She reached out a trembling hand. 'Your poor face.'

'Oh.' Ariel ducked her head and put a hand to her hair. 'It's nothing. When I return to Europe I will have plastic surgery, perhaps.'

Of course, she never did.

'Your scars run deeper.'

'Yes, that's ...' Kay sighed, struggling. 'They'll heal. I'm fine. I loved him, you know. But he's always such a wild animal, the bastard, so irresponsible, all those years ... then he got his act together, and he was paying and giving presents and, and waiting for me ... but I, I ... I liked the control ... oh Bob, poor Bob.'

They hugged, and the tears spilled, for just a few seconds.

'When will you go?' They drifted sisterly to the living room, arms over each other's shoulders, and sat together on the sofa. 'I'm sorry, I should've asked when Stephi left, but ...'

'We must talk.'

'Yeah. Dunno if I'm up to it.' Kay looked around the room. It was spotless, spic 'n span, everything in its place. A spray of white flowers in a wine glass grew from the dead wood of the coffee table. 'Thanks for staying a few more days. Thank you. Thank you so much, I mean, *look* at this place. Dunno what I'd done without you.'

In the outside room cat and child awoke together, squirming in a sudden, formless nightmare. They stared at each other in surprise and the leopard snarled, raising a claw-spangled paw into a beam of sunset. Savannah stared, dull and uncaring, then dropped her head exhausted to the pillow, not wanting to be awake, not ever. The cat recomposed herself, eyes frightened as they closed.

'I have a ... a proposal,' said Ariel.

'What?'

'I'll stay. Until we can release her back to the wild. Six months? And I'll look after Sav, and do house-work, so I can keep the room? You won't have to employ new help. And I'll pay you rent. I can do maintenance. I can fix—'

'Whoa. It's impossible.'

'Why?'

'We can't keep the leopard. We'd need a permit, and we certainly won't get one. We got to give it to the professionals.'

'Come on. Bullshit.'

Kay laughed and stood up, stretching her back, one arm crooked over her head. 'You want some coffee? I'm desperate.'

'Yes, please.' They made their way in wary thought to the kitchen.

'It's not just the permit. We've no rehabilitation experience. Hell, how we going to teach it to hunt? And where can we keep her? Can't stay in your room. In six months she'll be full size, and there's a *child* on the property. And if she escapes? Townside she'll be shot, prob'ly. And the other way? Private reserve. They've taken down the fence on the Kruger park side,' she waved a vague hand eastwards, 'so there's lion and hyena, other leopards. Wouldn't stand a chance.'

'There's always risk—'

'Ja, but where would we keep her?' As she said this, Kay realized the answer and stopped short, staring at the kitchen wall. Below, outside, the wall was supported by three broad sandstone pillars, and a cave-like storage space, ten feet deep, ran under the wooden floor to the brick of the foundations. Once it roosted chickens: bolted wooden frames still lined the gaps between the pillars, strands of chicken-wire now wholly rust. It was packed with junk, most from previous tenants. A short ramble of weeds linked it

to the face of the cliff jutting up above the little house. Hidden from the front. From all sides. Three runs of fencing would enclose it, a cave with an open-air run, right next to Ariel's room.

And ever since they'd moved in, she'd been thinking about fencing off the cliff, anyway. Beautiful, but dangerous, and worry had spent some time hanging out up there.

'You're thinking what I'm thinking,' said Ariel, tapping her toe as Kay filled the kettle.

'The old chicken hutch. Sure.'

'Yes! We could—'

'Yeah yeah, I know. It'd work.'

'So?'

'Slow down. I must think about this.'

'Did you phone Stephi, by the way? Sorry, forgot to ask.'

'Yes, last night. Safe journey. She seemed okay. I couldn't really tell. She has no wish to inform her father, or anyone, so I hope—'

'No, she should talk about it! Whew. She *really* needs therapy. Shame, man.'

'Yes, I worry ...'

'Keep phoning her.'

Ariel shrugged and stood at the window, and listened for sound from her room. The children slept on below, dreamless now.

'You know, I quite like it. You're responsible, organized. Might even get interested in my line of work. But mostly for Sav, she's going to need careful handling over the next while. But I dunno if you know what you letting yourself in for.'

'I'd love to help her. I would keep her active, with projects and—'

'Slow down, Mary Poppins. The leopard's still a problem. How 'bout we find a rehab center nearby, then you could visit—'

'The leopard is the reason I want to stay. Otherwise I would be with Stephi.'

'Ah. Okay. Of course.'

Kay snorted at an inner joke.

'What is funny?'

'I's thinking, if I met my old school friends. I could say,' her accent went all lah-di-dah. 'My child is in the care of our au pair, dahhling. From Germany, if you please.'

'Have to buy a new car first.'

And so, giggling, they contracted, the presence of Bob the witness, smiling down. Terms and conditions to evolve.

'And what about Churchill?' asked Worry. 'His permission. Might be implicating him, as well.'

'Come on, Kay. Have you seen him with the leopard? He's hiding his delight because of the ...' she gestured: *grief* '... situation. I think Churchill is the least of our concerns.'

'Yeah.' Kay stretched and leaned back, turning her head to look out of the window down towards the farm, a pretty smile emerging and softening her taut face. 'Truth is, I can't say no, hey Ariel? There's too much magic around here, too much weird meaning and balance and stuff. And Savannah ... maybe the best thing for her would be to help raise this cat. Teach her a bit of nitty-gritty, keep her busy. Compassion, hey? Care for life. Keeps you alive.'

'Yes.'

'But I should think. Lemme sleep on it.'

Ariel smiled.

The evening deepened. Kay got itchy to get back to her maps and impact reports and inbox, and pottered around her office – a paper-stacked corner desk in her bedroom – for a while, then lay down on the bed. Ariel closed the door gently, sat on the sofa, thumbed her cell and put a call through to her father, missing him suddenly.

'*Mein schatz*. Are you having fun?'

'In a way. I have decided to stay here in Mpumalanga for a while.'

'Where?'

'Mpumalanga?'

'Wait. A pen.' Fade out, his mutter *mpumalanga*.

She waited, shuffling. His voice was strangely flat, not cold exactly, but the smile, the warmth was too subtle to be heard. *He will become a stranger. No. I will.* Tears prickled her eyes.

'What a beautiful sound this name has. What is it, a town?'

'Um, province,' she coughed.

'Ariel? Child? What is it? What's wrong?'

'Nothing, nothing. It's good to speak to you. I miss you.'

'No, that's not ... where *are* you?'

'A house. A woman stays here.'

'This is very strange. I thought you were in a holiday resort?'

'Shit happens,' she said in English. There was a baffled muffling from the phone.

'Listen Papi, I must run. Don't worry about me. I love you.'

'But wait–'

She disconnected, dropped it and ran from the room. Her ankle twinged a warning, so she slowed down through the kitchen, breathing the tears back in. The sunset was dark and bruised with departing rain. She crept down the outside stairs and stood listening at the door. The kids were still sleeping.

In the joints of change hiatus, a malingering sense of no direction. She felt listless, uncomfortable in her clothes. It was very hot and humid. Mist wreathed from the wet earth at her feet, swaying in the dying sun. She kicked a rock-solid paint can at the entrance of the cave, but to break the peace, today ... no, she wandered to the edge of the garden, gazing out at the green vista, the smoky blue cloud of the lowveld.

'Ariel.'

Mosh, in a black suit, standing a hesitant distance.

'How are they?'

'Sleeping.'

'Do they need anything?'

'No.'

He walked swiftly over and stopped just short without touching, his shirt a skins-width of air from her dress. His scent washed over her, and he touched her hair lightly with his cheek.

She blinked. 'Hullo.'

'I missed you.'

'You smell nice.'

His finger traced down her neck and she turned and settled a burning cheek on his chest. *How quiet he is when he should be.* She kissed his shirt, and then his throat. And for a while she was only Ariel, and Ingwe lay purring with the kittens in the small room behind her, eyes averted and hooded with pleasure. Soothed, they sank deeper into healing sleep.

'So did you ask her?'

'Sssshh.' She sighed and turned her face back out. A big bird with an oversized beak jinked and swooped through the trees – *hornbill*, she noted, pleased – its acrobatics for no apparent reason other than joy. She pushed him away.

'Yes. She'll reply tomorrow.'

'So ... how did it go?'

'Fine. Okay. Yes, I'm sure. We'll be neighbors, hmmm?'

And then there was too much to say and they both fell quiet, sharing another sunset. Questions hung in the dusk all around, and only one answer: *whatever tomorrow may bring.*

The soil was cement-grey and dry as dust between the stone pillars and the ranks of junk lurking under the kitchen floor. Little inverted cone-shapes scattered this short, sandy stretch, the largest two inches across, like the prints of some pencil-footed alien. They drew the eye with perfection: *life*.

'What are these?' Ariel hovered a fingertip, not touching, not wanting to disturb the tiny circular slope of perfect dust. It landslid anyway, blurring the point, as if by a pulse of finger magic.

'Ant-lion,' said Mosh. 'Traps. Here, watch this. Don't let 'em see you.' He gently pinched a passing ant, slid his hand over and dropped it into the largest cone. The ant stumbled down and then up, but the side was too steep and the sand too fine. A trickle, a signal of single grains, and a pincer emerged and snapped, spraying a shot of sand. The ant tumbled. The pincer snatched and began to tug. The side of the cone collapsed, burying the ant but for one twitching antenna.

'Euw,' said Ariel. 'Poor thing. Thank you. Thank you for showing me that.'

'Ehe. Well, it used to impress the girls, when I's about six.'

'Why so many here?'

'It's dry. They don't like the rain.'

'What should we do? Dig them out?'

'No, why? You'd find them in a leopard cave in the wild, for sure. Bet they good, y'know, make a minefield for crawling insects, ticks and fleas and ants and stuff. Drawn by the animal.'

'Hmp!' nodded Ariel. 'Co-operation again. Predator and predator. So we perhaps put her bed behind them, there in that corner?'

'Well, let's chuck all this stuff, and see.'

She was a bit icky about crossing the ant-lion field, so he raked it smooth and laid the remains of a curtain across. They crouched together in this strange dwarf-room. Boxes and buckets and rolls of wire, a roll of festering carpet, old wooden tomato-crates packed with bits of plastic toy. A senselessly stored Christmas tree in a pot, dead on a bed of pine-needle dust. They set to work bent double, Ariel exploring and passing things back, Mosh behind, so soon the cave was a furnace of feral hormones. Then a spider scuttled black legs under her hand and she *shrieked* and dived out into the morning sun. After that they changed positions, he intrepid, she quite useless for a while. She watched him, rubbing the crawl from her palm, absorbed by the flex and grunt of his body.

He worked hard, to impress her, and because he wanted this job finished to get the leopard out of her bedroom. He dragged out the stubborn roll of carpet, shouldering past her vague gesture of help. She stood aside as he strode back, snorting and clapping dust from long, strong, bi-coloured hands.

Kay's heavy tread on the floorboards above. The gurgle of a pipe, the scrape of the kettle.

'Oops,' whispered Ariel. 'Must have woken her up.'

'KAAAY,' boomed Mosh in a sepulcher voice. 'KAAAY QUAAIL. THIS IS GOD SPEAKING!'

'Shush!' Ariel frowned.

'DO YOU HEAR ME, MY CHILD?'

'I can *see* you.' A blue eye and a wagging finger appeared in a gap between two boards by the massive joist. 'What more you want from me, God?'

'GOD WANTS A CUP OF COFFEE.'

'If you let me win the lotto.'

'NO!'

'Thanks. Didn't know you were black, by the way.'

'AND SEXY. DAMN!'

'Oh stop it,' said Ariel.

'Ehe.'

'Morning Ariel. Hey, God. Why are you so dirty?'

But God, bashful, didn't answer, leaving Kay's pale attempt at humor to wither away above them. Her footsteps shuffled as she stood.

'Why did you do that?' Ariel frowned.

'Jus' trying cheer her up? You know. Be silly.'

At last the junk was out, sprawling and spilling, flattening the weeds. They swayed in suspended dust, drenched and smeared and happy. The kitchen door creaked and Kay shuffled out in a towel dressing-gown. She looked awful, aged, her face puffy, eyes swollen and blank.

'Here's your coffee, my lord. Hey Ariel? I haven't said yes, yet. About you staying.'

Ariel peeked through her hair and said nothing.

'Okay. Put all this stuff back. Now!'

'What?'

'Got you. HAHAHAHA,' she coughed and gagged, said, 'Excuse me,' and spat. 'Sorry, sorry.'

'Better out than in.'

'Ja. Shit. You need some help loading the bakkie? I'll get dressed.'

'No, no, of course not. How is Sav?'

'Still sleeping. I wonder, should I wake her up?'

'Um ...'

'Leave her,' said Mosh. 'Let her sleep. How are you, Kay? Really?'

'I'm fine. Thanks.'

'You are in my ... and my father's ... thoughts.'

'Such a nice boy.' Kay flashed a tight, tired smile. 'Would you invite him over, Mosh? Anytime today.'

'Sure.'

'Maybe we can have a braai?'

'Well, we were hoping to dig the fence-pole holes. Trenches. Serious rock here. On the way back from the dump we gonna buy some fencing. Ariel is.'

'Great. Where ...?'

'From the corner of her room to the tree? And then across to those rocks, joining the side fence there.'

'Ja, perfect.' Kay rocked back on her bare heels, staring up at the fissured face of the cliff. 'But a gate? To get round the house?'

'I'll buy one,' said Ariel.

'Whew! Lot of fencing, hey? Cost a bit.'

'No matter. How high should it be?'

'A growing leopard? Good luck! Two meters, at least.'

'Anyway,' said Mosh, hoisting the dead tree.

Ariel took a break, hands on hips, surveying the cave. Something glittered in the sand next to the brick of the back wall. She shuffled in. An eye, blue ... no, an oval stone, polished, semi-precious. She picked it up. It winked a tiny galaxy of scattered gold. She clicked her fingers on the palmed stone and scanned her memory. Lapis lazuli?

Ingwe sensed it first, the sigh of scale on scale or the whisper of a hiss from the deepest corner, a black hole where sand met brick. Then movement, the faintest shift of

iridescent sheen. Then a clearer glint, like polished stone. She stared, absorbing the shard of reflected light.

Eyes.

She lunged backwards, scrabbling, a bolt of instinct through both cat and woman, and ran out. 'Mosh! Snake! Snake!'

'What? Where?'

'There. In the corner. It's really big!'

'Big? How big?'

She stretched her arms and then circled her fingers and then flapped her hands at him, exasperated. 'Big. Thick as my arm.'

'Wo, hang on a minute. What color?'

'Black?'

'EEEEK!' He pranced away in the weirdest dance, throwing up his legs as if the ground was burning, hands squirming on stiff arms, his face a horror-cartoon.

'What? What are you doing? What is it?'

'*Mamba!* Oh fuck, I'm so scared of those things. Help me, mommy!' He cowered behind the banister of the kitchen steps. Ariel giggled and skipped away, towards the cliff.

The kitchen door opened. 'Did you just say mamba?' asked Kay.

'Yeah, I think so. Big and black.' He pointed and munched exaggerated fingernails.

'Please don't make me do it Kay. Please!'

'What?'

'You know, kill it. Go near it. Fuck that, God. I'll do *anything* else. Jump off the cliff.'

'No-one's killing nothing. It's a rule in my house.'

'So what, you just gonna *ask* it to leave?'

'I ... *brrr*, scary thing, black mamba. You guys better come inside.'

But they were already a giggling whirlwind past her.

Ariel pointed. They stood for a huddled moment and stared at the dresser, the motley collection of chipped coffee mugs and dissimilar plates. Then they retreated to the furthest corner of the room, which held a small table and chairs.

‘Perhaps we could smoke it out? Put fire in a tin drum, then green leaves and roll it in?’

‘No Ariel. You don’t understand. Black mamba is fast, as fast as us. And very, very aggressive, especially near its home. And maybe only the yellow cobra is more poisonous, but the mamba is so big, with so much venom, it’s been known to kill like five dogs in a row. Basically if it bites you, you’re dead in half an hour, although I’ve got anti-venene here, but still. It’s not something amateurs should deal with.’

‘Especially me,’ said Mosh.

‘And the problem is it establishes a home base, a territory. Which must be here. All the others animals learn to keep away. I mean, in nature, even a leopard would give way. It’s got a prime spot down there.’

‘So what should we do?’

‘I’ll phone around. Get a pro.’

Ariel drummed her fingers on the table and then leapt to her feet.

‘What?’

‘There’s a hole in the door. To my room. The snake could get in.’

‘No. Wait. It’s not safe—’

But she was gone, slamming the door shut behind her.

Kay walked to the window and then just stood there, gazing out, arms listless at her sides, her face haggard and slack.

Mosh came quietly to her side. ‘Don’t worry, Kay. I’m sure the snake—’

‘It’s not the snake. It’s me. Me! I’m living here, stuck out in this wilderness all alone and I’ve got a child and no money, and there’s a black mamba living under my kitchen.’

It's just I'm a bad mother, I'm a bad mother. I mean she *plays* down there, y'know? I'm so clueless, so fucking trusting, all the people I grew up with have nice safe little houses in the suburbs and I've got this job where everybody hates me because I'm trying to do my job ...' The tears built up pressure behind her eyes, and she forced them back, the muscles working along her jawline.

He stood close, unable to touch her, suspended by respect.

Ariel ran back through the scattered junk, the kitten in her arms. Kay turned away from the window, and stumbled as Savannah tackled her in a fierce hug.

'Oh, hullo Sav. Here, I've got her.' Ariel was bright and breathless from the short run. 'You know, we really have to give her a name. Kay?'

'I ...'

'Oh! Sorry.' Ariel backed off, smothering her face in the fluff of the leopard's neck. 'I'll go out, no, I can't go out. I ...'

'Relax, Ariel,' said Mosh.

'Let's go to my room,' said Savannah. 'Mom? Come. Let's think of a name for her. Come, Ariel. Mosh, you stay here.'

The females retired, leaving him to smile at the floor. They murmured behind the closed door, then Kay slipped out. As she reached for the phone there was a knock on the front door.

Sav jumped out. 'Mosh, what's the Zulu for saved? You know, the saved one. The one we saved?'

He heard his father's voice, and said 'Uh, umsindisi.'

But he was distracted. "The saved one" is "usindisiwe". "Sindisi" means "the savior".

She took to her name immediately, twisting her ears at the sibilance, still maintaining a prickly wariness at the humans and the new room. She hissed and spat when Churchill leant his head in to say hullo. But now a playful spark flickered in her huge eyes, and she padded at a dark purple-crested lourie tail-feather twisting in Ariel's fingers, then licked a mock-nonchalant paw. The human faces on either side shone, reflecting her beauty and latent power, a scent of rapture in this small room.

'Damn!' said Kay, collapsing onto the sofa. 'All the snake boys gone on holiday. Dunno who else to phone.'

Churchill leant back, fingers steepled. 'Then rationally, we should kill it. With a shotgun. It's far too dangerous.'

Kay nodded morosely. 'You know where the mamba's main habitat used to be? The South Coast. Now one big fat holiday resort. It's endangered, it must be. I don't wanna kill it, Church.'

'Nor I. I'll tell you why. I grew up in a kraal in Kwazulu. There was a small koppie on the high land, and it was sacred. We were forbidden to go near it. And then I had a puppy, and it disappeared ... hm, haven't thought about *that* in a while, anyway, my grandfather told me a mamba lived in that koppie. Said it was the feathered serpent, the king of the snakes. I wasn't allowed to go find my puppy. If I went into the mamba's kingdom, he could eat me.'

'Bit harsh.'

'Yes, well. There was a belief that the snake's body held the spirit of our ancestor, some king from before the days of the white man. I don't know, I forget. I learnt too quickly, and forgot the stories of my grandfather.'

'Yeah. Me too.'

'And you know, it felt like the mamba *was* protecting us. Everything avoided that koppie, dogs and cattle and people, wild animals. If there was a raid by leopard, or

baboon, or people even, it always came from the other side. I saw it once when it came down to the stream to drink. It looked tired, and old, but it was *real*, Kay. And no-one got bitten, in all the time I lived there. We lost two dogs. Stored our grain up the hill near the koppie, and there were no rats.'

'So what should we do?'

'I don't know. My grandfather said that it was worse to kill the body that housed the spirit of our ancestor than to kill a living man. Bring a curse on us. I have my doubts, I mean, I don't believe in fairy stories. But I know if I have to kill this snake, I ... I would feel bad, that's all.'

'What else can we do? All the snake boys are gone.'

'If I dress in layers? There's a motorbike helmet somewhere in the house. Work gloves, boots?'

'Worth a try, but it'll slow you down. Fastest snake in Africa. How 'bout we rig a box-trap? With a live rat.'

'That's a good idea. There's another possibility.'

'Mm?'

'That our mamba's one-third mole snake and two-thirds imagination,' he whispered. 'Or a python, in the dark. Do you think she's ... you know?'

There was a hush from Savannah's room, as if Ariel was listening through the closed door.

'Yes,' answered Kay. 'She's very focused. Her description ... yes, mamba.' She nodded.

'Okay.' Churchill slapped his knees. 'I'll get the clothes. Wooly jersey, leather jacket. And my shotgun, just in case.'

The door opened. 'Why not make a lot of noise and smoke and chase it out?' asked Ariel. 'If it comes back it will see everything has changed, with the fence, and all the stuff gone. I'm sure it'll stay away?'

'I'm not comfortable.'

'Perhaps I *was* mistaken. Come, come and take a look with me, Church.'

They eased down the kitchen steps, Ariel ahead, Churchill behind with Kay's pistol. Mosh dithered at the door, watching with his cat's eyes.

'Wait,' said Churchill. 'This is wrong. Moshoesh? Get a blanket. Quickly! Ariel? Come back.' But she'd already scampered ahead and was crouching down to peer into the cave. He he saw her back stiffen with hairless hackles, her clawed hands lifting as she took a step back. The snake emerged from the shadow of the cave in a long, thick stream of gun-metal muscle. Ariel hissed, her claws raking the air. The mamba stopped and slowly stood, fist-sized head rising up until its stone eyes leveled with hers. She circled, glaring, and the snake's slim hood spread out, black mouth wide, two long fangs. One expression in its lidless eyes: malice. Strips of scaly transparent skin fluttered at its neck, the mythical feathers.

Churchill sighted the pistol with a sigh and a grimace and counted down *three two one* then felt a cool hand on his shoulder. 'Wait,' said Kay.

And she was right. The snake sank slowly to the ground, deflating, uncertain between the piles of human junk. Ariel held her stance as it turned away and flowed, picking up speed with effortless power. In seconds it had vanished into a grassy fissure in the cliff.

'Okay,' said Churchill. 'I'm *not* going to try catch that. I'll build a trap.' He turned to Kay as she laughed, enjoying the proximity of her skin, the firm, bushfruit-color of her, the delicacy of her fine wrinkles. Her blue eyes dropped, pleased.

'WHOO!' whooped Ariel. 'Did you see that? Un-fucking**be**credible!'

'Young lady? At the moment you are standing between a mamba and its den. Most children here learn – Sav, *is* that a good idea?'

‘No, Church,’ said Sav, a hand on his back, its arm around her mother. ‘Completely loony. But I think she’s going to be between a mamba and its den for a long time now.’

Which proved true, which is why Freddy the wild rat joined the household, caught in a drop-box and then staked as bait for two weeks in a jerry-built, mango-crate trap, before his daily visits, eyeing the kitten eyeing him, became permanent residence in Savannah’s room. And so the summer of the half-tamed rat, and the fast-growing stinky-poo cats. The summer of nothing more than survival.

Soon after, Sindisi grew a mean streak, clawing and biting, eyes murky and cross. She was depressed, it was clear, stressed by the unnatural surroundings and the noise of the fence-building, the bumps and grumbles of the house. In the garden she huddled in shade, like a sick bird. Slept in the cupboard now, refusing to eat, growling and prowling in mad circles at the door at midnight.

Ariel too seemed to go without food, and either worked on the fence, deft with wire and energetic in the trench-digging, or she lay wordless with the sullen kitten, and for two days she hardly slept. The fatigue filled her with happiness, the feeling of a long-frustrated task done at last. She cared for her troubled child with grateful, silent relief, like a mother reunited.

Mosh’s night shifts started again, so now he fretted till dawn on the other side of the road. He came to work on the fence in the afternoons and then rushed to do the deliveries, but in the mornings he slept solid in his baasboy’s hut. She came to visit him on the third day, brought brunch, salad and sandwiches. He drank the fruit juice. She ate chicken, wary and quiet.

‘Muss geddup, I spose.’

She munched flesh, methodically.

'I dreamed of the mamba. Hey d'you know, in the African oral tradition-'

'The oral what?'

'No, man. The stories. The mamba's a symbol of change. Of – what's my father's word? – interregnum. When things change for the better. Or worse, I suppose. And mamba's also a symbol of healing, I think, how about that? There's a story about a princess on her death-bed, and the mamba spends the night with her-'

Ariel sat up, eyes paused at middle distance, head inclined. Mosh could hear nothing. Then she was gone, while he was still scratching and stretching, leaving him to grin and shrug bare shoulders at his erection, hidden in the rumpled bedclothes. She took the chicken.

He came later into her room to see Sindisi, who leapt and hissed and cowered, driving him away.

'Give her time,' said Ariel. 'You wish to mate with her mother. In nature you would kill her, to bring the female into estrus. Lucky you're a human being?'

'Believe me, no-one's getting pregnant.'

'Agreed.'

'Maybe she won't mind if we just ... practiced, a bit, then.'

'Three more poles. Two trenches.'

So he set to, with gusto. She fetched an ice-cream from inside and stood in the shade of the flaking, white wall in her white cotton dress, nibbling, watching him from behind the curtain of her dark hair.

And this was Ariel's dirty little European sex secret, quite sweet really, of which the historians will also be oblivious, thank God. She would drift nearer in a Munich park as they erected a tent, she would dawdle, hidden, nearby Turkish gardeners and Irish builders, and pause at the gates to delivery yards. Ariel liked to watch men work.

'Sport! Man, I need sport. Soccer. Anything.' Mosh staggered to the sofa. 'And a beer. Fetch us a beer, woman!'

Ariel drifted over, blocking the TV, eyebrows raised.

He lifted a thumb from the remote. 'What?'

'I would do so, if you were polite. We should have a rule. If you command me, I do the opposite. Okay? So in this case, go fetch your own beer.'

'Only joking. Jeez.'

'Yes, me too. In a way. Can I fetch you a fruit juice?'

Mosh thumbed his lips and craned his head sideways to lock onto the screen, all amiability draining from his face. She hovered a brief, appeasing smile and then perched on the edge of the sofa. He thrashed away, leaving sharp spaces between them.

'What are we watching?'

'Cricket.' Makhaya Ntini rolled his broad shoulders and the ball spat off the seam, swinging a pixels-width from the edge of the bat. The slip fielders hooted and yelled and raised despairing hands to the gods of infinite chaos.

'What a strange movement.' Ariel brought her arm over. 'It looks so unnatural, yet powerful.'

'Hm.'

'Oh, stop it.' She walked fingers over his belly. 'You're all sweaty and cross. Please can I get you something to drink?'

'Since you put it that way.'

'What would you like?'

'Beer.'

'No. That's forbidden by the rule.'

A moment's pause, and he was laughing, pulling her down, kissing with his dry, off-salty mouth. Ntini took a wicket, and they didn't even notice.

'AAH *sick!* Gross. Mom? There teenagers making out in the lounge.'

'Well tell 'em to stop. We don't want babies crawling around.'

'*Stop.* We don't want *babies* crawling around. Mom?'

Mom appeared aproned, hands white with flour. 'Why don't you two get a room?'

'There's a leopard innit, innit?' muttered Mosh. 'Hates me.'

'Well, okay. But you see, um, I was raised in the town of Springs. And in those days, in Springs, when a young black man finished digging in the garden, he didn't come into the house and start having sex with the white people. In the sitting room. As far as I know! So you'll excuse me if I dunno how to ...'

'The situation feels *fine* over here,' grinned Mosh.

'Ja. Sure. Feels alright here, too, I suppose.' Kay wandered back to the kitchen.

The teenagers blinked at each other and watched cricket awhile, awkward in each other's arms.

'You guys want something to drink? Mosh?'

'I'd like a beer, if you have one. Thanks.'

'Ariel?'

'Yes please.'

'I'll join you.' She came back with two Black Label quarts and three odd-shaped glasses, handing Mosh the only beer glass.

'Aaah, that's better. Hoo. Ja, Springs, Springs. It's funny, it's like Springs was just a bad dream, hey? I mean, Springs couldn't *really* have happened. Like a foreign movie in my head, this strange, strange place. Bioscopes and drive-in and the corner café. You hoped when you died you went to America. We were English, and the Afrikaners just used to hit us all the time. So we stayed inside. And we had all these rules in the house, cutlery and crockery and not touching the furniture and schedules and lessons and

bollocks, so I used to escape to the bush, to the vlei down the road from our house, and now I feel like, what was *that* all about?’

The teenagers nodded politely to her headshake. They watched Pakistan slap three boundaries.

‘What’s the nature of your work, Kay?’ asked Ariel.

‘Come. I’ll show you.’

She spread the map on the bed. ‘Okay. Here we are. And down here, these two towns? And *this*,’ she pointed to a squiggle interspersed with minor dots, along faint, bunched gradient lines, ‘the only road linking them. See?’

‘Yes. It runs through these hills. Quite a detour. There should be a straight road, across this empty land, here.’

‘Yes! Well, actually, no.’

‘No?’

‘That’s exactly what they’re proposing. A toll road. But it’s not *empty* land. One of our biologists just recently found a totally new species of euphorbia, I got the email just now. One patch, endemic to one hillside. Slap-bang in the path of the toll road.’

‘This road, the existing one,’ Ariel tapped a forefinger, ‘doesn’t look right. Twists too much. What’s the condition?’

‘Terrible. Pot-holes everywhere. But there’s no strategic ... y’sure you want to hear all this?’

‘Yes please.’

‘Okay. In the old days this was Bantustan country. The homelands. You follow?’

‘Yes. Land allocated to the black people during apartheid. The various tribes. Thirteen percent of the land. Forced removals.’

‘Uh, right. And I think the people were just dumped here, probably because it was the easiest place to dump them. Anyway, a whole series of little towns sprung up along

the road, most not even on the map. If you go there now it's chaos, too many people, but it thrives, in that ... African way? Very busy, lots of trade. Anyway, down here, in this big stretch of land between the two towns? Since forever it was always tribal land, and because it's so isolated the landless people just don't go there, they'd be kicked out, anyway, by the traditional guys.'

'Okay. I see the problem. The communities along the existing road are sustained by it. If a new road is built it'll cut them off. So they'll have to relocate, and will come into conflict with the farmers. And the environment.'

'YES! Thank you. She got it! Three years, and the Department still refuses to get it. And this bit,' she drew a line over the empty space on the map, 'is very beautiful, and here, and here and here it's undisturbed, pristine, you know, functioning ecologies, unique species ... the chiefs protect these areas.'

'*Urwald*,' nodded Ariel. 'But surely ... there's some sort of strategic assessment? Assess the cost to the public of the straight road, versus the cost of upgrading the existing road, alternatively the cost of building a new stretch, here, at the foothills - a lot more kilometers, it would seem - then assess the cost of relocation of the people, the depreciation of property along the old road, the loss of income, the cost of providing new infrastructure and services, and balance it. And at the same time seek a compromise, a solution, eco-tourism? Proclamation of nature reserves? If the road has to be built.'

Kay felt her mouth gaping.

'Of course, there could be an overriding political consideration, you know, the economic benefits of linking these two towns. But that decision contains a long-term implication, which should be made with eyes wide open. It acknowledges that the two urban areas will grow towards each other. It opens the door to sustained and perpetual pressure on the receiving environment. The State has to acknowledge the implication,

the moral responsibility: this one step may determine the eventual destruction, or otherwise, of the wilderness.'

Kay jumped to her feet and strode to the window, clenching her fists as if trying to get a grip on the moment.

'All very interesting,' she sighed, slouching back to the bed. 'But it certainly doesn't work that way. Add the cost of relocation ... hahahaha. No, the impact assessment is only for the stretch of highway itself. And two hundred meters along either side. That's all.'

'What? That's ridiculous.'

'There's no strategic environmental assessment for the region. The spatial development plans, the zoning's a mess. Not required, although the lawyers say they could argue it, there are constitutional issues.'

'Are you in court?'

'Don't make me laugh. Do I look like I can afford a lawyer?'

'But your organization?'

'Not interested. In fact, a lot of those middle-aged conservationist white boys are sensing the wind blowing in one direction, that the roads gonna be approved. They hate to back a losing cause. And they specially hate to embarrass the black politicos, they *love* the cocktail parties, slapping each other on the back, so they can feel all nice and safe when they cuddle up in bed at night. So now they getting all excited and *positive* about conditions in the ROD.'

'The what?'

'Sorry. Record of Decision. We're waiting the decision. There hundreds of objections. But no, my bosses want to focus the campaign on conditions in the ROD. *Assuming* it'll be approved! You know, like fencing off the highway from the bush and lining the underground petrol tanks-'

'Weaklings. Appeasers. Rearranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic.'

A pause then, a realignment. Lieutenant to grizzled sergeant, a quip of loyalty at the frontline, in the dark before the dawn. The afternoon hung back for a moment's quiet contentment. Then the crash of a table overturning, a bottle smash. 'You beauty! We won, we won! NTINI, NTINI! Sorry, Kay.'

'Clean it up.'

'Yebo, madam.' He came to the door and head-butted it.

Kay folded her map. 'Aren't you meant to be going to work round 'bout now?'

'I phoned in sick. My dad did the deliveries.'

'C'mon boy. What you doing?'

'You wanna be fired?' called Savannah from her room.

'Yeah, maybe. It's not so nice since Bob – uh, sorry.'

'Go and clean up the broken glass,' said Ariel. 'Please.'

'Sure. And *then* ...?'

'Oh no,' groaned Kay. 'He wants to get jiggy again.'

'No, I was wondering,' to Ariel. 'Do you like horses?'

They were sorry excuses for horses, two stringbean, patchy old geldings lounging under a thatch lean-to. Indulged, Ariel could see, no working gear, living out their days. The younger, a dirty chestnut, lifted its chin in welcome to Mosh. The older, a pale grey, glared balefully at Ariel with its one good eye.

Then they caught her scent and whinnied, clattering shoes against the hard red earth, rearing against rope, a flash of white from their mahogany eyes. Mosh jumped back, tracking the horse's eyeline to Ariel. She turned and walked away, and the horses settled their hooves, snorting, baring ochre teeth.

'Weird. These are two seriously mellow horses. They ignore most people.'

'It feels wrong to me, too. Let's walk.'

Along the vast green wall of eucalyptus, floodlit by sun through gaps in the clouds, down to the black road. Mosh ran the yellow line all the way to the bridge and then jumped into the ditch, lest someone from work see him. He splashed his boots in the mud, following the stream of water which once soaked down steppes of stone and soil and root, but was now channeled past the buildings to the dam, where it sluiced into a concrete pipe under the road into the cleft of the valley, into a verdant rock-bed kloof. They clattered down the loose stones of the incline to the mossy culvert, holding steadying hands, and ducked in. A car bonged the bridge above, the echoes shivering rings in the puddles.

And at last tall grass, reeds, the flash of birds. They clambered a fence with a sign *Warning Hippos!* and found the footpath through a sheltered stand of bush-willow. Ariel flowed away and disappeared, leaving Mosh to clump along behind.

‘Stop, woman! Dammit.’

A throaty whisper at his ear: ‘You commanded me. I do the opposite.’ And she was gone again.

Mosh sighed and ambled on his way. The grass grew head high, and he stomped his feet to warn the snakes. The path grew soggy underfoot as the kloof widened. Still no sight of Ariel, no sound. He came to the stretch of cropped lawn next to the river. On one side boulders the size of houses guarding a clear, serpentine pool, and downstream a field of reeds on a stretch of white sand. He climbed a rock to peer into the water for croc or hippo then made his way down to the grass.

He sat down. A faint rustle in the reeds below. He marked the spot. Another, movement. Then the crunch of sand from behind and she lowered herself into a crouch beside him. He shushed a finger to his lips and pointed. A reed snapped and a bullet-headed rodent-type animal, the size of a small dog, wandered out onto the open sand, snuffled, then ran back into cover.

‘What was *that?*’ she whispered.

'Cane rat.'

'A rat? That enormous thing?'

'Yeah. Hey, listen! I read once ... there's this leopard hunting technique?'

'Yes?'

'They drum on the sand with their paws. Literally, a drum beat. The sound goes through the water beneath the sand and fills up the whole reed-bed. The rat don't know where its coming from, and it freaks them out, y'know, sounds like stampeding animals or something, so they panic and start running around in all directions. If the leopard's lucky, straight out in front of it.'

'Really?'

'Learn it from their mothers, y'know. Let's try it!'

'What?'

'C'mon, let's go down to the reeds. Quietly!'

'You want me to drum on sand?'

'Hey, when in Africa ...'

'You go first.'

'Sshhh.'

As she shuffled behind him she slipped her knife from the belt-buckle sheath, all her senses focused on the reeds. They ran to a tree, then leopard-crawled to the edge of the bank.

'You flap your hands like a fat duck.' She was righteously disappointed. Her kayaman had no rhythm.

'Ssshhh!'

She did the opposite, tucking the knife to her side and scraping away the loose dry sand to the brown, damp firmness below, cupping her hand in an exploratory slap. They felt the faint beat as they lay together, the ripple into taut tummies.

Mozart, she thought. *Drama and discipline. A heartbeat of wild abandon.* She began to drum out a sound-bite of the Master while Mosh scraped away his patch of sand. He picked up the cadence with rolling fingertips, then slid into a reggae off-beat - smooth, pulse-perfect rhythm, after all.

Then they both felt the fountain of sound welling up beneath. Ariel dropped her beat, but Mosh kept on, digging in the rhythm, deeper into the earth. He stopped and they listened: warped, ghostly echoes seemed to flow back, a shiver of reeds in the wind.

The cane rat burst out, leaping straight at them. It landed, twisting, on the slope of the sand-bank, tumbling and squirming and then Ariel was up and leaping and Mosh saw the flash of the blade as it swept down. A squeal, a thump, a burst of sand, and she was standing over the dead rat, horrified confusion in her face. Blood dripped from a clenched knuckle.

'Fuck a duck. Why did you do that? *How* did you do that?'

'I don't know, Mosh. I don't know what happened. Oh, oh, my hand is full of blood.'

He stepped back, staring at the trembling, red palm offered to him. She snatched it away, turned, and ran down to the water.

When she came back, hiding her face, wiping the blade, folding it and tucking it away, he was on one knee, hoisting the dead animal and shaking off congealed sand. She peeked at his expression, expecting disgust or anger, but he was grinning.

'I know exactly what we're going to do with this.'

Sindisi jostled in Ariel's arms down the path to the front garden, half-asleep, grumpy, squinting at the twilight beyond the fence. Ariel paused at the corner, watching Mosh arranging the cane rat behind a stand of thatch grass down near the ficus tree. He left the furry little butt peeking out, and then twanged the string which

stretched the full length of the lawn, from the knot around the rat's forelegs up to the tap pipe, where it looped around and ran to the steps of the stoep.

'Okay?' he said, loping up the lawn. 'Take her down there, just leave her. Uh, please? Let her get the smell of it.'

Ariel did as requested. Mosh tugged the string, and the rat rustled against the grass.

Sindisi sank lower to the earth, flattening the curve of her tail, ears back. Mosh tugged again, and the rat's head peeked out. The leopard slowly turned her head, her eyes seeking a line of query across the grass, a single blink. Ariel flicked an encouraging glance and Sindisi focused on the prey, shuffled, and touched a paw forward.

The rat jerked, and she jumped, too soon and too far away - and the rat was off, bumping and flouncing across the grass. Sindisi slowed to a disdainful walk and sat down, utterly ignoring everyone. The rat flopped to a halt as if mesmerized by cool.

'I read about another hunting technique ...'

'Yes?'

'Antelope can suss a predator by body language, right? By the shape when they stalk, when they run, y'know? The *directness*.' He thrust the spade of his hand forward. 'So there was this one guy, he saw a leopard *dancing* ...'

'Dancing?'

'Ja, it's true. You see, if a leopard just walks past, doesn't bother to hide or crawl, then the buck'll often just stand there and watch it walk past. Like they don't click it's a danger, cause it's not behaving like one.'

'Yes, I saw something like that on Discovery. Go for a stroll in the park, a lot on my mind, dum-de-dum then *pow!*' She grabbed the air.

'Ja, so then this one guy saw, a leopard took it a step further. It started acting like a total raving lunatic, dancing on its back legs and rolling around on the ground and hopping like a rabbit. Acting so strange that the buck even got curious, and came closer. And because it was hopping around, it was easy to move - *whoops!*' The string slipped

from his fingers, and they looked out at Sindisi, dragging a rat almost the size of herself back into the shelter of the tree.

One low branch and she simply jumped, wild-eyed, her forelegs barely reaching past the blunt torso. The string jerked as Mosh grabbed it, the rat sloshed against the bullet-scarred trunk and she lost her mouth-hold and tumbled to the ground.

‘HAH!’ He whipped his arm over and the rat made a break for freedom.

But in vain. This time she found her feet with one determined squirm and was charging up the lawn, faster than Mosh could reel the string in. She caught the rat with claws flashing, ripped at its limp belly with hind-claws and buried her snarl in its throat. It fought and tugged against her grip, until the string snapped.

‘We let her kill it now,’ said Ariel.

‘So you gonna teach her, mother leopard?’

‘What?’

‘The loony leopard dance.’

‘If you promise not to watch.’

‘No, I’ll be the prey.’ He flexed his shoulders. ‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘You have to audition. Don’t want just any old prey. Let’s see your impala imitation.’

He stood and tried a bush-charade, bugging out vacant eyes and masticating sideways, but then collapsed with a rueful laugh back onto the step.

‘Hmp. I’ll find my own prey.’

In a swirl of embarrassed, boyish heat he leant over and tried to kiss her. His lips sought reassurance, a soft pliant smile, but she turned her face away. The crunch of gristle came from behind the tree, and a satisfied rumble that only she could hear.

Ag, not again, he thought, with sullen anger. He jumped up and strode up the stairs. If he’d listened to her, he might have heard a faint purring.

For almost an hour she waited while her kitten licked and chewed, both staring out into the bush beyond the wire. She registered the clangs and scrapes of Mosh at the back, cleaning up around the new fence a bit, could hear the distraction in the sporadic noise. Then a long silence, then the scuff of his shoes on the road back to the farm. She opened her mouth to call out and shut it again, unwilling to disturb the dark, furtive land, the stars like moist studs in a restless sky.

At last Sindisi staggered across the lawn, her belly a swinging sack. Under a juicy hibiscus behind the stairs she squatted and dropped a huge poop. Then she wandered back to her mother, her face goofy, and rubbed and purred and licked in extravagant, sensual delirium.

‘I suppose you want me to lick you clean now?’

A shadow passed over the cat’s eyes as she squinted up at the human voice.

‘Come. Let me clean you.’ She fetched a bowl of warm water and a scrap of hessian, and they lay together on the bed in their lair as she licked her kitten clean with her fingers.

'I met a very nice man. I think I'm in love.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.' Stephi's voice carried clear and defiant over the landline. 'He's fat, you know.'

'Oh?'

'Well, not really, sort of lumpy. And ugly. Can't believe I'm interested.'

'Why are you?'

'You mean, because he's fat and ugly? Or because only a month ago I was tied face to face with my previous lover while he slowly suffocated to death?'

'Steph. Okay, yes. The latter.'

'I dunno.' Wire interpreted her sigh, producing only muffle. 'For a coupla days I tried *your* gimmick, y'know? Hiding away in my room. Sleeping. The whole wounded animal thang. Then I got bored. So I rented some DVD's, good stuff I missed while I was working, and some other escapist crap. Oh, and I got a job. On another movie. About a tsotsi.'

'A what?'

'Tsotsi. Township gangster. Should be a jol. Anyway, it seemed like ... *all* those movies were about revenge. Revenge this revenge that. It was making me *crazy*. The last one was this ultra-violent buddy-cop movie and the hero was like this total loser degenerate bastard, killing people and stealing drugs to support this hooker but *it* was okay, because he was chasing the guy who killed his partner, so he was still the hero, man. Was redeemed by it, y'know, when he killed the guy who killed his buddy, even though it turned out it was actually this other cop—'

'Stephi, have you been to see anyone?'

'What, like a shrink? What for?'

'What for? Are you serious? Let's see. Do *you* have strong feelings for revenge?'

'Of course I wanna kill that bastard, wha's his name again?'

'Skeet.'

'No surname. Stupid us. But there was something in those movies, made me feel sick, hey? It was like this ... justification for ... for ...'

'Hatred.'

'Yes. *Yes*. Glorified it. So many unresolved things in life, Ariel. This morning, this little bitch in a Tazz stole a parking space right out from under me so I hooted and she pulled a zap. Wanted to rip her face off, as one does. But you get hit, and you just have to move on. That's all. People carry all this anger and frustration around with them, living in the city, criminals and bosses, petty officials, idiots in the traffic and there's no justice, you get hit and you just have to move on. Transport yourself into a movie character, now and then, you'll get your revenge.'

'Steph, you don't sound well. Please get some help.'

'I'm fine, I told you, I think I'm, I'm in love.'

'Steph, *come* on. Please.'

'How goes the investigation? Into our old pal Skeet?'

Ariel sighed. 'Kay is very determined. She has visited the police twice since they took our statements. And made copies of their papers. They refused at first, but she persuaded them, and corrected a few mistakes. She is good at this, she's ...'

'An operator.'

'Oh, she suffers terribly. And poor little Savannah. I think of the banality of evil, the ease of destruction, how we build a lifetime of love and then one gratuitous, irrational act—'

'Yeah, it was *totally* on impulse. After he tied us up he walked away a few steps and I actually saw him get the idea, turn around and come back and just pop the bag over

Bob's head. Just like that. Then he stared with this like, *snigger* in his eyes. God, God it was horrible, and then he walked away. Like a throw-away murder. A junk murder. Like garbage. Oh God, poor Bob ...'

'Yes.'

'Just another movie. That's all.'

'Steph ...'

'I know. Get some help. The thing I like about my new lover is he's so clever. He makes me laugh. He listens. So fuck you for judging me.'

Ariel waited awhile, while Stephi's breath labored over the line, the lapping of a dam of tears.

'Sorry. Unfair.'

'No don't, don't be sorry,' Ariel dropped into a soft Bayerisch. 'My treasure. It's your style, I love it. You are beautiful, you are a survivor. I wish I could hold you.'

And then they both wept freely, the soft sounds mingling in the telephones, each holding a handful of healing.

Wife No. 4 blinked in surprise as she strutted into the hospital room and stopped short, recognizing the lawyer. Skeet killed the movie with the remote as the suit thrust out the papers. 'What?' she fluttered, staring at the trembling sheets. 'Oh. Oh mah Gawd. Y'divorcin' me?'

'Yeah, bitch. The money's already in trust, every goddamn cent as per the pre-nup. Ah want yah outta mah house enda January.'

'But ... I came here to see your new face? Missed mah ... tennis lesson.' Her pretty features sharpened from vacant confusion into spiteful annoyance. 'I was *excited*.'

'And now you're divorced. Simple as that. Yah fight me, I hurt yah *real* bad. Y'don' know me. Now git out y'all.' He turned over in the bed, careful with his head.

The lawyer snapped his briefcase and clipped across the linoleum out the door. Wife No. 4 hesitated, then leant over and whispered into the ear-shaped bandage:

'Y'know somethin', mistah big shot? I wired into the hard-drive. I taped all yer sickness and filth with those poah damaged wimin. I got copies of all yer disgustin' emails. I think we gonna renegotiate the pre-nup.'

'I don' give a damn. You'll get nuttin'. I'll have ya kidnapped and feed ya t'mah cats. Feet first.' He caught a whiff of her shock through the bandages and savored it, turning in his bed and watching her take a step back, watching the fear in her little squirming mouth. *True love gives you power. Murder gives you power. They sense it, the new truth in me.*

'Oh yeah?' She stepped forward again, her face a hatchet. 'Y'know how sad y'are, Skeet? Walk around like mistah big shot, tellin' me what to do, getting all neurotic like a spoilt baby if I don' obey, d'ya know how easy it was to *play* ya? The petty little victories I gave ya. An I spent yer money and I fucked whoever I wanted, wherever I wanted, whenever ... aah wanted. Fucked spics and ... and *niggers*. And d'ya know why? Cause ya know *nothin'* about women, Skeet. Y'don' know how to touch 'em or talk to 'em or please 'em ... God knows I tried with you, but it was like fuckin' a lizard. Y'make mah skin crawl. The last guy I fucked had long, long fingers, they were through me and into me ev'ry which way ...' she swayed before his little peeking eyes, scratching fingers across her jeans-split pubic mound, eyes sliding down. 'Golly gee. Looks like abuse turns ya on, oh mastah.'

'You know what to do.' *I know what I am, now. Betrayal is expected. That's what punishment is for.* 'Do it.'

So she peeled back the bed sheet, leant obediently over and then bit him, hard enough to hurt real bad. He screamed like a girl, swung a fist and missed, and she ran from the room into a storm of hysterical tears, degraded even in defiance, damned whatever she did. And perhaps if she hadn't bit him before escaping, she wouldn't have become his second victim, the bitch that bit and ran away and was shot down like a dog

a month later. He clutched his bruised dick until the pain was almost nice and flipped the channels on the TV. Robert de Niro raised his gun before a noble, conflicted face, in submission to his anger and masculinity, and pulled the trigger.

‘Mr Humperdink? Sir? The agent says you will get a lot more money if you sell the animals one by one. When the market opens up -’

‘Ah don’ care about the money. I told ya. If ya don’ get rid of them, I’ll *shoot* ‘em one by one. After ah fire ya, Jimboy.’

‘Yessuh. I found a bear sanctuary in the Rockies -’

‘Whatever. Ah wan ‘em gone in a week. Got it?’

‘Yessuh. And all the cages demolished, except -’

‘Yeah. Except one.’

As freaky as it may seem, in the early twenty-first century it was quite common among certain castes and dominant tribes to indulge in the decadent barbarism of willfully changing their faces through surgery. Not only the deformed, the burned, the bitten, the heart-ache ugly - ordinary people with average faces misspent hundreds of millions of dollars on this vanity, even though the result was often, somehow, so much more grotesque than anything the whims of nature could produce.

Today, Skeet’s head-bandage would be unwound. He had entered the clinic with nothing more serious than a broken nose, a badge of adventure, but today he would leave with a new face, one that not even his soon-to-be dead ex-wife would recognize. This was the new Skeet; purified, dangerous, Spartan, sporting a chiseled, Marlboro-man chin, well-hung nose, botox forehead, jawline pinned up to the ears. True, he had lied to his tribe about the extent of his African injuries to drum up sympathy and respect, and he was bored with his generic, old-Skeet face, but another motivation lay deeper: a mask to cover the leprosy of his new obsession.

'Jaeger.'

'Papi? Sorry about the last call.'

'Ariel. *Gott sei dank*, I was so worried. Tell me now. What's happening?'

'I rescued a leopard cub. I'm raising it.'

'Ah-' Papa Jaeger suppressed his shout, and the line rang clear with silence. Ariel dropped a note of nervous laughter, and he coughed. After a few deep breaths he spoke:

'Okay. My generation did, indeed, celebrate the notion that a person should follow the winds of adventure, of arbitrary personal experience, when young, for no reason other than the wind itself. Backpack to Tibet, go to the Magic Theatre, all that Herman Hesse shit. But Ariel ... times have changed—'

'It's tough at the top, but friggin' crowded at the bottom,' she said, in smiling English.

'Stop that. You see, when your future employers examine your CV, they are likely to be concerned that you spent – how long? – starring in a Disney cartoon. How long *does* it take to raise a leopard cub? And what if you then find an orphan ... aardvark?'

Ariel laughed for a long time, skirting the borders of hysteria, disturbing Ingwe, listening to her father's droll smile hanging across seas and continents. Sindisi stirred and opened her eyes, grumpy with sleep.

'Aaaaah, Papi. Six months? I don't know. I love it here.'

'Yes, but—'

'I may stay for much longer. Hm, I've met a boy—'

'No, child.' His voice was suddenly sharp. 'You *have* to study. Do you understand? You have to come back. You will lead a life of hardship and regret if you don't. You're too intellectual. Take your year, travel, raise your leopard cub. But the world today ... if

you float around Africa like some damn hippy, all heart and no brain, it'll chew you up. Trust me on this, child. I cannot stress how important—'

'Yes Papi. I know,' she sighed. 'You're right.'

'Now. Tell me where you are.'

And so they turned to practicalities. Ariel told him nothing of what had happened, and he did not ask.

Blessing wiped the sweat from her face as she toiled up the haphazard steps of stone and root towards her homestead. The hunger-void of her belly had spread to her limbs; if she walked any slower she'd fall down backwards. Between the steps she walked Pondo mountain-style, swinging her legs around from the hips, not bending her knees, each swing incrementally higher up the hill than the last, using the turn of her body to save valuable, ebbing energy. In a plastic-raffia bag on her head, mielie-meal, oil, sugar, salt, paraffin, new shoes, matches, a new Bible for her aging uncle. The five mud-and-stick thatched huts inched into view, and she rested under a ravaged witch-hazel, bag on a rock.

The huts – her childhood – looked smaller, shrunken like drying mushrooms on the hillside. Her uncle had whitewashed the walls recently, cheerful in the green. Spinach and pumpkin rioted, the mielies stood tall from the recent rain. She patted her severance pay in her damp bra and noticed that a branch of the tree was dead. She broke it off as an offering of firewood.

The dog lifted his head from the shade of a hut, one ear sharpened. Then he staggered his gaunt body slowly from the ground and trotted down to meet her, tongue lolling in a grin of welcome.

A dark, squat figure emerged from a doorway, and Blessing gasped. Tears swelled and broke and mingled with her sweat. Her mother, her mother back from Joburg, back for Christmas with city presents, back from her maid's job with her rich white family,

the job that had orphaned Blessing but for three clinging weeks a year. She wiped her tears with a trembling smile, balanced the bag, and forced her legs to work again.

‘My child. Why are you here?’ Mma Zondo held her daughter at arm’s length and studied her face. ‘Why ... did Miss Quail give you leave? So soon after starting the job?’

‘Mama, I ...’

‘Have you been fired?’

Blessing nodded, flinching.

‘No! No, this cannot be! Do you understand what you’ve done?’ She swung her arm and slapped Blessing, hard.

‘*Mama!* Why?’ She collapsed to the ground, legs failing.

‘Forgive me.’ Mma Zondo sat down and hugged her. ‘Forgive me, my child, my child. But this is terrible. I too have been fired. Now there is no money. I shall starve.’

‘But you worked for them for twenty years! How could they fire you?’

‘They do not care. They have the hearts of lizards. They said I am too old. They hired a young Shona makwerekwere from Zimbabwe. I raised their children and they threw me out like an old dog.’

‘But Mama? They paid you pension money every month?’

‘I ... I have spent it. Come, this ground is hard. Let us go inside. Are you hungry?’

Blessing nodded, clutching at her meager bag.

They raised themselves from the red dust, fighting fearful ennui. But Mma Zondo was a Jozi suburbanite, accustomed to fear. She knew, with trained certainty: *someone has to help us.*

And the only one we have is Churchill.

He tested a gate-pole with a shake – it stood firm - and surveyed the line of the fence with one eye. Mosh waited at a distance. Eventually he smiled and nodded approval.

'Where's Ariel?'

Mosh shrugged. He hadn't seen her for several days.

'You fighting, son?'

Are we? He shrugged again. It certainly felt like it. With every day, every solitary night, her distance seemed more implacable.

Churchill had a curious thought: *She's a new mother. He doesn't understand yet. That he now comes second.* He remembered when Mosh was but a little baby, a bundle of primal willpower in his half of the bed, the stone in his wife's eyes – *this is how it is* - and his own happiness when he submitted. He sensed the confusion in his son and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, uncertain what to say. But he had to say something:

'Not that it's any of my business, but I think that in matters of the heart Europeans are a lot tougher than us.'

Mosh frowned and straightened his back, shaking off his father's hand. They both stepped away and squatted down to examine the cave, which now contained only a threadbare, stained mattress. The mamba-hole had been bricked up and the ant-lions had re-opened their traps, ready for gruesome business.

'Maybe we should have a, like a party,' said Mosh. 'When we introduce the leopard to its new home. Invite everyone. You know, like a house-warming?'

'No.' Ariel's voice came from behind, surprisingly close. They stood and turned, and she walked to them and took Mosh's hand. She smiled into his eyes and said 'I want to make this as natural as possible. A mother leopard changes her den, to avoid other predators.' She reached up and kissed him gently on the cheek. 'So I think that I must do it alone. At night.'

Churchill caught a glimpse of the relief in his son's face and turned away. He walked through the gate to distance himself from their murmurs, the sunset trailing his shadow on the wall of Kay's cottage.

'Thanks. Thanks a lot.' Kay replaced the phone, stretched out on the sofa and closed her eyes. A transient peace had settled across the room, softening the lines of anxiety carved into her face. Three leaning pillars of sunlight slanted from the open window. Ariel came through from the kitchen, curious, drawn by the smile framing the occasional words of assent Kay had murmured as she listened.

'Who was that?'

'This American girl, Ursula? God, she's amazing. She's been here a coupla years, helping Deon and his guys rehabilitate. Introduced a leopard back to the wild last year. She's gonna drive up when she gets the chance.'

'*Super!* What did she say?'

'Um, quite a lot. Gushing somewhat, all positive and enthusiastic. And knowledgeable? I tell you, I thank the sweet lord for people like her. Reminds me that however hard it is, what we do is better than anything else in the world.'

'Yes.'

'Anyway. In nature leopards establish a territorial range. A male leopard's territory is much bigger than female's. Overlaps. They live with their mother until they're about a year old, then they establish their own range. The males migrate, while the females take a territory next to their mother's. Gradually, y'know, interacting and learning. If a female is a stranger, not related, then the territorial females will try and kill her. They often do, because they know the terrain, more experienced.'

'Oh. Oh dear. How can we find-'

'It's gonna be difficult, Ariel. The best thing would be a new reserve, where there no other leopards. If we just let her go into the Kruger Park she won't have much chance of surviving alone.'

'And they only become independent after a whole *year*?'

'Yeah. Even more, depends on the leopard. And she's four, five months old now, I'd say. So if you're going to see this thing through ...'

'I will see it through. However long it takes.'

'Sure, sure I believe you. You don't exactly strike me as a flaky kind of person. But, but may I be frank?'

'Of course.'

'You're very young. And this is one helluva commitment. Shouldn't you be worrying about your career or something? Won't you get sick of this? I mean, I won't be able to take care of Cindy if you give up. I just don't have the time.'

'My youth affords me fanaticism. Irrational commitment. Love.'

'Uh, right. But still ...'

'Let me show you. Come.' Ariel led her through to the kitchen, to the window overlooking Sindisi's run. She was slouching along, growling at the bush beyond the fence. She had grown noticeably since her arrival, her shanks thinner, jowls lolling, her expression open-mouthed, delinquent disdain.

'She's better, see? She's wild.' Ariel whispered, moving to the door.

Sindisi turned. A faint rasping, her thickening voice, drifted up to the window.

Kay watched as Ariel crossed the yard and into the run, opening and closing the gate. The leopard ambushed her, jinking, feinting, wrapping around her legs. With a shriek and a snarl they fell and rolled around in the weeds. Sindisi broke away and then flopped down and rolled in the dust. She sat up, caught Kay's eye through the glass and coughed, the sound of uncertainly sawed wood.

Kay hurried to the door, but then she paused, frowned, and walked back into the house to check on Savannah.

Who was reading. Harry Potter.

'Sav? Come on. Let's go play with the leopard.'

Dark eyes shuddered, blinked in a pale face, and then wandered back to the book for a bleak second. Then she threw it aside and slid off the bed, slack and dry-mouthed. Shoulder Thomas cast a glance over and went back to staring at the rat.

‘Oh come, come my sweetie. Do you want a glass of water?’

She half-nodded, listless, and lifted her hand to be held, just like a baby girl. And ten minutes later she was running, tumbling, fighting, shouting, glowing red under the sun, her face and her T-shirt split with manic joy.

Sindisi tired first, tired of these jumpy, hard-footed humans. She loped, panting, to the shade of the tree. Sav kicked the fence and a wave of tinkly wire rippled around the enclosure, a thousand little bells all around. Her thin chest heaved in the clean air.

Ariel collapsed laughing alongside the leopard, wiping hair from her face.

‘You guys did a good job, hey?’ said Kay, sitting leaning against the fence, hands linked behind her head, legs up, looking around through black shades. ‘Good straight lines. Looks professional.’

‘Mosh is amazing.’

‘Yeah. So are you.’

‘You too. Look. Look, the light is golden.’

Kay took off her shades. The afternoon stretched, wordless.

‘Sindy! Leave!’

The cat was examining the awkward corner pole by the tree, its diagonal supports. She tested the wire with her claws.

‘Hey, look there, Ariel. You left the supports on the *inside* of the wire. As one should, I suppose. But she can climb up – *woah!* Sindy! *Stop!*’

But in one fluid leap she was teetering on the top of the pole, tail squirming for balance, forepaws tucked in. Kay jumped to her feet. The sudden movement startled the

cat and she fell into the outside bush. Clawing the air to bring her paws up, she plunged face-first into green thatch-grass. Kay ran for the gate.

‘Wait,’ said Ariel, and Kay dropped dead in her tracks, surprising herself. She would remember that instant many times in the years to come, that instinctive obedience. Ariel stood up and prowled to the fence. The kitten had unoopsed and sat on her haunches, a stick of grass stuck up her nose.

‘Come Sindi come.’

The gate clanged, a glimpse of Savannah running around. Sindisi scampered along the fence towards her. ‘Ag shame man,’ laughed Kay, hands on her hips. ‘Put some wire over the tops of the corners? But Ursula also said you must take her for walks, in the bush. Explore. If she has bonded with you, she won’t run away.’

The day was hot, the bush ripe with summer. A cloud of dancing midges attacked their faces as they crossed the open ground, a ball of outrage at the trespass. Sindisi sneezed and snapped her jaws shut and a few were sacrificed, to the leopard’s gagging disgust. Ariel lowered her to the ground to get below but the cloud moved off anyway, seeking again the perfect centre of the clearing. *Where do they store the energy in those tiny bodies, she thought, to fly so aimlessly all day long? And why do they do it?*

They did not go far on that first day, skirting around the first trees. They found shade and sat to watch and listen.

Most tourists the green ignores. The web is used to their harmless bumbling, their loud, sweaty, happy pink. But Ariel’s aura drew the bush of the eastern side of the farm and it turned in slow awareness towards her. She felt it too, felt something inside reaching out. Her eyes deepened, absorbing colors not in the spectrum.

... this is home.

And no thought, no memory of Alpine foothills or winter Christmas, rose to disagree.

She lay in her cave. Heat ebbed from the brick and out into the deepening sky, where sacred ibis drew a descending V over the last embers of the sun. Sindisi, fresh from her nap, purred and stroked cheeks, impatient to go. They could sense prey settling down for the night; shrub-hare shuffling into grass, birds into comforting crooks, snakes and viscous lizards into cracks and crannies, paused as the world turned. A lone steenbok scented leopard and barked once before drifting back to sleep, thinking it came from the true bush beyond the fence. Genet, bush baby, a family of olive mongoose and a wildcat all lay awakening, waiting for the hunt. Ariel too felt the stirring in her bones and prowled hands and knees to the entrance.

A hedgehog bustled out onto the stretch of grass beyond the steps, drawn by the insects drawn by the light bulb above the kitchen door. Sindisi tensed behind the stone pillar, then stalked along the wall to the fence. The hedgehog snouted the air, bristled and scurried back to cover.

‘No, Sissy. Leave.’

Whatever, flicked her tail. *Fence*. She snarled and glared at the pole affixed to the wall. A V of horizontal chicken-wire capped the join. The plaster was scored with claw-strokes.

The crunch of shoes up the driveway beyond the house, so she slinked back into the cave. Ariel sniffed the air and smiled, and Sindisi blinked annoyance and turned from her; this twitching and stretching of monkey-human lips ... *other people. The man*. She growled and lashed with her tail.

Ariel crawled from the cave and stood upright.

‘Let’s get out of here.’

'Okay,' smiled Mosh. 'At last. Where?'

'Anywhere.' Ariel stretched and shook. Ingwe slipped from her shoulders and ghosted across the earth, through the fence and into the cave. 'Go for a drive and see where it takes us. Can I buy you a beer somewhere?'

'Absolutely. I suppose the bar at lodge is outta the question?'

'Indeed.'

'Well, there's the Krokodil. It's a boere bar. Y'know, white guys? They'll fall off their stools if you walk in with me. But it's okay, I *should* survive. Or we could go to the shebeen, y'know, the black guys. That might be a bit more complicated.'

'Why?'

'Uh, ex-girlfriends and such. Perhaps I should say ... unpredictable. There's also a gang of losers there who are jealous of my good fortune. You might be too much.'

'You sound vain.'

'Do I? Envy is dangerous in Africa. Some of my people ...' he shook his head and muttered, '... idiots.'

'Then let's not go there. Anywhere else?'

'Yeah, in town. There's a nightclub, dance floor, pool tables--'

'Why didn't you say so? Let's go!'

'Y'wanna get changed first?' He stood tall and broad in his new white shirt and narrow in his Levi's, with a smile at her disheveled T-shirt. 'And maybe have a bath?'

She was not quite prim, but freshly-scrubbed, stiff disapproval quivered the bakkie's cab. 'Did you not *see* that car? Or the stop sign?'

'Hey. He was traveling too fast.'

'You're such a strange person, Mosh. One moment you are civilized, courteous, the next you're like ... like ...'

'Like an animal?'

She glanced over at him, a smile creeping into her eyes. 'You said it.' He grinned wolfishly back, and she redirected him with a forgiving nod to the road ahead.

'Well, just look at the pot calling the kettle black,' he muttered.

'Excuse me?'

'I said,' with a drum-roll on the steering wheel, 'd'you *like* it?'

'*I love it!*' She shouted a laugh and leaned over with a kiss.

They negotiated the road in silence a while, the L-word hanging in the air. She sprawled back in her seat, turning away from him, an absent-minded thumb between her soft lips. He glanced back-and-forth from the dim, flickering pools of the headlights to her, each glance at the curve of her profile, the scars, that dark averted eye, lingering longer and longer ...

BANG! Something whipped across the windscreen *something with legs*. He slammed the brakes and slew shrieking rubber onto the narrow verge. The quiet was abrupt, the engine idling as they twisted back into the dark beyond the rear window.

'That was an animal,' she whispered. 'Didn't you see it?'

'I ...'

'You were looking at me. I could feel it. You really must learn how to drive properly, Mosh. Actions have consequences. You could kill us both. This is a ton of speeding metal, not a computer game.'

'I know, I know, you're right. But hey, I never play computer games-'

'Oh shut up, you idiot.' She opened the door and jumped out.

He dragged the body to the front of the bakkie for her to see.

'It's beautiful. Oh, poor thing. What is it?'

'Civet. Related to the mongoose, but much bigger. Climbs, fishes, very clever. They can eat poisonous fruit. Shy. Shame, man.'

The civet had a stylish patterned coat, a muted grey in the headlights. Its handsome, black-masked face was smashed on one side and dark with blood. A metallic, cinnamony smell reached her. *Musk?*

Or the blood of my enemy?

She shook her head. Her mouth was suddenly dry, and she passed a shaking hand over her face.

'Hey. Hey Ari. Are you all right? I'm sorry about this. Really, I'm sorry. Please don't be so angry, I also feel bad—'

'No, it's not you. There's something different ... so much death recently, and I ... forget it.' She clawed at the civet, hoisted it up and threw it into the back of the bakkie. 'Can I keep this? To give to Sindisi. To fight?'

'Yeah, cool. Civet's leopard competition. She won't eat it, though. Leopards eschew the flesh of other predators.'

'Eschew? You getting larney on me all of a sudden?' A passable imitation of a Seffrican accent as she climbed back in.

'Yeah. While you were hiding away, I's reading my dictionary. So I can understand what you say like half the time.'

'This is going to be a good jol,' she said. 'I can feel it.'

'Yeah. Crazy stuff.'

'Do you ... do you think I'm crazy?'

'What, with the leopard and stuff?'

'Yes, and ...'

'No, no I think it's amazing. It's very, very cool. You're like this ... amazing person. Truly.'

'Studying the dictionary hasn't helped much.'

'I'm focused. On the road ahead.'

And indeed he was, his care just a touch on the side of showy. He streamlined a mountain bend into the valley, weight even on both axles. The town strung lights of welcome before them. They crossed a mossy old bridge, then past industry and warehouse retail with fence and tar and prefab then the roadside shops, farm equipment, used cars, a MacDonald's spluttering fluorescence through a vague mound of dead insects inside the bright yellow plastic of the arches. Then the long, white stucco of a townhouse development, cartesian Tuscan presiding over bare, flattened earth. Then a tightening belt of riotous, ramshackle green, the pretty older suburbs huddled in sub-tropical profusion, then a lone traffic light, red. Mosh slowed and stopped.

No cars, but he waited for green, whistling through his teeth, and then crawled into the old town, past buildings no more than three stories high, some still with battered colonial facades, others more recent plate-glass. She could sense the town as it once was, this insular night-fear outpost, the jungle a frontier all around. Pedestrians appeared like ghosts from the murk, loose-limbed jollers in black, earth-colored streetkids, security guards.

Even at night this core felt overworked and overpopulated, the pillars and pavements chipped and grimy, broken glass patched with cardboard, a frenzy of signs and rickety adverts. Scraps of plastic and paper chased each other around the intersections, coke cans winked from drains. They turned left and cruised past, and he pointed at the side-alley door of the club.

Ariel wished she could wash her civet-itchy hands, and restrained a touch to her hair. Now, with all the people and the passing lights she felt nervous, unsettled, first time in the big city. A car spat by behind them and she startled, turning this way and that. Mosh reached over, pulled her to him and kissed her cheek.

'Stop it. Watch the road.'

They parked by a butcher shop with a menu in tri-colored chalk on blackboard: *Imbala Kudu Crocadile Blesbok Ostritch Niceley Marinaded!* Mosh gearlocked and gave her

hand a reassuring squeeze. She kissed him and alighted, excited now. Across the street she swayed in the lee of his tall swagger, her flowery summer-dress rippling against her skin in the fresh, warm breeze – no jeans, no knife, released from her burden. As they turned into the club he put his arm around her. The front desk was painted black and lit by a single red light bulb, obviously meant to be sexy or something, but the effect was ugly, hellish, a psycho-killer's bedroom. The chair was empty.

'No cover charge tonight,' said Mosh. 'No band.'

'Pity.'

But still, the poolroom was cheerfully full and hubbubbing, three-quarters men. Ariel skipped down a corridor to the dance-floor. Two huddled dancers, underage girls hiding from, waiting for, the men. The throb of the music hurt her ears, so she hurried back.

'Wanna drink?' he asked.

'I'll get it. Beer?'

'A Blackie. Label noir.'

'Don't move.'

'No, I saw some people I know. Won't be a second.'

They split. The bar stretched along a whole wall, one end a scrum of loud, beaming student-types, the other a line of solitary drinkers. She found a gap and glanced at the harassed barman, who hurried past the other waving arms and tapped her hand.

'Two Black Label. Keep the change.'

A snap and a flash of teeth and the bottles were before her. She sipped and peered over her shoulder for Mosh.

'Heaven musht be sad tonight,' slurred from the left.

She ignored it.

'Why, you shay? Hey? Cosh they musht be mishing an angel hur hur hur.'

She raised her eyes, lifting the bottles, turning away.

'Are y' calling me a poesh?'

'Excuse me?'

'You called me a poesh. Shtuck-up ... bitsh.'

'Enough, you drunken fool,' growled from her right.

'Shorry Darshy.' The drunken man hurriedly staggered away.

'My apologies, miss.'

She turned to the man with the deep voice. He was tall, middle-aged, long dark hair. Sadness, laughter and hard work lined his face, which inclined acknowledgement of her unspoken thanks. Then she spotted Mosh beyond, bent over some young, black, dreadlocked skank in a miniskirt.

'That your boyfriend? Young Moshoeshoe?'

'Yes, sort of. Do you know him?'

'Sure. Good kid. Don't you worry about that chick. Local slut. He wouldn't touch her with a barge-pole.'

'Thank you. I'm not worried.'

'Really? He's popular with the ladies, hey?'

She shrugged, poised, utterly chill.

'Aaah, *I* see. It's Mosh who's out of his league. About time.'

She met his eyes. 'There are no leagues. Just people.'

'Easy for you to say, so gorgeous and all. Hey, it's okay,' he lifted his glass, coke-black, and took a sip. She caught a whiff of brandy. 'I understand the curse of the beautiful people. All the attention. All the losers. So when you single no-one's quite good enough. And when you're with someone there's always someone better, just around the corner.'

'How could *you* understand?'

He snorted and turned to her, brandy-and-coke dripping from his chin. 'Hey. Excuse me. I was beautiful once. Listen, why don't you pull up a seat?'

'You're presumptuous.' She glanced over at Mosh again. Another girl, blonde this time, had come up to him, laying long red nails on his shoulder.

'Pres-? Um. Okay. Sorry. Didn't mean to be.' He babbled over her low growl. 'Thought I was just being nice.'

'No, it's okay.' She shook her head clear and sat down. 'In my culture one should be introduced, and know someone for many years before making such personal remarks.'

'Bullshit.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'What century you from? Your scars ...' He traced fingers through the air before her face. 'Like a pattern. Like dueling scars, badges of honor. Are they deliberate?'

She dropped a foot to the floor. 'Mind your own business, you creepy old man.'

His guffaw rebounded around the room, turning heads. Mosh caught her eye, and they shared a rueful, private smile.

'No wait, I'm sorry. I am being presumpt - bump - may I introduce myself? I'm Cliff Darcy.'

'Jane Austen.'

'Really? But that's an English name. And you are ... German?'

She nodded, straight-faced.

'Thought so. Strange. But hey, I know that name, Jane Austen. What are you, famous? A model? Movie star?'

She shook her head.

'Hey, Janie? We'll prob'ly never see each other again after tonight, so why not? Why not just have an interesting, honest conversation? Get to know each other. That's all I ask. I'm not trying to get into your pants, not after Mosh has been there, sis, disgusting, man.'

'What?' but laughing.

'Your juicy little peach. Hey, look at your hands! You're a working person. Have you been building something?'

She glanced at her shameful, tattered fingernails, the peeling scratches, the indelible cement stains. 'Yes.'

'What? What you been building?'

'A cage.'

'Ah. Not a tourist. A farmer? A cage? Wildlife?'

'Yes.'

'Jesus, now I really wish I's twenty-one again. Hmmm. Romantic. Are you rich?'

'Enough about me for a while. What do *you* do?'

'... In some cultures that's a very rude question.'

'*Rude?* To you? Ah, of course. If one is a child kidnapper or drug dealer, then one might be embarrassed. Dishonoured, by having to lie, and by telling the truth.'

'Ja. Dishonoured. Exactly.'

'So which one are you?' She drank half her beer in one long draught, and he watched the moonlight-pale arc of her bobbing throat with red-rimmed, hooded eyes.

'What animals are you rehabbing?' he asked, as she wiped her mouth.

'In my culture it's rude to ask what animals one is rehabbing.'

'Of course. Must be a big problem, the illegal animal rehabilitators in Germany.'

'No, here.'

He caught the admission, the kernel of truth within the conversational chaff, with a tilt of his head. He sipped his drink, and said, 'Well, you don't have to worry about me. I'm not on good terms with any authorities.'

'Thanks. I imagine you never were.'

'Yeah, once upon a time. Okay, my turn. Quid pro quo, Clarisse. What do I do? Okay. I am a ...' a dramatic pause, 'diesel mechanic! Ta-daa! You see why it's a rude question? Fly away now, little starling. Fly, fly fly.'

'No, I, that's nothing to be ashamed of. Amazing work. Power and precision, the intricacy of machines.'

'Why thanks, Miss Austen. Will you marry me?'

'Seems I came just in time.' A flat, dark voice, Mosh, behind them.

Cliff twisted to face him with a swift joller's experience. But he kept his hands down, mute, his face a friendly grin.

'Hey Mosh. Hey, big guy. Your girlfriend Jane here has just been saying amazing things about you. I mean, *I* was saying amazing things about you. You know. We both were.'

'No I wasn't,' said Ariel. 'We were talking about ... what were we talking about?'

'We were talking kak, in the great South African tradition.'

'Jane?' said Mosh.

'Yes, my darling?'

'Me Tarzan,' said Mosh, eyes dark.

'You're Tarzan all right,' cried Cliff. 'You're King Kong! Why don't you pull up a seat?'

'You got a branch for me to hang from, Cliff?'

'Whoa ... Mosh? Forget it, bru. Let's not do this.'

'HAHA! *Got* you!' He slapped Cliff hard on the shoulder with a sharp, stinging uppercut. 'You poeped in your pants!'

'Aaah that I did. That I did.'

'Idiots,' muttered Ariel, shaking her head.

'D'you know that your boyfriend King Moshoeshoe over here once wrestled a crocodile with his bare hands?'

'Really?'

'Ja, but then he woke up and realized it was his own dick! Hahaha!'

'Oh, goodness me. I love intelligent conversation.'

'Jeez, you talk strange. Are you like royalty? A princess or something? Incognito?'

'No.'

'Ja well, I'm intelligent enough. Not as well educated as Mosh, though. He was top student in his year, did you know that?'

'Surely you joke?'

'No, s'true as bob. At my old school. Which is why he talks like a coconut.'

'Bob? Coconut?'

'Just an expression. Not Bob,' said Mosh.

'Black on the outside and white on the inside,' said Cliff. 'Or some such nonsense. I mean, coconuts are brownish. Like me. And sometimes I feel pretty black inside. I don't understand these things. Hey, Mosh?'

'What?'

'Last Sunday you overtook me on that bend past the Blood Rock. D'you remember? Fucking suicidal, man. There was no ways you could've seen the oncoming traffic. Are you bent in the head? I swear, I see you driving like that again I'm gonna beat your pretty little face back into your skull, boet. You've been warned.'

Ariel stepped from her stool and ran through the people outside.

'Hey wait! Hey, hey c'mon Ariel. Wait up.'

She turned as he ran to her and suddenly they were kissing. She remembered his lips, his lean body, how long it had been ... and pressed closer. They swayed, molded together in the middle of the litter-strewn street under a flickering streetlight, framed by weary, battered colonial buildings that had seen so much, like two rows of old folk smiling and murmuring at the eternal novelty of young love.

A silver hatchback turned the corner and then drove slowly past, four white youths, staring. They broke the kiss, breathless, shared a drawn breath of glittering eyes and ran to the pavement. The building above them felt sick and bloated, listing in the polluted waters of commerce: A1 DEBT COLLECTING // CASH LOANS and MAHMED * MEYEROWITZ * MIYABO ATTORNEYS-AT-LAW so they hurried on, away from the club.

Lucifer loves brandy and coke. The way it fools nature, exciting this monkey tongue's taste for fermented fruit. He counted down Earth-time in precise sips, trickling the drink over Cliff Darcy's taste buds, enjoying the burning in this body that had not touched alcohol in ten years. He washed away ten years of sustained willpower, boring AA meetings and lonely, desperate, silent craving with one last swirling mouthful of the sweet liquid, and stood from the bar. Time to be a hero.

The car squealed to the right and wobbled as a white claw lost its grip on the steering wheel, then over-corrected and roared back towards them.

'Oh shit,' said Mosh.

Damn dress no knife, Ariel looked around for a weapon – *nothing*, wait: an empty beer bottle. She picked it up. The car throttled past and angled in, bumping the curb. All four doors opened and four men-sized kids stepped out.

'That was public indecency,' said the biggest. 'We making a citizen's arrest.'

'Ja,' sneered the smallest. 'And you resisting.'

'Racist scum,' said Mosh. 'Losers. Use violence to compensate for your low self-esteem.'

'Whaddid you say, *kaffir*?' The biggest stepped up close, forehead bulging. Ariel shrank back, hand behind a street pole, ready to break the bottle with one tap.

'See, *umlungu*? You prove my point.' Mosh stood tall, not giving way.

'Hit him, Barney,' said the smallest.

'Yeah, c'mon, c'mon Barney.' Mosh danced and shimmied, fists darting at air. 'Hit me! C'mon C'MON LETS GO!'

Barney hesitated, and a deep, languid voice stepped in. 'What's going on here?'

'Mis ... Mister Darcy.' They stepped back towards their car.

'Mosh here is a good friend of mine. He's worth ten of trash like you. You mess with him I tie you to a thorn-bush and take a blowtorch to your face. Y'unnerstand me?'

'Yes sir.'

'Your mother know you out here, running around like a pack o' animals?'

'Yes sir. No sir.'

'Next time I service her tractor I'm going to tell her about this.'

'No sir. Please sir.'

'Run along now. Go home. I'll catch up with you one day real soon.'

Doors slammed and pistons screamed, wheels spitting away.

'The little one's got the sweetest little ass. Mosh. My lady Jane. Please accept my apologies, for what I said inside.'

'You got it,' said Mosh.

'You see, sometimes this stuff comes crawling out of this festering pit of apartheid in my mind. In other words, my childhood.'

Ariel's relieved laugh tinkled around the old buildings.

'So when I'm with friendsh and had a drink or two ... I merely meant to admonish you, Mosh ... sh ...' he staggered, grasped his forehead, and held a shaking hand up to the plate-glass window.

'Hey. Hey, are you okay?' She laid a soft hand on his shoulder.

'Whew! Mortal flesh. Can't *take* the excitement! I'm fine, thank you, I'm fine. Listen, kids. Please let me buy you guys a drink. God knows *I* need one.'

She spotted a dustbin on the boardwalk and detoured to drop the bottle. Something small flashed sheen in the corner of her eye, a wiggle of life in the angle between the corrugated-iron portico roof and a notice-littered pillar. She held back while the men strolled on then turned, tentative, searching. A tiny creature flew out; flickering fishlike tail, four dragon-fly wings, miniature human torso, arms, head, black-and-gold floating hair ...

A fairy?

She blinked hard, but the fairy hovered even closer, clearer in the streetlight, even more real. It was wet, she could see, droplets of clear, shining water on the tiny scales. One drop fell, and she followed it down to a dark crown-shadow on the dirty wood. She jumped back with a gasp and the fairy followed, waving its tiny hands in urgency, tiny mouth an open O of distress. It squeaked words, too small to hear. Ariel bent her head closer.

'Hey Jane? Are you coming, sweetness?'

The fairy contracted into a pearl of light and flashed away, but Ariel nodded, she had heard:

Do not be tempted, do not fear. You drive tonight, you drive.

'Whew! That went down nice. Barman? Another round!'

'No thanks,' said Mosh. 'Not for me. I got to drive back to the farm.'

'I'm okay,' said Ariel. *Maybe Mosh slipped me LSD. In my drink ... but no, I saw the barman open the bottle ... Cliff?* But she felt fine, clear-headed, not drugged at all. *Real, then?*

A fairy? Am I crazy?

Do not be tempted ... by what? Sex?

She suddenly missed Sindisi, a puzzling shiver inside.

'Aah come on, Mosh. Have another dop. I saved your life, remember?'

'Bullshit. You spoiled my fun. I was gonna break those punks. I was gonna kick them back into their car and roll it down the hill.'

'Set fire to it first, I hope.'

'Yeah! Roll and burn!'

'That's my boy. But you owe me. You know it.'

'You'll get zip from me, bud.'

'Yeah well, maybe you crash and burn tonight. Who cares?'

'You two talk like animals,' said Ariel, shrinking distastefully away, arms crossed.

'I'm very far from an animal, sweet Mary Jane. But it's fun to play with one once in a while. Don't you think?'

Later. 'Well, this is a new one on me,' said the Devil. 'So you believe in God because it's *rational*?'

'Yes. Reality's crossed my threshold of probability.'

'But then you don't really believe, do you? All you've got is an argument. Like a chess piece. Wait for another argument to come knock you down.'

'No, intuition balanced on knowledge and logic. I do believe.'

'You believe in evil?'

'Not in the same way, obviously. God is a consciousness, a being. Evil is merely a human state, um ... envy, hate, decay.'

'So young and sweet, and ignorant of the true horror of free will.'

'Cliff?'

'What are you two talking about?' asked Mosh, back from the loo or whatever he was doing.

'The existence of God,' said Cliff.

'Oh lemme guess. Neither of you believe in him.'

'I do,' said Cliff. 'As much as I believe in me.'

'And you?'

She nodded.

'Well I don't know,' said Mosh. 'How can you know?'

'Jane here has an interesting answer.'

'Yeah?'

'Oh, not again.'

'C'mon, baby.'

'Okay, okay.' She sipped her brandy-and-coke. 'Um, well, if we could prove that the Earth was designed, as opposed to having formed purely by chance, then that would prove the existence of God, right?'

'Uhhh, if you say so.'

'Well, obviously. Design implies purpose. Purpose, creation, okay? Now my starting point was, why does all life die? *All* organisms have a definite life cycle, hardwired, birth, growth, maturity, reproduction, decline, death. Some lives are short, seasonal, some trees for millennia, but all a blink in geological time.'

'Little monkeys,' said Cliff. 'Born to fuck and die.'

'Uh ... okay. And love and play and adventure. The beauty of each day, the nurturing of children—'

'Livin' 'n lovin,' said Mosh.

'All the colors of the sky, the scent of jasmine in the spring, every moment of time precious and unique—'

'Get on with it,' growled Cliff.

'Well, then I thought, why hasn't something evolved to live forever? One organism, among the millions of species and their billions of adaptations, could have, surely? Why are our lives so short?'

'There a doctor in the house?' said Cliff.

‘Why, not how,’ said Mosh. ‘Because if we lived forever there’d be no space for our kids.’

‘Yes, Mosh, exactly.’ She reached out for his hand, so visibly pleased it touched his heart. ‘The whole point about life is that it must continue. The prime directive. We must reach blindly into the future at all costs. If you have a stable population of immortals with no children, then what about accidental death? Predation, or disease? With no-one to replace them, the immortals would become extinct. So the only way to perpetuate life is through death.’

‘And sex,’ said Mosh.

‘Shex? Did someone menshun shex?’ The drunk man was back, leering at Ariel.

‘Quiet, dog.’ Cliff’s soft growl. ‘Continue, Jane.’

‘Um ... okay. So for life to survive, it needs a life-cycle. Seasons, growth and decline. Now let’s look at planet Earth.’

‘Let’s look at yer titsh,’ sniggered the drunk man.

‘We have two options, remember?’ she continued, her face pained and averted up to the dim light. ‘Creation versus fortunate accident. Both used the same method, a coalescing of inter-stellar dust, but I’m saying that, that the one is arbitrary, and the other,’ she threw out a gesture, a hand rolling dice, ‘... God. So if I am to decide which is more likely, I must work out the odds, one against the other.’

‘Huh?’ asked the drunk man.

‘So, planet Earth. What are the odds against such a perfect environment to sustain life simply happening? If we can establish the factors, we can work out the odds. If the odds are against to a large number, it’s against arbitrary event.’

‘But not proof of God,’ said Cliff.

‘No. Probabilities.’

‘In other words,’ said Mosh, ‘If the creation of the world by accident is very like, unlikely, then someone made it? Therefore God.’

‘Yes. The basic premise is wrong, I think, because I assign equal value to two different concepts, the one consistent with scientific observation and the other unknown, and in infinity odds are meaningless, but anyway. I’m just playing. What’s the most important substance to sustain life on Earth?’

‘Water,’ said Mosh.

‘Right. It is in us, through us, around us. Now it is scientific fact that if water did not behave as it does on Earth, then life would not exist here. It has three states, solid, liquid and gas, within a narrow range of one hundred degrees. Actually less, evaporation? Say twenty, thirty degrees. Now, if our planet was a few hundred miles closer to the sun, or the same distance further away, then water would be either ice or vapour, with no transition between the three states. If ice or vapour, then no life. So what are the odds of our planet falling exactly into that narrow band of space, against the distances of the solar system?’

‘Massive,’ said Mosh.

‘The other thing about water: it’s the only substance we know of where the solid state is lighter than the liquid. If not, then the winter ice would sink and stay at the bottom of the ocean, where it would build up and freeze all our water solid. So the substance upon which life depends, among all the substances of the universe, which is sufficient on Earth to fill the oceans but not drown us, is uniquely dynamic. What are the odds?’

The drunk man burped.

‘Now, look at the tilt of the world. Without it there would be no seasons. And the seasons provide an ideal structure for life to pass through its stages. Winter, death, spring rebirth. Ice at the poles, warm water at the equator. A cyclical system, where the temperature range is precisely calibrated to the properties of water, tilted at an angle to provide dynamism, and with a blanket of atmosphere to act as a medium from ocean to land. And the seasons, the cycle of life and death contained within the cycle of

transition of the environment. Exactly the conditions necessary for life to survive. What are the odds?’

‘You talking lotto numbers,’ said Mosh.

‘Also the turning of the planet, night and day. If one side faced the sun all the time, then it would be baked dry, the dark side would be ice. Rotation ensures warmth and evaporation, then cooling and condensation. Daily. A period of activity, another of rest. And we just happen to have a core of iron, which gives us a magnetic shield, a force field, against solar radiation.’

‘So how do you work out the odds?’

‘What’s the temperature range within the universe? From the centre of the galaxy to the absolute zero of space? Then *compound* the other factors. How lucky, to come to rest exactly where we are.’

‘But still possible,’ said Cliff.

‘No, Cliff. Something put us here. We have a purpose.’

The music seemed to swell louder as they settled back, a rap sample of classical strings rising up to the last flourish of the chanting chorus. A moment’s brief quiet.

The drunk man farted.

‘Aaag, for God’s sake!’ said Mosh, rising to his feet. ‘Why don’t you piss off? Who asked you to come stand here?’

‘Heh heh, shorry, ladiesh. But you girls’re talking a lotta boring old kak. I wanteda hear about shex.’ He leered again, rolling out-of-focus eyes down to Ariel’s breasts and up again. Cliff raised an open hand in a gesture both resigned and expectant. Then he gave an approving nod as Mosh pivoted and swung an uppercut hard and fast into the drunk man’s face. It was an awesome, furious, pent-up blow, lifting him from his feet and flinging his head back to skittle along the dark floor.

'You!' The barman reached under the bar with one hand and pointed at Mosh. 'You get out now. Out!'

'It's okay, Jackie,' said Cliff, a hand on Mosh's twitching shoulder. 'He's with me. The guy had it coming.'

'Okay. He's an asshole anyway. But get him outta here. Throw him outside. He's littering the floor.'

'Me?'

'Of course you. What's your name?'

'Mosh. Named after King Moshoeshoe.'

'Well, your majesty. Like I said.'

Cliff turned back to Ariel. Her face was flushed and her mouth softly open, her eyes wide as Mosh bent and hoisted and dragged the man away. Then she blinked and raised a curved hand to her brow.

'You liked that,' he said.

'I'm sorry?'

'Of course you did. It's natural. He defended your honor. He's full of pride and anger. Sexy.'

'I ...'

'Mosh listens to you. That's something you need. You're a woman, it's natural. Imagine if everyone listened to you. You could be a big star in politics, with your looks, your voice. You got that something, that X-factor. I was watching the people around here. It was like there was this faint music, so faint that they could hardly hear it, but they were longing to hear it. They all knew you were here. If you'd spoken louder they would've listened.'

'You think so?'

'I know so. You could be famous. Imagine standing on top of a tall building, everyone listening.'

'Like Hitler?'

'Ah, Hitler. His alpine idealism at your age. But he was always a freaky little monster. You're not. You could throw yourself from the building, and the angels of your words would catch you and carry you up, over the people. They'd love you. You could be famous.'

She frowned, a puzzled glance up to his face. 'I think it would be awful.'

'Why?'

'If everyone's watching, then you have to act the way they think you should. You can't be yourself, do things. And your life would become artificial, and then so would you.'

'But they would listen. Like Mosh. You need it, I can tell.'

'Please. No.'

'Come on, think about it. You could help people. Get everyone to stop fighting and save the planet.'

'I could write.'

'Ag, writers. Little fat bald middle-aged white men. No-one gives a shit. Assholes. You gotta get out there, have a real life. You could be on TV, get the big bucks. I'm serious. You're something special.'

'I read too much, that's all. At least, I did. I don't know what else to talk about. I don't relate to people at all.'

'You're still young, still shy. It'll come. The world's just waiting there for you, hanging there like an apple. All you have to do is reach out and pluck it. You can have it all.'

She laughed. 'You're a strange man.'

'You've no idea.'

'I don't know. I just want to live ... here. Live with Mosh and ... just live. You know?'

'You can run but you can't hide. The world's getting smaller every day. Think about it.'

But she had stopped listening, as Mosh loped, loose-limbed and dangerous, his eyes hooded and sultry and his mouth a soft sneer, across the floor towards them.

'Let's get outta here, Ariel. Let's go home.'

She sighed. 'I wish we could just drive, drive away and never stop.'

'Yeah.'

'Come, I'll see you guys to the door.' Cliff stood slowly, with a tired smile. 'Listen, buddy. The lady's driving tonight. Okay?'

'Okay. Sure.'

'Strange evening.' Mosh lounged back, a hand heavy on her lap as she drove.

'I enjoyed it.'

'I feel sorry for him. Seems like he's in pain or something.'

'Yes,' she glanced over in appreciation. 'I felt it too.'

'He's ...'

'Scary.'

'Anyway. Fuck him.'

'Quite.'

They negotiated the road in silence for a while, the F-word hanging in the air. Then she stirred: 'You know, my ideas were just homely philosophy, half-baked common sense. The theoretical physicists, the math's guys, they're doing the real work. Eleven dimensions, the membrane theory, collision as creation, all that metaphor for a language only they understand. The only universal language, mathematics. But you know what? I'll bet that one day they find a unifying force. Life. Us. One day they will find we thread the multiverse, or that we are a fundamental force like gravity, or that all

life, from microbes to the great whales, are echoed in the parallel universes, while God permeates all. There are demons and angels that can come through, and take us back to their dimensions, if we let them. There's Heaven, and there's Hell. And when we understand, then science and religion can marry, after a courtship like a comedy of errors.'

'Ahh come on, Ariel. Enough already. Jeez, my poor head.'

'Sorry. Sorry.'

'No, it's cool, whatever. But maybe you should find some dork to go out with. Then you can babble on all night. Find some professor who also doesn't wanna make love.'

'I'm sorry. I want to. But ...'

'I'm a man of Africa. Anything I say now will come out wrong. But I don't think I can stand this much longer.'

She sniffed.

'Don't sniff at me! Okay, look, it's fine. Let's just be friends. I'll find someone else to have sex with.'

'Mosh.'

'Sorry. I don't mean it. Hell, the only one I want is you.'

'And the only one I want is you, too.'

'So ... oooooaagh. God please. When?'

'How about tonight?'

But alas, poor Mosh.

At first it was fumblingly perfect, scripted by nature. He groped the ignition off at Kay's front gate and reached over, leaning into her softness, her scent of fruit and musk. As they kissed the bakkie rolled blindly on and kissed the wire, so he eased up the handbrake, his hands trembling. Springsteen mumbled *Devils and Dust* on the radio and she slipped away and sighed, tracing a fingertip down his shirt.

'Oww,' he breathed onto her neck. 'My belt.'

'Here ...'

'No, no. Ow. Like a damn tourniquet. Ah! Let's go inside.'

They stumbled to her room arm in arm, an embrace washed open by the rush of their forward motion, but at the door she hesitated, dropped her hand from his hip, and stalked over to Sindisi's run.

'Aaari ... I beg you. Forget the cat for once.'

'One moment only. I promise.'

He grunted as she changed into a moonlit shape, crouching before the faint shimmer of the wire. He heard her whisper: *Mmrrrow?* Then quiet, counting moments, *two, three, four ...* A whiff of the civet drifted over from the bakkie as he leaned back, his hands outstretched, pleading to the swarming stars. And when she returned, soft through the grass, she was different again.

'She's gone.'

'Come on. Please. She's sleeping.'

'No, she's escaped, Mosh.' She turned away, her summer-dress flapping in the chill night wind.

'Wait, girl. Okay. Not a problem. Get your jeans on. Get your boots on. I'll check out the garden.'

She paused, tilted eyes warm over her shoulder. 'Thanks, Mosh. You're a good man.' 'Don't let anyone know.' He strode away down the cold stone drive.

The mamba lay still as living stone, listening to the world through the hard earth beneath his belly. In the distance footsteps, the thud of a door.

The worm inside him squirmed and urged him on, towards the leopard under the fallen tree, but he fought it, lying still, caution as ancient as patience. *Cat not prey. Enemy. Avoid.* The worm swelled and pinched his long heart, and the pain whipped his tail and spat his head against a jagged rock. He lay still again, hating this thing inside his body, resisting it with the weight of his soul's remembrance, daring it to death. It pinched again and he slid from the rocks down the black sand of the embankment in a long, sinuous hiss of agony.

Sindisi watched it come, shadow-grey in the moonlight, the same shade as her mother ... *Ingwe?* Gone now, up the hillside to fetch Ariel. She hissed back at the snake, cornered by the mass of thorns above and behind her. It paused and reared, tongue flickering, then writhed away, coiling in on itself in knots of burnished steel. Sindisi stared unblinking, tensing for the leap. Then a rustle away up the hill, and she scented Ariel coming through the dark.

The mamba whipped away as Ariel walked out into the moonlight, her face pale and bright. They purred in the lightest of cat kisses, a spot of black blood drooping a single whisker, a streak across the three shining lines on Ariel's cheek.

Just enough light to see his hands. Shakes and spasms, like dying animals, separate from the rest of him. He willed them into a grip on the steering wheel and dropped his head with a little mew, a sound like a baby's last tearful breath before sleep.

Why, Cliffie boy, why why why? Wha' happen? Drunk again, motherless moerdronk, after all these years. What happened? He tried to remember, but the night was a smoking hole in his brain. Half-jack of Klippies on the passenger seat, half-empty. Silent and dark outside. *Where am I? Bushveld somewhere? Lost.* He remembered vague tail-lights dancing before him, following, following ... *Mosh?* Some strange smudge of memory in the driver's seat. Then blinding, head-splitting pain, just enough time to get a foot on the brake ...

He dropped a disembodied hand to the brandy, lifted it, tilted his head and drank it all. *Just to help me sleep, please God. Forgive me.*

Something flowed out of the darkness onto the gravel, long and oil-black, and he screamed. He fumbled for the keys, ground the ignition and grabbed the gear – *wait! Only a snake. A snake, fool! You're safe, safe in the van* – and he let the drunkenness swamp him, banging a cross-eyed head on the steering wheel.

Anyway, I can't drive. Drunk as a dominee. I'd kill someone kill someone again be a sin. Must sleep. Mama, please help me. Then his eyes jerked open and he watched as the snake stood from the ground, swelling and growing and shivering tentacles of darkness, and then he smiled and slid the car into gear, turned and drove, swaying across the road, knowing exactly where he was.

The sun rose beyond the kranz of a distant koppie, setting fire to the sky and then dropping ember threads of perspective through the mist before touching Mosh, alone and cross-legged on a mango crate by the white wall. In the slope of his shoulders, resignation. He twirled a straw, whistling with the birdsong, and floated a tired, smiling face at the sound of crackling grass and the sight of mother and child.

'She caught a rat! All by herself.'

'Well done.'

'Maybe lucky. Whew. The sun is up.'

'Yeah,' he stood and kissed her cheek. 'I love you.'

'I ...'

But he had turned, and they watched him walk away.

'Ari? Can you watch Sav? I gotta crisis.' Kay burst and bustled from the kitchen door, battered briefcase, jacket, files, water-bottle, an apple, map and keys bundled in her arms. 'Morning, Cindy.'

'She caught a rat. All by herself.'

'Really?' She checked the necessities, two steps at a time.

'She escaped. I found her out there.'

'Well ... what's that smell? What is that?' Kay pointed a pinkie to the dark mound of fur by the front gate.

'Civet. Mosh ran over it last night. I forgot ...'

'Ag, shame. It's kinda *gross*, actually. Get rid of it.'

'Yes. Where are you—'

'They called a meeting with a little advert in the paper. Said, said you had to register by last Friday. The advert appeared yesterday, five days *after* registration date. I'm going to gate-crash the bunch of crooks.'

'Um ... '

Kay was almost shouting. 'They invite everyone in favor of the development, put the advert in late, and then say there's unanimous support. Done it before.'

'Unbelievable. But an opportunity to lock 'em up in litigation.'

'Get me the money, I'll lock 'em up good.'

'What will you do today?'

'I dunno. Shout and scream, as usual. What else can I do?'

'Explain—'

'Whatever. They got their own agenda. Sorry to suddenly dump this on you. With Bob gone it's just ...'

'Please don't worry, is Sav-?'

'Asleep, let her sleep. She's growing fast, y'know.'

'As is mine.'

'... yeah. Be good.'

'You too.'

'Ariel?'

'Oh, you're awake?'

'Well, duh.'

'Want something to eat?'

'What you reading?'

'Textbook. Your mother's. Geohydrology.'

'Oh. Where's Cindy?'

'Asleep. She escaped and caught a rat, all by herself.'

'Cool.'

'Are you hungry?'

'Eeeugh. Rat. My room stinks. Let's go outside. I need sun. Let's where she escaped, y'know, from?'

'Okay.'

'I think I *must* free my rat. He's a nightmare. Makes a noise all night long.'

'Yes, do it. It will adapt quickly back to the wild. Be free.'

'But everything eats rats.'

'Um ... yes. Where did she escape from? I can't see.' Ariel scanned the fence, imagining herself an adolescent leopard.

'But if I free him and he dies because he grew up in a cage, then I'm like, responsible?'

'Let it go, Sav. It's strong and well-fed. Has to take its chances, like everyone else.'

'I suppose so. Still ... yuck! What's that?'

'Civet. We ran over it last night.'

'Oh. Well, without death, there can be no life.'

Ariel paused, concerned, standing above the wan, thin child.

'My daddy said that. I dreamed it last night,' said Sav. She scuffed at the dust with bare feet, then took a deep breath, staring out over miles of quartz-fractured green wreathed in receding mist, flint in her eyes. 'So you musn't be sad.'

'Curious.'

'What?'

'I said the same thing last night. But it's okay to be sad, Sav. You have to be. Intense personal grief causes a chemical change to your body, which lasts about two years. You'll have a difficult time, but time will heal you.'

'Well, thanks a lot, Ari. Super. Two years of hell ahead.'

'No. Listen. This can be a time of strange beauty, of growth and change. This is a challenge, and you will overcome. Focus and work hard. Your grief will change into knowledge, and your pain into strength. *You* are still alive.'

And Sav listened, sorting out the words. Ariel laid a hand on a bony shoulder, a breath of fresh sunlight in her empathy.

'Hey! Let's put the civet on a string for Sindy,' Sav broke into a snaggle-toothed, urchin grin, and took off down the drive, sand spurting. When she reached the civet she paused, and balanced a contemplative thumb on her lip.

'What a beautiful creature you are,' she whispered, reaching out fingertips and drawing them back. 'This is the first time I've ever seen one, y'know that? Lived here my whole life. He's a member of the Secret Seven.'

'The what?'

'Civet, genet, serval, porcupine, wildcat, aardvark, uuuh, what's that?'

'Six.'

'I dunno. Leopard? No no, pangolin! Leopard's Big Five. This smell, like perfume.' The wind stirred and ruffled her sleep-tangled hair. 'I know what! Let's give Cindy a fright!'

'I don't know ...'

'Come on!' She grasped a sooty-clawed paw and dragged the corpse back up the drive.

So strong. Ariel marveled at the angular heft of her thin body as it swung the civet between the stone pillars. The reaction was immediate and ear-splitting, a *yowl* exploding from the cave in a bolt of gold and black, streaking across the run and leaping at the fence.

Ariel barked a deep cough, dove to her hands and jerked the civet out, then smashed it into the dust with a snarl. Sindisi froze, claws hooked on wire, then dropped back to the ground.

'*Sindisindisindy,*' Savannah offered a meek, apologetic hand. Sindisi blinked away the shock, drawing back her dignity. She stared at the body and shrank against the wire.

'There. That's done.' Ariel leaned against the spade at the corner of the veggie patch and spat onto the ground. 'Are you hungry yet?'

Sav cradled Sindisi under a hottentot tree, scratching through the rough, spurting hair along her belly-line, silent and thoughtful behind the purr. *There. There we are.* Ariel caught movement, Shoulder Thomas on a lichen-splattered boulder, shivering, eyes unwavering sparks in the sun. She drifted over to him, no direct glances, and he ducked his little, grey-striped head in trust. She cradled him, stroking between his ears.

'How's school?'

'... mpf,' Sav swallowed a mouthful of Wheatbix. 'Better. We did apartheid in history again, so then some of the black kids tried to beat me up again, so I climbed up on top of the goal-posts and I'm like, shouting: "*I'm born free!*" and then Mister Nkomo came to rescue me. Everyone was watching. Then Thandeka and her crew, she's also in the chess club, they went and shouted at them to leave me alone, and stood by me after at the gate.'

'But this is terrible. Are you okay?'

'For sure. Got protection now. Thandi's a manic gangster.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I dunno. I'm my mother's daughter. She always says do the right thing. I'm gonna go to talk to them there by where they all hang out. I'm gonna be like, how can you blame *me* for apartheid? Because of the color of my skin? I'm just a kid. There's a word for that, y'know, blaming someone just because of the color of their skin. It's called racism. And you been pissing and whining about racism all this time, I'm like, fuck *you*, bitch.'

'It's a difficult one. They won't be thinking in those terms, so they'll be defensive. Speak the truth. If they sense fear, they will attack. And if they sense domination, if they are threatened, then they will not listen. Speak humbly, and stand your ground.'

'Hey, that's cool advice, actually. That's like what I learnt from my mom. No fear. And this is what I'm s'posed to do, isn't it? This reconciliation thing I'm s'posed to y'know,' she waved a spoon, trying to catch the word, '... talk. Not be scared.'

'I don't know, Sav. I don't know these people. They may just shout you down. It may even be dangerous.'

'Naah. Be more dangerous to hide.'

'Well, good for you. No fear.'

'No fear.'

'What do you want to do today?'

Sav shrugged and scrunched her nose at the sky. It was a fine, early autumn lowveld day, the sun tempered by scurrying cirrus, the wind fresh and gusting, bearing a tint of moisture up from green Kwazulu to the south.

'I know.' She stood up abruptly, sloshing milk onto the stone steps. 'My dad ... my dad made me a kite. The weathers perfect. Let's go fly it over by Churchill's fields.'

And Ariel felt suddenly ten again, jumping up without reflection, energized by an idea. She jogged on the spot as Sav entangled the kite in her jumbled-up cupboard, then helped her untangle it, their hands swooping and twisting around each another, the kite buffeting in anticipation. They ran down to the fields, where Ariel skipped lithe and long-legged between the mielie fields, playing string from her hands. The kite swooped and nose-dived in a suicidal loop, again and again. She caught it and held it down, adjusting the cross-dowel. Then up it flew, up, up into the sky, red against the blue and soft, wispy white. At treetop-height it took a breath and hung in the wind, tail flickering.

'Here.' Sav gently took the living string and stared up, eyes wide and unfocused, empty but for the sky and a dancing spark of red. Two tears welled, and fell to the ground.

At long last she pulled the kite back, arm over arm, and hugged it until the paper tore. They drifted back along the rows of tall, rustling mielies. At the cottage she held the crippled kite out to Ariel, her head turned away.

'Should I ... should I fix it?'

'Nah. Throw it away.'

'And now?'

'Let's go swim. Can we? There's public pool by the school. Ag, but you got no car.'

'Yes, I'm going to have to do something about that. Let's go ask Mosh if we can borrow his.'

'Okay. But maybe he's busy.'

'I'm sure he'll be sleeping.'

Which he was, and he snorted and growled as she slipped into his room. She shook his shoulder.

'Mmmm, Ari? Come here. I had a dream. I ripped all your clothes off ...'

'Sssh. The child is here.'

'Sindy? Here?' He raised his head, pillow-creases mottle-grey on dark brown skin.

'No, silly. Sav. We want to go for a swim. Can we borrow your bakkie?'

'Have a cold shower. Works just as well.'

'Oh dear, Moshie,' she giggled. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Go. Run for your life.' He flipped the keys across the bed.

The pool was packed, the black-white ratio about twenty-to-one. Sav found a spot of grass behind the sole, large Indian family, the adults elegantly clothed, serene and inward-turning on their blanket, the kids splashing about with the rest. She stripped off to her cozzie and hurled her unabashed pinkness into the throng. Three black girls broke away and waded towards her, the flash of grins sparkling with the water.

'BORN FREE! BORN FREE IS *HERE!*' They surrounded her, slipping ripples over seal-shiny shoulders. 'Hey, Born-Free! Sistah! Go climb up on the diving board,' shouted one. 'C'mon. Sing *born free, born free, born free,*' they chanted. Savannah waved to Ariel and laughed, splashing and diving aside. They toppled into her slipstream, bubbling the singing, four pairs of pink-soled feet just splashing away.

Ariel smiled at a young woman smiling at the kids and sat down. She began to fidget, itching for something to read, something to do. She willed herself to hold still, to

wait and watch while the kids played. She lost sight of Sav and stood up, craning her neck. There, a flash of blonde hair by the diving board. She rearranged the towel and sat cross-legged, hands tense around the empty space between them.

'Born free ...' Sav's thin voice rose above the hubbub, and a hush fell. *'BORN FREE,'* the other three joined in, arranged around the diving board steps. She raised her arms, all faces turned like flowers to her. *'Born free ...'* She dived into the water.

Ariel glanced around at the adults seated around, the lifted half-smile, the peace in their eyes. *They understand it. They understand the significance of moments like this. They are deeper than they seem.*

This is an amazing place.

After about an hour Sav was whacked-out, staggering under an overdose of fun. She collapsed alongside Ariel and downed half a bottle of mango juice in one long chug. She toweled herself and pulled on her shorts and sat, her eyes chemical-red and fuzzy against the sun.

'What you thinking about, Ariel?'

'Oh, well. You wouldn't believe me.'

'Try me.'

'Um, how do I say this? I saw a fairy last night.'

'What, like a gay guy? So what?'

'No, a fairy. *Fee*. A real fairy.'

Silence from below.

'I know it sounds strange, but—'

'A *real* fairy?'

'Yes.'

'What it look like?'

'Four transparent wings, like a dragonfly. A tail like a fish. Hair, arms, face like a tiny human. The hair was ... not hair ...'

'I heard you Germans had a weird sense of humor.'

'I'm serious.'

'Aaaaah please, shut up. What am I, three?'

A long, sunlit silence.

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Bollocks.'

They sat for a while.

'If you say this to anyone else, I'll pretend I don't know you,' muttered Sav. 'D'ya understand? I'll cut you dead. Fairy indeed. People think I'm crazy enough as it is.' Lethargic fingers flopped over her face. 'Born free, what a tosspot. I'm a walking embarrassment to myself.'

'You were magnificent.'

'Thanks. Really? A fairy?'

'Yes! What can I say? I saw it. Either I'm insane, I ... see things, or I saw a real fairy. It spoke to me. It was wet.'

'You lie. What did it say?'

'She said, I ... that's funny. I can't remember. I'm quite tired.' The sun shone in her hair. She tucked her face away from it, frowning the first of her legendary wrinkles.

'Not very convincing. Where did you see it? Can I go there? Only children can see fairies. Then you forget when you grow up.'

'In town. Outside. In the street.'

'In town? But they like ... green becks, and, and soft fey places. Why was she in town?'

'I don't know. To warn me.'

'Never heard such a load of old codswallop in my entire life.' She flopped onto her belly and promptly went to sleep.

Ariel lay in wait over her while the sun angled towards afternoon. She noticed that the child's back was sunburnt and gently woke her, to go home.

'Ari, careful! Drive slow. There's a snake up ahead. Big snake.'

'I see it. Is it dead?' She braked slowly, two wheels on the gravel.

'It's the mamba. Oh no.'

'Look at the birds.' Three sullen pied crows hung in the branches, eyes sardonic jewels. They cackled to each other: *there goes lunch*.

'They're waiting. Don't trust it. Maybe still alive?'

'Hasn't reacted to the car at all. But there's no damage I can see.' She eased up next to the snake, tires crunching. Sav kneeled on the seat and leaned over, and they bumped as Ariel braked. 'Dead. I'm sure of it. Look, look at the feathers.' The mamba's wispy crown of skin had shaped itself to the wind.

'Maybe we should just ... poke it with something?'

'The wheel-lock. Give it to me.'

Sav scabbled while Ariel carefully wound down the window. A truck exploded the road behind them and Ariel glanced nervously in the rearview mirror. The crows leapt and flapped and squawked scornfully. The snake did not move.

Ariel eased the wheel-lock out and poked.

'Dead.'

'Ag shame, man. We can't just leave it here.'

'Forget it. No-ones getting out of this car.'

'I s'pose.'

As they pulled away a crow dropped from its tree and tugged the body back into the bush.

As the eucalyptus trees hove into view and they slowed for the gate, they saw Kay's old Mazda coming from the opposite direction. She waved through her open window, grinning as she turned in first. They followed, windows shut against her dust.

'Yay. Mom's home early. I thought she was gonna be out plotting with the other mavericks all night long.'

'She looks pleased.'

'You've never seen my Mom in action, have you?'

'No.'

'You gotta get out more. Leave Cindy with me.'

'Okay.'

'Postponed! Blew the whole thing up in their faces. Had to accept a rescheduling. Yeah!' Kay thumped her stuff onto the kitchen table.

'Well done.'

'What you two been up to?'

'Anecdotes about archetypes,' said Sav brightly. 'That sort of stuff.'

'Huh?'

'Ariel saw—'

'We went swimming. She sang in front of half the town. She was a hero, today.'

'Shut *up*. Mom? Are you staying home now? For the rest of the weekend?'

'Yes.'

'I'm tired but that hungry kind of tired.'

'Shower first. Some fresh clothes. I'll fix us a hot dog.'

'But not with the mustard. It's plasticky.'

'There's no tomato sauce.'

Sav sighed a deep and tragic sigh like this really was the end of the world, and traipsed off to the bathroom.

'You, Ariel?'

'Please.'

While Kay knifed the frozen plastic and filled the kettle Ariel unpacked; toilet paper, toothpaste, carrots, potatoes, bread rolls fresh from town, two liters of milk. She whistled as the kettle boiled. 'Kay?'

'Yuh?'

'I think I should buy a car.'

'Really?'

'Just some old thing to get around. I'm kind of stuck here.'

'How much can you afford?'

'Twenty thousand? Rand.'

'Get you one for less than that.'

'I met a diesel mechanic, by the name of Cliff Darcy?'

'Yeah, Cliffie. Good man. You could ask him. Used to be a hell-raiser, I believe, but he's solid now. Scary guy, hey? Those big hands, all hairy. Or just look in the paper.'

'Oh dear. I forgot. I must get the bakkie back to Mosh. See you later.'

He had the vegetables and herbs packed in a block by the driveway and hopped from foot to foot. A wagging finger scolded and he hoisted the first box as she braked.

'Sorry.'

'*Keine sorge.*' He bent and lifted to rhythmic thumps.

'Hey! *Deutsch.*'

'I bought a book— *oof.*' He hoisted the last box.

'I forgot to ask you - are you working tonight?'

'Yeah,' he slammed the door. 'Bye.'

'Mosh, I ...' but he was gone, spitting dust into the turn.

She trudged up the hill to the short stretch of road between the farm and the cottage. At the spot where she could see no dwelling she paused, contemplating the cows on the other side of the fence. *A car?* It would be a tie to this place, a hook in the land. Her father would be furious.

If he knew.

'Mrrrrrow?'

'Oh no. Now *you*'re awake. And hungry.'

'Don't worry. I fed her a chicken.'

'Oh hi, Churchill. I didn't see you. Just standing there ...'

'I ... heh. Just watching her, y'know.'

'She's lovely, isn't she?'

'How's the rehabilitation going?'

'Well, she escaped last night, and caught a rat, all by herself.'

'What? She escaped? How?'

'I am not sure. I think--'

'This is not good.'

'No?'

'No, Ariel, no. This is a farm. And there are other farms around here, and believe me, she'll be shot on sight. And as far as she knows, her natural diet is *chicken*, for God's sake. And people are her friends. How are you going to train her, like this? This is just a game for you. Wake up!'

She opened her mouth but he muttered and shuffled off, a click and an impenetrable word.

And so, at last, Ariel finally got to spend time with Sindy, crawling hands-and-knees around the ant-lions, curving around her on the threadbare mattress. The cliff-face reflected afternoon sun, filling the cave with soft, warm light. The floorboards above creaked.

And the gate clicked, Sav's barefoot shuffle. 'Ari?'

'What?'

'I can't sleep. My rat. I want to let it go before it gets too dark.'

'Like another rat?' she whispered and nuzzled Sindisi.

'What?'

'Nothing.' She crawled out and put her arm over the child's shoulder as they trudged up the steps together.

Freddy had done his time, behaved good, paid his debt and at last the day had come. He knew it, snuffling at the bars as they carried him out, haunches fat and strong. When they lifted the cage he took his own good time, sniffing the first step of the long journey home. Then he lifted his head, chirruped at Savannah, and scampered off behind a rock.

She had two distinct ways of talking, her monkey-mother. Two voices. To the other people, standing tall in the sun, her word-sounds were flat, uncertain shapes from that flickering tongue, that sharp, beloved mouth. But alone in the cave at night together her whispers and murmurs came from somewhere else, some place of gentler air all Ariel's own, where vowels are rich as loam and consonants crisp as frozen snow. This voice Sindisi liked, a shared secret, a pattern of feathered words comforting her, though nonsense as birdsong to her ears.

And through the words, beneath them, the sense in them, she heard a third voice: her real mother, with leopard-names for the scents and sounds of wildlife and little whispers of encouragement. She did not wonder how, or marvel at this ghost feeding her knowledge. The chicken dissolved into her bloodstream, lending calcium to growing bone, protein to muscle, magic.

Ariel spoke in her sleep *'Mama? I'm bleeding ...'* and the cat purred with simple pleasure. She rasped a naked, protruding ear, and the dark, star-etched girl-shape twisted away, muttering and raising her hand.

The cat rose up in the dark, yawning, and shook off mattress dust from her fur, bouncing the springs. All this sleeping through the night offended her. Waste of good darkness. Made her want to *bite* these humans hiding blindly here like prey. Sav-smell through the floorboards, juicy-monkey everywhere. She prowled out into the night to breathe, turned back and coughed a single impatient word at Ariel, who lurched upright, rubbing her eyes, then slumped like a puppet, hands in her lap, head nodding.

The cat waited for her, a fiery presence, a single, silent message:

Let's go!

'Hssh. Halt.' Ariel crouched down behind the long grass, tense fingertips in the centre of a shoulder rosette. They listened to the languid air. Sindisi slowly raised her eyes above the grass.

Human, said Ingwe. Monsters. Always remember. They are death.

But it's the boss-lady and the chicken-man. Look. Doing the mating dance, all old. Not death. Life.

It's a game, silly. They are human, so they are death to us. Understand? Monsters. Come. Slip away. Don't let them see you. Lead me with your eyes.

She brushed at Ariel, directing her, snaking low through the grass along the dirt road. They rushed like wind along the path behind the eucalyptus and down the hill to the road, towards the cage of the stinging wires and its fat, sleeping impala. Behind, Churchill and Kay leaned together against the low wall of the stoep, talking, laughing, oblivious.

At the tar they stopped, panting, and stared straight ahead, ears left then right. No cars for miles around. Hesitating, then in a brisk trot, they crossed over. In the sand and scrub of the road reserve Ariel stood from her stoop and made her way alongside the electric fence, assessing wire, poles and flattened earth.

'Don't want to short it. Set off an alarm or something. Bring the men.'

A non-committal grunt.

'Look. This concrete is cracked.' She reached carefully between the insulators and shook the pole. 'Loose. Let's see' Squatting, she grasped it and jerked upwards. It shifted slightly. Her hand groped at a stick and then levered it into the crack, working the crumbling concrete. The wires quivered. She pulled again, straining with care, and it slid a foot higher, the wire rising up winglike on either side. She jammed the stick and stomped, and the pole stuck. A gap between earth and wire, just enough.

Ariel belly-crawled through first and then held a stick just under the wire, eyes fiercely focused through air too black for human eyes, careful not to touch, prepared. 'Sindy,' who prowled anxious circles, ears flat, then listened and crawled slowly through, tail held low.

Along the fence road and into the dark kloof, meandering through the somber presence of the fever trees, pausing to sniff here and there. Ariel kept with the pace, stepping lightly into bare earth between tussocks, ducking under the teeth of acacia, her moves catlike, synchronized to Sindisi. Her thoughts were wild and punk, a driving bass 'n drum above the quiet awareness flowing to the cat, and back.

Something rustled. They locked onto a jumble of sticks and grass. A step forward. It rustled again. They froze, and took another step forward. It rustled. Then Sindisi shrugged and prowled on. Only Ariel didn't know this creature's name now.

Above the valley the lodge owned a plateau, a steppe of transitional bushveld between the high grassland plains to the west and sultry Mozambique below. Here the antelope gathered at night, impala and nyala, together with a family of zebra, a giraffe couple and a few blue gnu, all safely huddled within the fence-stitched arms of the escarpment.

A young zebra caught a molecule of Sindisi in a cultured nostril, enough to snort *wake up*, a single, silent ripple through the herd. A sentry bark, nyala. They heard Ariel's footfall from half a mile away, smelt leopard. They remembered Ingwe, always into the wind, always utterly silent, snatching and killing before they had time to react. One thought, one unspoken word, and the herd moved like a single amoeba, a slow slipping of parts, the last to arrive from the watering hole at sunset now the first to move like tributaries to the path, down to the water and the safety of the humans.

'*Sh!*' Ingwe dropped her fingers to the tailtip. The game was up. She listened. The prey moved, brushing against grass and stick on the other side of the stone ridge. If not

for the human colony, she could ambush over the ridge, cut them off, run a stampede, pick a fawn out of the darkness. But that way led only to the guns.

She stroked her daughter's shoulder and then became aware that she had been listening, eyes fiery coals in the life-net. *Cut them off. Over the ridge.* And before Ingwe could react she was leaping away, up rock and through ripping bush, straight at the heart of the herd. Ingwe leapt to follow, and darkness fell over Ariel's eyes. The air was shattered by crashing branches and squeals of terror and a single, throbbing snarl. She groped for a space and squatted down.

Stein strolled down the chipper little path along the neat green rustling of the reeds, hands behind his back. The walk sometimes helped him pee. He had spent the last ten minutes in homage to the urinal, but nothing. Nothing but straining and burning and a couple of putrid, oily drops. His face was clenched in a grimace but still he strolled, a dapper, self-contained old gent in expensive casual clothes, hair neatly combed, shoes shined. He projected control and self-confidence, the self-discipline implicit in surviving to his age. Just a spot of insomnia, that's all.

But no-one witnessed the show. It was well past midnight, quiet but for the drowsy mumble of the fridges and the occasional air-conditioner, the lights muted. The guests slept, safe under his management.

Alone, he thought about money as usual, adding it up. The Yank continued to pay him ridiculous amounts for the weekly reports, which thankfully Stein had been able to provide without hiring any outside help. From his attic room he had watched, through high-powered night-vision binoculars, across the valley. He had glimpsed the leopard several times, and the foreign girl often. A definite village idiot, living in the kaffir-room, wearing the same jeans a week at a time. Tonight he had seen them leave together for a walk, the girl running in a strange, hippy crouch until she was lost in the grass, and he had reported to Humperdink with a cell phone from his solitary vulture's

eyrie. 'Yes sir, still here, both of them. No sir, her fat friend has not returned, we can assume she's out of the picture. Yes sir, both niggers. No sir, I won't fire him yet. And yes, the slut and her shamefully neglected daughter. No change to the situation. No sir, the target is not yet fully grown, a couple more months. Make a fine trophy. Of course, I've told you. Discretion is the better part of valor, hah hah. No sir. Thank you.'

A couple more months and the hunt was on. And *this* one would not come cheap. The Yank was obsessed, and criminal as hell. And, of course, that altogether different class of rich. Stein actually cackled, his voice like some mad bird alone in the bush. *Money money money*. He rubbed his hands gleefully together, counting in his head, while silent, undiagnosed cancer ate further into his bowels.

A crash off to the right, a smashing of branches, and he hopped off the path with a squeak. The noise grew and loomed. Treetops alongside the dirt road beyond the bridge whipped against the stars.

He scuttled up the hill to the shelter of the walls, fumbling for the master key as he ran round to the door of an empty unit. So his head was down, trembling key poised at the lock, when the first wave of impala came flying out of the night. They were a sight to see, graceful, transformed at full stretch into creatures of beauty and power, but Stein, engrossed with the dark keyhole, saw nothing of his property in the full expression of their beings. He heard them come, a rush of monstrous wings sweeping up out of the wilderness, the sound of judgment day. He shook the key into the lock and threw himself inside.

Mosh kept a cooler head, just enough time to step behind a tree before two horned bolts ripped past on either side. He peered back and saw graceful pale-brown shapes spanning the river in an effortless flow, an interlinked living bridge. Each took its turn, gathering hindquarters and thrusting out over the water. Beyond, down the hill, the

herd slowed to allow for the bottleneck ahead, shoulder to shoulder. A nyala skittered at the outskirts and dashed back. He glimpsed a giraffe, neck and head, coming to a swaying halt.

Impala clattered around the camp, milling sharp-hoofed in the flower-beds, arranging snorting groups on the lawns, blinking bug-eyes against the lights. Mosh stepped out as the last straggler, an overweight adolescent buckling in the leap, found sanctuary over the water. He stared into the bush, searching, searching ... but nothing, no movement beyond the lights.

Stein peeked through the alcove window and realized what had happened. He coughed *ahem*, the competent old gent again. A wry smile at his foolishness. *Right*. To the breach. He straightened his lapels, lifted his beaky little chin, opened the door and stepped out into the night.

Impala everywhere, but no dressing-gowned guests, no new lights and opened windows. Slept through it all, the fools. He tried a predatory slink to his walk, but his knees were still shaking.

He made out a human shape in the darkness, backlit by a balcony light. The night-boy, actually awake and on duty. Standing in that goofy, useless slump that Stein had watched through the binoculars, disgracing his uniform. He had a hand up ... Stein peered ... resting on the shoulder of an impala! Simple, trusting face raised up at him, a daisy trailing from its mouth.

Stein nearly spat with disgust. The buck skittered and pronked off as he approached.

'You. Boy. What, what are you doing?'

'Boy?'

'Yes, you? What's all this?'

'Sssh. You're frightening them, sir. Poachers. Must be poachers. No shots, though.'

Then Stein put two and two together, the girl and the leopard, the stampeding buck: 'Go down to the bridge and open the gate. Come back and we'll chase them out. Quietly. Now.'

'Yes sir.' Mosh toppled off into a trot down the hill.

Stein watched him go and gritted his teeth. God, he hated that kaffir. If there was one thing before he died, a bullet into that stinking black head. No, a whole lot of bullets, from his old army rifle. *Badadadadad!* Turn that happy, smiling, wide-eyed face into meat.

Mosh broke into a sprint. The buck shied away and settled back into strolling around. His back burned ... hatred. Unmistakable. *Bring it on, old man!* He leapt and punched the air, a swinging roundhouse that would have shattered Stein's skull, and ran faster into the curve, leaning to the camber, limbs like pistons. He reached the bridge and surfed the pebbles, one foot forward, then dropped into a casual, whistling jog, picking out the key.

The gate open, he prowled along the reed-beds, upstream to the higher ground. Let Stein wait. Giraffe gone, the bush blank. His eye snagged movement on the top rock of the koppie. The distant twist of a familiar ear against the sky.

Damn cat escaped again. He clicked his tongue, all that hard work, for what? He loitered closer up the path and risked a hiss, '*Sindisi! Get out of here!*'

She lifted from the rock, shining gold back at the patio lights and in full view of the dark windows above Mosh, her head held high and chest heaving. She took a cautious step off the rock, down towards him.

'*No! Sindisi! Suka!*' He picked up a loose stone and hurled it up the hill. It fell short. She inclined her head as if listening, then turned back into the night.

Ingwe was furious. What can you do when they simply *won't listen*? When they run off, happy flappy straight at disaster, you screaming like a loon? What do you do? Of

course, being dead doesn't exactly help either, can't give the brat the *bite* she deserves. She walked stiff-legged along the ground at Sindisi's slouching shoulder, scolding into a sulky ear.

As they followed the path uphill Ingwe lagged behind, exhausted from holding her energy together all by herself. She slumped and rolled in the undisturbed dust. The whole wide world tugged at her to *come*, a whispering promise of relief, of absorption, of sleep. She felt frayed at the edges, but knew in her insubstantial core that she could – she would – hold it together. She stretched out on the ground, tail twitching ... *just a little rest. Up in a minute.* From crisis the conviction to keep on going.

'Mrrow?' *Mama?* Sindisi nosed, shimmering fire in the night. *Come back to Ariel. Come. You are weak. I'm sorry.*

Don't worry, I'm fine. She lifted her head. No boots, no engines. *The men are not following us. Yet. Just a minute to rest. No. We must go.* She raised herself wearily up, shaking off imaginary dust. They fell into place up the path together, flowing up the stone steps.

Ingwe saw it first, the frightened flicker behind a boulder. She chose not to tell Sindisi, *let's see what happens.* Then it skittered one nervous hoof. It realized its mistake and froze, but the cat had already locked on, absorbing reflected starlight through her huge, open eyes.

Where is the wind?

... behind me.

So ...?

It can smell me. She sniffed. *Yes. I can't smell it.*

Look. Look there. That sheet of rock. Careful the thorns. Now follow the grass. It can't see you. Cut back, under ... there. See?

I am behind it. She rrowled at the first scent, salivating.

Ssssh patience. Hold your breath. Now. Stalk. The men are not coming. Take your time.

Mosh took his own good time, ambling back up to Stein. Approaching, he slowed even more. Neither man was willing to pierce the quiet with words, so the moment became weird, a silent black-and-white movie of two men, arms harmlessly swinging, slowly closing the gap between them. Both had the same secret motive. Drag time. Distract the other from the leopard, keep the other from the other side of the reserve. They dawdled in the dark, like old friends with nothing left to say.

The old man broke first. He coughed *ahem*: 'Right. Let's do this slowly. Keep it quiet. No need to wake the guests.'

'Maybe we should just ... wait a bit, sir? When the impala know the danger is gone, they'll go by themselves?'

Neither suggested the obvious; phone the police, get the guns and drive out to check the fence.

'Agreed.' Stein conspired. 'Go up to the main gate. Make sure the damn guard is awake. I'll go down to the bridge and keep an eye out.'

So they separated to either sides of the camp, each guarding an exit from the other.

Mosh heard the death-squeal, and so did Ariel. Both smiled in the dark, despite their shared anxiety, separated by two kilometers of bush. Both wished they could see. They waited.

No, higher up. Under the chin. Hurry. No time to play.

The dainty hindlegs thrashed, but gently, accepting. The last breath squeaked shut with the shift of the grip. Sindisi did not puncture the skin, caused no pain to accompany oblivion, let it die by consent. They listened to the little heart slow and then stop.

Lift it. Come on, not like that! By the shoulder. Good, that's right, now no, your paw to the other side. The other paw. Good. Let's go.

A soft splash of struggling breath from somewhere up the hill. A twig snapped. Ariel craned her head and stood up, her hair haloed by the swathe of light above the undergrowth. Something shifted across the sky and stopped at the charcoal sketch of a dead branch. An owl, miniature, a perfect replica the size of her paused hand, barely an arms-reach away. It glared at her, eyes as round and bright as coins, then dropped and soared silently away.

A grunt from Sindisi, much closer now. She peered into the dark and caught her scent, her sweet, sweaty breath. Then the dawn came to her eyes in a rush, and her ears flooded with the night. She stretched forward to the cat, fingertips on the ground.

The clear air welling up from the south-west had travelled all the way up from the deep southern ocean, bearing the first chilling whispers of winter. It lingered over Mpumalanga then drifted down again, the trailing feathers fraying over the Swazi highlands and St Lucia's wide waters before drifting out over the Indian Ocean. Ariel shivered at the touch, the cold laying temporary claim to the land from the north, a hint of implacable intent. The real dawn promised daylight. She lowered the impala fawn to relieve the ache and rubbed tired eyes with the back of her hands.

She couldn't really understand it, and blinked twice ... still the faint threads of purple, pulsing through and between the plant life, the strange-colored waves within the shape of Sindisi, the animated jewelry scattering the bush, almost imperceptible now as the sun encroached. She tried to figure it out, but was tired to the marrow from the days of housework and lift-club and cooking and homework, and the nights, the timeless nights prowling the play-ground of the farm. *Maybe I'm discovering latent human powers ... no, no, awareness ... from the sustained interaction with nature. My eyes adapt. Perhaps this is within all of us.*

Then why ... why did it happen when Sindy came back? Why was I blinded when she ran away?

The question hung in her mind while her breathing slowed. She eased the ache from her arms.

And a voice answered, from a deep language of senses, of sight and sound and scent, as complex as the life all around her. It formed hesitantly into words:

I am here. Inside you ...

And she knew. Ingwe. The leopard mother, dead beneath her hand. The night brightening around her body, the fierce hunt to get her kitten back.

Of course. Why did you not speak before?

I ... learn. As you learn to listen. Come. Day comes. Danger. We must go.

Gathering her energy again, she hoisted the flopping body with four sharp legs that seemed to snag on every single damn branch and fell into a lope down the hill through the fever trees. Sindisi tail-twitched ahead, ears flat and eyes creased with anxiety. The day loomed, so Ariel ran faster, tearing hooves through leaves, her breath a ragged rhythm to the birdsong.

The up-stretched wires were now shockingly visible, an aberration of line. She let the momentum of her run swing her arms and the buck up over the fence. Sindy was already jiving under the wire and she followed, over-hasty, thrusting with boot tips. Loose stone scoured weals on her breasts and tummy and the fence zapped her wriggling bottom, a kick of voltage, good riddance.

'Ssss,' she called and they ran onto the tar. Halfway across Sindisi turned with a mew at the abandoned buck, but Ariel gave her a slap and shouted, chasing her over and under a thick knot of thorny bush. She ran back, knelt before the pole and tugged at the peg. It was stuck fast, so she worked at it, thumbing from side to side. Then she stopped, listening; the approaching thrum of an engine from the direction of the lodge.

She worked faster, frantic, then clicked her tongue in annoyance and stood, grasping the pole carefully with both hands. The fence zapped her again, frying a few arm-hairs, but she adjusted and pulled, squealing with exertion. It slid an inch higher, staining to the limit of the wire, but enough to kick the stick loose and away. The pole dropped down just as a car's roof mushroomed into view – and she a wandering tourist, a casual whistling stroll in the fresh country air.

An old man leered for a split-second. She noticed her swinging hair, matted and tangled and disgraceful. *I should cut it. Get rid of it. Show my face. Now that would be brave.*

The incident last night gave Mosh a reason, *nicht wahr?* To go talk to her. Break the ice. Besides, he had to check that Cindy had got home safely. His duty, surely? He was nervous, strumming the steering wheel, and as he turned from the dirt road onto tar he stopped on the verge, to give the matter some thought. Careful now. Could cock this all up. Have to warn her that the leopard is loose at night, discuss the situation, but without accusing. Or disapproving. Friendly, like. The last few weeks had been hell, both of them acting chill and loose, sketching hullo waves when they happened to see each other, desultory words when they met and had to talk. Could go either way.

And truth is, after all the chasing around after stupid impala half the night, old vulture-head squawking commands, the fiasco of the ornamental cabbages, buck running this way then that and then the other, he was somewhat peeved. Basically wanted to go and just fight with her. Shout and grab her and throw her down and ... *fuck* her, there and then. He sighed.

Some inkling of the future aged him, sitting there, the sun just touching his lap. He tasted it - *one day I'll own this valley* – and his face hardened. Question: *do I want her here with me, my ... wife?* and the answer: *hell, yes.* He rolled tension from his shoulders. *Then do the right thing. Always. With this woman, you fail once and you fucked forever.* He indicated, released the brake, looked left and right and drove slowly back onto the road.

It was a guilty pleasure, this early morning read, because nowadays Churchill really didn't have the time. But he allowed himself, say twice a week. Okay, sometimes more. He would accompany young Mlungisi to the pasture and take an hour on an east-facing rock, the sun slowly warming his bones, a book in his hands. He liked the crisp morning words, the flexing of his mind, the transition from dreams to hard farm-work. In his memory a distant herdboys and the wonder of his second-hand copy of Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, wrapped in a disintegrating scrap of newspaper. He still had the skinny volume, battered and stained red, in pride of place on the bookshelf.

This morning he had that Da Vinci thing everyone had been making a fuss about a few years ago, a clean fresh block in his hands, but it couldn't catch his attention. He put it aside and watched the cattle awhile. He knew the moment they did of some disturbance in the bush behind him. He climbed up on the rock and craned as they calmly gathered into a horned laager, the Afrikaner queen at the front.

He called Mlungisi over. 'What is it? A man, a dog? What do you think?'

'The leopard? And the crazy white lady, I'm sure. I saw them the other morning, first light.'

'You mean they're out at night?'

A shrug.

'The cattle seem okay.'

'Used to the smell, by now.'

'I'm going to check. And watch your mouth, boy. She's not crazy. She's royalty.'

He trailed along the fence and picked up the snap of a twig some way beyond, then a softly spoken word. He listened to that word, let it hang, the pretty incongruity of it, like an unexpected flower from these dry old trees. It was a moist, round word, with crisp edges, a sound of real, live Europe ... le Carre's smoky cobblestones, Conrad's dark ships. He licked his lips in the bright sunshine and strode to catch up.

'Heita, Ariel?'

Silence from behind the screen.

'It's me, Churchill. Over here.' He rattled the mesh.

'Morning, Church. How are you?'

'Fine. Fine. And you?'

'I'm ... tired. Church? I have something to tell you.'

'What?'

'Perhaps I shouldn't.'

'No. Now you will. Actually, let me guess. You went out with the leopard last night, and you killed something.'

'How—'

'Was it one of mine?'

'No, no.'

'Good. Well done. Relax, girl. Tell me what happened.'

And so they spoke of the night, the fence between them. He hooked his fingers in the mesh, grinning and nodding. She lightened up, standing taller, chattering a bit too fast. He held up a palm and she repeated, slower, touching her hair.

'You say ... you can see at night?'

'Yes, I know it sounds, oh dear ...'

Crazy Ari. 'Yes, well, um ... where's the impala?'

She stared at him for a clear second then skipped back into the bush. He bit back on his laugh of pleasure, lest she hear and misinterpret.

'Can we talk later? Please, Mosh.' She dropped the fawn. 'I have to drive Sav to school, and we're already late.' She straightened, stretching her back, staring anxiously up at the closed kitchen door.

'You're way late. I saw them drive past.'

'Oh. Oh dear.'

'I'm not angry, Ariel. I'm worried. If we had gone out with the rifles ... hell, *you* could've been shot, never mind *Sindy*.'

'But I have to teach her to hunt.'

'Teach her to stay away. Teach her to be scared.'

'Maybe we should go the other way?' She pointed east.

'That's worse. Guys with guns, *and* lion, hyena, buffalo—'

'So what do you suggest? That we carry on fooling around on the farm? Playing with bunny rabbits in the garden? We intend to release her out there, so she has to gain some experience. Look. Look how big she is already. Time is running out.'

The cat prowled a hungry curve around them. Ariel blinked, then dipped a finger behind her belt buckle, slipping out the little knife. Mosh cringed and took an uneasy step away. She dropped to her knees and grasped the hock, sliding the knife under the loose, matt skin between belly and thigh.

'What are you doing?'

'Meat. I'm going to cook it for myself.'

'What? Yuck, man.'

'Mosh.' She sliced through. 'Let me be. Please. Leave me alone.' She began working the knife through shin and tendon below the white rump-fluff.

He slowly lifted his gaze from her hands to her face, and saw the deep shadows under her eyes, the stubborn, exhausted devotion to the task at hand, impassive against the facile judgment of the childless. The knife was sharp and her stroke deft. She stood wearily, the leg dangling.

'What do you want?' she said. 'I asked you to go.'

'I just want to help. That's all. I just want to be part of, of whatever it is you're going through. I want to talk. *Help*. I knew this was gonna happen, that you'd take everything I say the wrong way. I tried to protect you last night. And look!' He threw an open hand at the three-legged buck. 'If y' wanna go hunt there then do it. Do it! Just lemme know when, so I can stop a hundred bloody impala from eating all the flowers!'

He saw the amusement touch her eyes and grasped at it with an awkward guffaw. 'I'm on your side. I love you!'

Click. She blinked and declined her face away from him, mouth firm. He wavered between *cold bitch* and *I love you you don't have to love me back*.

'I love you too, Mosh.'

'... what?'

'I do. I think about you often. I know that you're ... I, this is timing. Disjointed, it's slipping. You scare me, sometimes. I don't know what you want.'

'Nothing, whatever. But you, you cut me off.'

'No, you did.'

'C'mon. Ever since ... it's like, you think I only want one thing.'

'Well, don't you? Didn't get your bit of *bumsen* with the white chick, so now it's hey, look at me, Mister Cool. I even saw you with another girl. Why waste time?'

'Huh? When?'

'I dunno. Three weeks? Who cares? In your stupid bakkie, going out.'

'No. No wait, that was Blessing, maybe. She's my cousin or something, forget about it. I took her to the shops. I haven't touched no-one.'

'Why not? Do it.'

'Now wait a minute, this is bullshit. Why you so angry? I've given you space, huh? And I know you're saving yourself. I'm not expecting sex, Ariel. I'm not.'

'Oh.'

'This is ... what's the word? Courtship. I love you.'

'Oh dear,' she swung her head as if avoiding a blow, blanketing her face. 'I want you, Mosh. I don't know why ...'

And he allowed no thought to hesitate him, stretching long fingers to her neck and down her spine, his stubbled cheek against her matted hair, her breasts beneath his chest, thigh to thigh. She melted to him, raising a soft mouth to kiss and their taste was sweet and salty with the night's hard work, a tang of fresh air, long awaited. They lost their balance, stumbling over the fawn. Sindy growled.

'Okay, okay.' He broke away first.

'No, come,' she whispered, fingertips around his thumb, and led him to her room.

There's a place where she can forget about the whole damn world for one long, glorious moment, and Mosh took her there, quickly. They lost their clothes and climbed under the threadbare blanket, rank with sweat and dust. The touch of skin on skin was unbearable, shivering breath fusing in warmth, soft and hard, rushing into penetration, conspiring, thoughtless. They fucked, deep and long, and he came inside her.

'Wo.'

'We shouldn't have done that.' Impish little fingers peeked from the blanket under her chin. He chuckled. 'No, I mean it. I must be out of my mind. You may have Aids.'

'Or you.'

'No, I had a test. Two. And I haven't done it since. A long, long time ago.'

'I'll, um go for a test tomorrow.'

'Oh, well that's nice. I feel comforted. When was your last time?'

'Six months? I used a condom. Always do. I'm clean.'

'Am I supposed to believe you?' She trailed a fingertip through the ridged furrow of his chest, traced his six-pack, down. He mouthed, 'uhuh,' smiling as they kissed. They got busy for a while.

But this time the A-word hung between them and they were careful, stroking moist tendrils from their fingertips, a little shove on the hip and he subsided. They mumbled and sighed and spiraled down into deep dreamless sleep, the slow rhythm of their breathing in perfect synch, in and out, two wings.

Outside a beat in time, chew chew chew.

At midday he left and she slept on. At two Churchill dropped Sav off, and then sped off to catch up with the day. She wandered down to the outside room and peered through the clean window. Ariel's slumbering shape. She tiptoed back and let herself in. At four Kay came home and found Sav lying on her bed, watching the afternoon make shapes on the plaster-board ceiling, Shoulder Thomas in her arms. By six Kay had made a stir-fry and rooibos tea. Time balanced as the seasons tilted. They did the homework, watched the Simpsons, talked while they brushed their hair. Below, Sindisi started on the chest and neck.

And still Ariel slept on.

By dawn the cat had given up pacing the fence, listening for her absent mother, and settled to sleep the meat away on her mattress. Mosh came, knocked softly, and left. Kay and Sav banged around the kitchen and bathroom and out the front door, standing by Ariel's new car – a battered, bi-coloured twenty year-old Corolla – and shrugging, before turning to Kay's car with a glance at her watch. The morning air was still, windless, warming as the sun rose overhead, and it seemed even the birds stayed away from the cottage that day. At two Savannah asked Church if she could stay with him

until her mom came – ‘Learn about the farm, c’mon, c’mon c’mon’ – and her mom came late, to a house deepening into darkness. This time she was worried, and knocked hard, not stopping until she heard mumbling signs of life on the other side of the door. Half-an-hour later Ariel dragged herself inside.

‘*Eishh!* You look a wreck!’ Savannah grinned.

‘Are you sick?’ Kay peeled mielies, dropping them into boiling water.

‘Does anyone here know how to cut hair?’ Ariel scratched at the owl’s nest, puffy eyes squinting against the light.

‘Yes!’

‘I’ll get the garden shears.’

‘Oh funny.’ Ariel slumped into a chair. ‘What ... what time is it?’

‘Seven-thirty on Wednesday.’

‘Tuesday.’

‘No, Wednesday. I told you, Sav. She missed a day.’

‘Bizarre.’

‘Can I have a bath?’ Ariel peeked out. ‘I need to wash this.’

‘Of course. Please. Then come and eat with us. Come and talk.’

The bath was one minute of bliss and twenty of pain, picking and tearing at the matted clumps, tugging with the brush through plastered conditioner. Fit for shearing or dreads, and the nascent dreads she destroyed. She emerged in Kay’s bathrobe with a rosy, contented little face.

‘Have a mielie.’ Kay lathered butter with a knife.

‘If you don’t mind, I’m going to cook some of our meat.’

‘Yuck,’ said Sav. ‘Not again. You eat way too much meat.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Come on, have a mielie.’ So they sat, crunching kernels and juicy talk about nothing much at all.

They got onto the subject of the perfect commune somehow – oh ja, Ariel, these farms in Germany where they grow vegetables, which they feed to pigs, who bestow in turn to the bacteria pits which make methane to drive turbines to make electricity, and fertilizer to feed the vegetables. At every turn of the cycle profit: meat, vegetables, power. Sav imagined out loud. Nothing comes in but sun and rain and clean fresh air, nothing out but songs and laughter and food. How many people would be just right, how would it work? The technology was disarmingly at hand in their cozy little kitchen: channel rainwater, lay solar panels on every roof, recycle all organic waste including our own, compost, grow, waste nothing. Just like nature.

But tonight the talk was mostly about people, about the spark of imagination in Sav's eyes, her kneading fingers as she shaped the future, the grown-ups playing along.

'Five couples. Five men and women. Each with two kids.'

'So only twenty people?' asked Ariel. 'Why not a hundred?'

'No, must be small. Like a gorilla family. Must be natural.'

'But what about singles? Old people? The odd and the ugly and the orphans? Me? Gays and infertile and disabled? Is this like a fascist state, like rural suburbia?'

'You? You'd be out in the wild.'

'The centre must be female,' said Kay, picking her teeth, a faraway look in her eyes. 'I mean, it must be run by a group of women. With the power to hire and fire.'

'Why? Why not have mommies and daddies, and everyone equal?'

'I think,' said Ariel, 'that it doesn't matter who the person is, as long as they understand the work they have to do. The role-'

'Yeah sure, well obviously. Everyone has to have a job. But it's all about happiness, isn't it? Harmony. Everyone must get along, with no fighting.'

'Of course.' Ariel caught Kay's sad, cynical glance with a rueful smile.

This kind of talk was quite routine in the Quail household, leading Savannah down a familiar path towards sleep, nodding and yawning and happy. Her thoughts gradually fell into whimsy, fairy-tales for realists. The young woman beside her took the elder's lead, guiding the child, murmuring. A kiss for Mom, and she traipsed off and closed her door. The two adults allowed themselves a moment's quiet together, thinking similar thoughts, the perfect commune. Ariel had a beer to Kay's second. Late evening rain drum-rolled the roof and then thickened into white noise, masking their voices from the sleeping child.

They talked of everyday things, the farm and the lives in its care, Bob and the police, how Stein must know who the American is. They talked of communism and rampant capitalism, seeking a path between the two. They shrugged and grew quiet. Then Ariel sat up, her back sapling-straight, turning her head. Listening.

'What is it?' asked Kay

Ariel waved a writing gesture. Kay rummaged in her canvas bag and pulled out a pen and pad. Ariel wrote:

Someone at the door.

Kay nodded, slipped off her chair and ran to the gun safe. Ariel positioned herself next to the door, hand on the handle. Kay muffled one into the chamber and flipped the safety. She pointed, with a single nod.

The door swept open to reveal Mosh, mouth and eyes ludicrous O's above his soaked maroon uniform.

'How long've you been standing there?'

He shrugged.

'Why aren't you at work?'

'I wanted to see you.'

'You're wet. Come. There's a towel in my room.'

That night she remembered the condoms. The dark became clumsy, a zone of fumbling uncertainty before quick release, so they spent most of the night just talking in the warmth of the window-stars, dreams and disparate childhoods ...

when my mother left I was an only child I, I feared being alone

my mother left or died disappeared I was an only child, I too

knew I must face my fear and become alone and I

became what I feared

I learnt to love it

I read

books and adventures and games, stories of discovery drifting down like ash on the wind, entwining their limbs, words like shy kisses in the gradual infusion into sleep. Before dawn touched life to the sky he snorted and jerked awake and threw long legs off the grotty little bed, out of a wide meadow of Heaven. The moon a sickle in the eastern sky, faint behind gleaming, silver glass. He grunted with the effort of pulling on his squeaky, freezing uniform.

She slept on.

Town in the daytime bewildered her, our svelte young urbanite from Munich's sleek streets. *But look. Now I fit in*, in her faded jeans and boots, a raggedy old denim jacket in a plate-glass window – NELLIES HAIRDRESSER. A motorbike beat revs into her space and she staggered, conflicting messages to her limbs, a leap of instinct and *be cool*. A lounging man studied her groin with dull, vacant eyes, and she snarled, walking by. A plastic bag danced into her path and she snatched it up and dropped it distastefully onto an overflowing dustbin before stepping in, the bell tinkling.

'Hi, can you cut it all off, please.'

'I could try trim it,' said Nellie doubtfully.

'No, it's ruined. I just want to get rid of it.'

He was waiting on the pavement for her, one arm propping up a parking meter. A whiff of alcohol in the diesel air.

'Well well well. Hullo Jane. This is a pleasant coincidence.'

'Mister Darcy.'

'Looks great. Really suits you, your exquisite bone structure. You look like a cat.'

'Thanks. You have a nice day, now.'

'Hell, I'm free today. What you up to? I closed the business, I thought, what the hey? Might as well take my retirement while I'm young enough to enjoy it.'

'As you wish. But I must go. Have a nice day.' Eye-weight lingered like heat on her back as she quickened her pace. Half a block away she clearly heard a lascivious, drawn-out sniff, a connoisseur at a trough of scent. She turned the corner in a hurry.

A check of her mental list in the Pick 'n Pay, in time to the clank of the trolley's loose front wheel, driving against the insistent yaw with thrusts of her left arm: beef, chicken,

venison, lamb, chicken hearts, a jumbo bag of cat food, toilet paper, batteries, toothpicks, soap, oats, bread, tea, sugar, margarine, beans, tomatoes, broccoli, mushrooms, mielies, carrots, potatoes, oranges, apples, grapes, milk, yoghurt, corn flakes, fruit juice, flour, mielie meal, bully beef, biscuits, donuts, eggs, yeast, stock cubes, parsley, a family of Easter bunnies, marshmallow eggs, the most expensive moisturizer on display for Kay, shampoo and conditioner, a plastic-wrapped rack of school stationary, a torch, a bar of milk chocolate. She began to enjoy herself, adding up precise totals in her head, subtracting from her diminishing savings.

Have to call Papa sometime soon.

Then she shivered in the sultry faux-wood wine section, and glanced up and saw Cliff Darcy. She strode over. 'Are you stalking me?'

'No. Just following. Just interested.'

'Well don't, okay? Creepy old man.'

He grinned, and a small knife appeared in one hand. The same shape, the same size as her own. She slipped her thumb behind the belt buckle and found it still there. She eased the blade open.

He raised his other hand, palm out, and deliberately sliced the skin between his thumb and forefinger. Blood welled and spewed, a dribbling stream to the plastic floor. Two old head-scarved women scampered past, huddled together. One muttered his name.

'They're just meat, Ariel. Giant, fleshy bacteria, consuming the planet.' Some sickly radiance in his mouth as he spoke. She swayed at the edge of that split-second, a pillar of vertigo, and then she knew.

She took another step forward. 'It's you. Mahmoud's demon.'

The supermarket speakers switched mid-song from Katy Perry to another song, one she recognized ...

Please allow me to introduce myself ... The Stones. Sympathy for the Devil.

'No,' he said. 'He's being re-educated, having let the cat out of the bag, as it were. I'm Lucifer. I thought I'd approach you directly, and speak plainly.'

'Oh. Why aren't your eyes red?'

'I'm the master. But you have no idea who *you* are, do you?' he whispered. 'Not yet.'

'I don't?'

'No-one quite like you. Your ambient soul, the richness of your fiber, the fine crystal of your intellect. The whole damn package wrapped into one. Bit of a nexus in the matrix you are, Ariel. A jewel.'

She saw the store manager beyond Cliff's hunched shoulder, staring at the bloody floor. She gestured *I'm okay* and turned back to the spasms of Cliff's puppet-eyeballs, dancing on their strings.

'There's so much about us you don't understand. And if you knew our vision, maybe you'd understand yourself better. You're wasting your time in this God-forsaken place.' Throaty mumbles, for her ears only. 'I could kill your cat, easily. I dreamt of a future you.' His face warped, and he switched to perfect German. 'Returning home, all dressed in black, broken and pitied and lovely, finding solace in the arms of some handsome young Siegfried. I dreamt you grew to love us, to believe what we believe.' He switched back to English. 'You know, I really, really hate it out there in the bush. Yugh, creepy crawlies and instincts and shit, I *hate* it. I want you out of there, so we can talk. Let's make a little deal and go our separate ways, for now. No harm done. Come, I've always been honest with you.'

'Okay. What deal?'

'Go home. Catch a plane and fly away-'

'Yeah, yeah, and you'll give me fame and fortune. You do go on and on a bit, don't you?'

'No. The deal is, on my side, I won't kill your cat. I won't kill your black stallion, nor Mama Hen and her delicious little chicklet.'

'Ah.' She cleared her throat. *He lies. The last thing he wants is for me to hate him forever.*
'Thanks for the offer. Let me think. No thanks.'

'HAH! I *knew* it!' He slapped his forehead, pushing himself back into a rack of cheese-puffs, leaving a bright splash of blood between the licks of black-and-grey hair. 'Stubborn girl. Ask yourself, am I bluffing? Are *you* so safe? If you're not with us, then do I really need you around, influencing events?'

She stood completely still, staring at his borrowed eyes.

'So be it. One way or another, you'll come to us, I'm sure of it. One day you'll understand.' And he turned, one injured hand cupped in the other. A line of onlookers took a wide-eyed step back, hemmed in by the biscuits and salty snacks. He feinted a bloody, outstretched palm at them and they scattered down the aisle, regrouping by the chip-dips as he limped out of the shop. She ducked and slipped away before their eyes could turn back to her.

As fast as she dared in the little car, unfamiliar with its rattle and squeak and mechanical quirk. It handled the corners, nimble on narrow tyres, but whined and slowed uphill, the scrawny engine unequal to her urgency. Her hands trembled and she willed them to be quiet. The car was empty, groceries abandoned back at the shop.

On a long, downward sweep of straight road she saw a queue of traffic ahead, at its head two stick-figure policemen in fluorescent yellow. She cursed out loud, the words foul in her mouth. As she slowed she saw a black man seated in a white plastic lawn chair on the roadside, his dusty legs stretched out, at his back a wall of bushveld. He was strumming a guitar. She eased to a halt. He began to sing dreamily up at the sky. A coin sparked a parabola from a Mercedes window to his feet, but he ignored it. Above him a bird sat in a branch, twittering – she could hear neither above the engine, so she leaned across the passenger seat and wound down the window. Too far ahead, only faint tinkles and a voice as smooth as wind. Something flickered in her peripheral

vision, a glitter of sheen, *sunbird? Or maybe a fairy, God alone knows. Once I would have seen that bird there, singing above the man, and thought its behavior territorial, an instinctive reaction to the music, cute but rational. Easily explained. Now I don't know. Perhaps it's singing along. Perhaps it understands the words. Perhaps it blesses him and his peace, his freedom.*

Perhaps wherever there's life, there's magic.

The flicker, in the bush off to the left, through the open window. She turned so fast she twinged a muscle in her neck, but missed it again.

Do not be tempted, do not fear.

A ping of horn behind her, and she saw that the space between her and the singing man had opened up. She crawled up alongside him, and he dropped his eyes from the sky to meet hers. He stopped singing, a hum and kwela fingers continuing, and smiled at her, his soft music filling the car. His face was tired and handsome, creased with life, and she smiled back and asked:

'Are you an angel?'

He nodded and tipped his head back in the direction of town. 'Go back and buy your stuff,' he said. 'They're safe, for now.'

Every memory is caught and fashioned in isolation, unique to the islands of our minds, as transient as the flesh and blood that sustains it. No memory can share its essence through our stumbling words. The way the sun lit auburn flames in Ursula's hair only Ariel saw that day, as she drove sunward up the cracked slate of Kay's driveway. Only Ariel saw, absorbed, and renewed the halo with gratitude throughout her life. Hair and catalyst sun outshone everything else, the women, the cottage, the trees, the green grass, so only after that moment of fascination – a blink, saved - Ariel registered Ursula's large, heavysset shape, her snouty, charming face. Baggy jeans and camo T-shirt, chatting up close to Kay ... and that beautiful hair. Ariel shyly touched her own short tufts in her habitual gesture at the sight of a stranger, then impatiently flicked back imaginary tresses to show her smiling face.

Sent by the angels?

'Can't stay for long,' said Ursula in a lyrical American drawl, as much for Ariel's ears as Kay's. 'I'd sure love to, but I gotta get on back.'

They strolled over to the car. Kay held back her shriek of delight at the radical haircut long enough to make the introductions, then shuffled across to ruffle and hug, laughing. Ursula watched nonplussed through tiny, kindly eyes.

'Now that's what I call short! Military style,' Kay chirped as they hefted the bags together. 'Did they take the bird's eggs out first?' She raised a laden arm to invite Ursula up the steps.

'The hair diss, again. Even *after* I've cut it. I'll never get away from you.'

'Wow, it looks amazing,' said Ursula. 'I should get mine cut like that.'

'No *don't*, please,' said Ariel. 'Such a beautiful, strong color. It shines like fire in the sun.'

'Now you I like.'

'Ursula helps rehabilitate wildlife and stuff,' said Kay, oofing the bags onto the kitchen table. 'Raised a leopard last year.'

'Yes. That's wonderful.'

'I'm truly sorry I can't stay for long. But from what Kay says yer doin' just fine. Beautiful, healthy cat you got there.'

'She is, isn't she?'

'Where does she spend the day? In that den?'

'Yes.'

'Hmmm. Should try get her out more. The females raise their young in caves, but adults spend the day under the thickest, thorniest bush they can find. Leopard 101. Safer than caves, no snakes, no scorpions, y'know? Can keep an eye out. You should train her to sleep in the bush.'

'Thank you, I will. If Churchill permits.'

'Who?'

'The farmer.'

'Yeah, of course. Any problems there?'

'So far, no. She avoids the livestock, as if she's afraid.'

'Good. Keep it that way. Reinforce it. Not exactly an ideal set-up, this. But it might work, God willing. The problem is they hunt at night, when we can't see.'

'Ariel seems to manage,' said Kay, unpacking into the fridge. 'They caught an impala the other night.' She paused and stared at a tub of yoghurt, brows creased, then glanced up at Ariel. 'Mosh told me. About the stampede.'

'She killed. I waited.'

'Yeah, that's the beauty of leopards,' said Ursula. 'Like domestic cats. Instinctive. Best you can do is provide opportunity. Where ...?'

'In the private reserve across the road.'

‘With the electric fence?’ Ariel nodded. ‘That’s wild! How did you get in?’

So Ariel told them and they laughed, a circle of three, two dancing intersections as they unpacked the food, one standing gruff and awkward to one side, as happy as a big old bear can be.

A quick tour of the project – Sindisi obligingly awake and friendly, gracefully snuffling a steak - and Ursula was off. Then a pot of green tea, smiling as they blew lacy shreds from the cups.

‘What a wonderful person,’ said Kay. ‘A true operator. One of the greats. Here, there and everywhere. Rumor is she’s connected to the Buffets, anyway she’s privately funded. Afraid of no-one, gets things up and running. Charms the farmers, stands up to the department, helps out with food and equipment and transport, man, I love her. Hell, right now, I really like Americans. Thank you, God.’

They fetched Sav together in Ariel’s little Toyota. She ran up from the school gate and hoisted herself into the back then leaned between the front seats, hand on her mother’s shoulder, to assess the haircut. Glee and relief and a kiss and a hug. She slumped back, tired and dusty. Kay enjoyed not driving, feet up and head turned to the countryside, spotting and naming birds – black-collared barbet, a gang of bulbul, pied kingfisher, a bemused yellow hornbill, a rare greenshanks in a vivid riverbed running late for the migration. Ariel braked and glanced from bird to road, and then spotted one of her own, pulling over to announce: grey lourie. Applause frightened it away, so they drove on. At the downward slope to the bridge they saw someone, slouched by the side of the road.

‘Hey, it’s Blessing. Slow down.’

A shy, frightened smile as they stopped. She stepped back.

‘D’you wanna lift?’

'Madam?'

'C'mon, get in. Sav, make space.'

With reluctant dignity, she lowered herself into the back seat. Kay hooked an elbow over the backrest: 'So, howzit?'

'Fine, madam.'

'Please don't call me madam. Kay. I'm Kay. Look, about what happened before ... you wanna work coupla mornings at my place? Take a load off us?'

'I work for my uncle.'

'I'm sure he won't mind, all alone in that big old house. I'll talk to him. I'll pay you.'

'No, I will,' said Ariel, to the rearview mirror. 'Three days a week?'

'Thank you, madam.'

Kay sighed as they turned into the farm. Sav's tummy rumbled. Ariel whistled, focused on the road. Blessing cleared her throat:

'Is ... ingwe ... your house?'

'Leopard,' said Kay. 'Yeah, she's still there.'

'I scared, madam.'

'Stop calling her madam,' said Sav sharply. 'It's a racial insult, don't you know?'

'Sorry?'

'No, it's okay,' said Kay. 'C'mon Blessing. Don't be scared. We be friends, hey? The leopard – ingwe – is locked up in cage. You be safe.'

'She's scared of me, too, I think,' said Ariel. 'Blessing? Everything will be fine. When you come to clean in the morning, I'll take the leopard out. To sleep in the bush. Okay?'

Blessing nodded, bloated with unease, silently alighting at the house, one hand stiff in farewell.

'Fraught bitch,' muttered Kay. 'How are things at home, Ariel?'

'Well, fine. You know. I'll take Sindy out again tonight.'

'No, man. I mean back in Germany.'

'Oh. I haven't switched on my phone for at least ... three months?'

'What? What if something happened? Do they have my number?'

'No.'

'Jeez. And I don't have ... whatsit, your father?'

'Yes.'

'Give it to me. Now.'

Ariel recited while Kay thumbed it in. They arrived at the cottage, Sav naughtily singing 'I do, I do, I do believe in fairies,' from the Peter Pan movie. In the sky behind them a fairy turned a weary swoop away, down the drive, towards the water.

Couldn't find the phone for ten cursing minutes, then found it where she'd first looked, in the side pocket of the backback. Shoulder Thomas appeared *mrow?* and chased something out the open window. Plugged in the charger before switching on.

187 messages. Missed calls, emails, BBM's, a flood of interest from the digital world. The real world, damned up for three months. *You can ignore your phone, but it'll never go away.* Like reluctantly returning to the scene of an accident she scrolled 'em: Father, Mother ... ah, Noods. Lots unknown or unlisted. First she accessed the voice mail, and first a man's voice, scratched and broken into blurts by the poor reception. Wants to do a follow-up story, inviting her to ... breakfast? 'Not hungry,' she muttered, deleting. Shoulder Thomas popped his head in to disagree.

'Papi?'

'Ah, hullo Ari. How's the weather down in your part of the world?'

She imitated the deadpan tone, smiling: 'Fine.'

'Lovely spring day up here. Is it cold where you are?'

'Not yet.'

'Three months, Ariel! If it wasn't for Google Earth I would've called the police. I've watched you. And your leopard. How much longer?'

'She's almost fully grown, mister creepy.'

'What are your plans with her?'

'To release her. It will take a while longer.'

'Okay, I'm posting you University application forms.'

'Okay.'

'Please send them back. And call your mother. She's been quite dramatic.'

'No. You call her. Tell her I'm fine.'

A sigh. 'I must go. Work. I love you. Do you need more money yet?'

'Uh, yes, please.'

'Can you email me bank details?'

'Yes. I love you too.'

'I know.'

She toyed with the phone and then switched it off, tomorrow the others, maybe. The afternoon air was soft and warm through the open doorway and she strolled out, stretching her back, warming up for the night. From Sindisi's run she could see a length of fence way off to the east of Churchill's wild lands, the glint of heavy-duty mesh in front of the electric wires. Beyond lay the true bush, private land open to the Kruger Park further to the east, settling into the somber, hazy hues of the afternoon, sprinkled with an occasional fleck of bird-flight. Leopard, lion, buffalo, elephant ... need a pair of wire cutters this time.

'Hey, whassup? Lookin' for fairies?' Savannah's face wore a smirk, streetwise corruption. She swaggered like the cool kids in the movies.

'Oh please stop it, Sav. Don't mock, it isn't nice. I shouldn't have shared it with you.'

‘Sorry. Just teasing. Still think you might be teasing me because I’m a child, you know?’

‘It’s okay. Relax. You don’t have to believe me.’

‘Well I do, sorta, that’s the problem. Then I don’t. Can’t stop thinking about-’

‘Sav, be careful. Don’t stray. Look out for strange men.’

‘Like always. Why? What’s wrong?’

There was no answer. Savannah put an arm around her lean waist and added a measure to the scales of probability in her mind: *She’s cuckoo. Completely out of her mind. Fairies indeed.*

In the heart of the eastward valley, beyond the riverine jungle in the highlands and the cattle-scoured dongas below, the fence ripped a scar of dead earth through the bush. Ten feet, either side, stripped flat. They lay hidden beneath a canopy of moonlit branches, breath slowing as they scented the air and watched. Sindisi rumbled and licked her lips, tail twitching then held still.

Downhill, across the dip of the stream, the fences lost their footing, stepping skew from drilled posts in a boulder to a shaggy earthbank. Weeds thrust against the posts, challenging the wire. *Opportunity, down there.* They set off, crouched low beneath the gnarly fingers of the branches.

Ridiculous. No-one for miles around. She stepped out into the path and walked upright. Ingwe flowed down to Sindisi’s side in the bush.

Sindisi has soft paws to see the ground. She is fast and fit. It is good.

The moon dimmed as the trees grew in stature, their roots in the channel beneath the earth. In the steep-sided ravine few had survived the flash-floods, and the sides were vertical walls of crumbling clay, with treacherous overhanging thatch. Beneath the fences rocks had been piled, large and firmly-lodged enough to climb ... *there.* A dark

space beneath the outer wire, a crack, a leopard-hole. She prowled slowly closer, concentrating.

A man-shape rose up from behind a bush at her side, black against the moonlight. She stifled a scream and spun to face him, crouching, wire-cutters in one hand, knife in the other. He leapt across the distance between them and slowed, circling, a glint of red in each eye. A wooden club swung in his hand.

‘Sexy sexy,’ he growled. ‘You come here for fucking. I fuck you sick before you die.’ He circled around to the windward side and she smelled him and almost gagged – shit and woodsmoke and ancient, rancid sweat – a snarl and a flash of the wire cutters to catch his attention, knife low and hidden behind her fingers. Then he stopped, eyes widening and white in the moonlight, and she grinned as she felt Sindisi strolling up from behind.

He roared, a bellow of anger and fear, and lifted the club.

Now, did he raise an arm to strike her? Or to turn and flee, terrified at the sight of the leopard, hands thrown up in fright? If one, in that split second, self defense; the other, murder. But it would always be a feather on her conscience. She reacted to his movement, stepping forward below the uplifted club, aiming with deliberate precision at the bulls-eye: his temple, between eye and ear. She struck hard and fast, to the hilt. A liquid popping sound, a spurt of blood on a thumb, and he was toppling, moonlit eyes bulging in comic surprise, dead in an instant.

Forty years from now, the death penalty for rapists and murderers carried at last through the World Parliament, history records that she attended several executions. She was admired for this, the willingness to face the gritty reality of her policies, no academic, uptight, paper-pushing exec, our Pres. Must have distressed her, so famous for her compassion and her fierce love of life.

But in truth, she felt nothing then either.

Except, tonight, exhilaration. Branches whipping against pumping arms, the skitter of stones beneath her boots, sprinting back to the cottage. Sindisi coughed her irritation, loping through the bush at her side, *meat?*

At the kitchen steps she paused, then took her time with the cat and the dark, gathering humanity around herself again. Ran long fingers through her short hair to flick out bark and leaves, dusted off her shoulders. She mimicked the movies to act normal, a giggling voice in her head:

Oh. My. Gawd. I jus' killed a man.

Kay raised tired eyes from a bundle of papers. 'Hi there. Been out with Sindy?'

Ariel nodded, unable to trust her voice quite yet. She took a goat haunch from the freezer and popped it in the microwave, then turned to face Kay with a bright, breezy smile.

'You have blood on your hand, Ari. She catch something?'

'Yes. No.'

'Get away?' She glanced at the laboring microwave.

'Ooh, I must wash this. Disgusting. Sorry.' She crossed to the sink, pouring a palm-full of Dettol.

'No worries. Dunno how you do it. You should keep a diary.'

'What are you doing?'

'Going through the objections. Comparing them to the property owners on the Surveyor-General maps. Listing who I still have to talk to.'

'How does it look?'

'Pretty good. Definitely a majority. Most of the land is tribal, but the induna's are pretty much united against it. A coupla the farmers are fantasizing about riches, tourist lodges, farm stalls. But it's clear that most of the people want the ring road upgraded and infrastructure in the existing towns. If the government approves the road, then they

care only about the developer's money, and don't give a damn about the people. That's it, plain and simple.'

'Can I help?'

'Would you? Wonderful. Here. You find the names and addresses. I'll try and find 'em on the map.'

They worked for a while in easy companionship until the microwave pinged. Ariel slipped outside and then came back; a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits waiting at the table. She took up a pen.

By midnight the job was still only half-finished, but Ariel's face ached from suppressing her yawns. Kay noticed and glanced at the clock in surprise, then firmly filed the papers and chased Ariel out. She collapsed into the dark room and into sleep in one falling movement, still dressed, dreamless until rejuvenated dawn but for one dream: Ingwe, lying proud at her side, keeping watch.

Two days after she had seen the vultures funneling down from the dawn sky they set out again under a waxing moon, a slow meandering prowl to sniff and listen, the direction inexorable as twilight dissolved above them. Sindisi put up a shrub hare in the long grass, sweeping the hind legs and killing with one bloodless crunch. Ariel climbed to store it in the fork of a branch and they crept on, deeper into the night.

No sign of the body at all, no bones, no ghostly-white skull accusing with maggot-roiling eye-holes, no scattered, beckoning fingers. Back already to the earth in splatters of shit. Sindisi stayed close alongside, wrinkling her nose.

We have killed human. We can't free her into a nice little game lodge. Only the land beyond is left, now.

Ingwe urged her on, exultant, the destination of her life's journey beyond just one last fence.

A scrap of fabric flapped at the entrance to the hole, *man-made, then. Check for snare.* Sindisi sniffed it warily then hunched down and slipped through.

Leopard here, sniffed Ingwe. Mother and daughter. We'll have to move on.

Not yet, not yet, mama. She is human. Look. Already she is tired.

She burns with my fire listens now ... she yearns for empty territory.

No. She is human The wind behind us, no it turns ... what is that?

Lion.

Yes. Lion. I remember terrible thunder in the faraway night. Closer, now.

If they come we climb, they are dogs they cannot ... wait.

A waft of pungent cat-smell and they dropped, crouching, Ariel's fingers in trembling support, flared nostrils seeking direction from the swirling wind.

Leopard. Male scent-mark. He has passed through ... mmmmmm ... this way. Come.

Mama!

Ariel stood, tall against the stars: *Enough for tonight. We'll come back tomorrow.*

'ARIEL? Wakey wakey. Rise and shine!'

'Mbwot?'

'Can you take Sav? I got breakfast with some Bantu. I'll fetch her this arvy.'

'I ache. Went far last night.'

'Catch anything?'

'A hare.'

'Great! Well done. Come, shake a leg.'

Mosh stepped stiff-legged away from the bakkie, his maroon uniform fading to pink in the rosy dawn light. He yawned as she drove up, a hitch of arrogant shoulders, one thumb in his belt. *My woman.* She stopped alongside him.

'A moment, please,' she said to Sav, and stepped out without saying a word and lifted her arms around his neck. He stiffened in surprise and then softened into her hug, his lips to the nape of her neck. A sigh and she whirled back to the car.

'What was that all about?' Sav fingered goo from her eyelids.

'Shut up.'

'Well, alrighty then.'

'Eat your breakfast.'

A baleful face dropped to the bowl of oats, jelly-trembling in her lap. 'Whatcha gonna do if I don't?'

'Then it will spill into my new car and make a disgusting sticky mess. Which I will try to clean up.'

'Your new car. Hah!' Sav kicked the eighties-plastic cubbyhole door. It dropped obligingly open with a *sproing*. 'It's not my fault we're late.'

'You haven't eaten your breakfast. So whose fault is it?'

'I'm not eating this. Looks like a bowl of brains.'

'Ja? Give us a wee bite, then?'

Humour crept like dawn sunlight into the girl's eyes as she passed a spoonful over.

'Yuk. Throw it away.'

So she tossed it, bowl, spoon and all, to clatter along the tar road behind. A mynah zeroed in, flapping closer. Ariel made a mental note to pick the bowl up on the way back.

The sun crept slowly higher. The first fly found them, twig-hopping through the stunted, bushy acacia to the sheets of rock below. Sindisi flicked an ear at the buzz and her mother hushed, *That twitch could mean your death*.

Oh, lighten up. So warm on this rock.

Always sleep with one eye open.

Ariel opened both eyes and shifted position, her hips nagging discomfort. The light was sliced into shards by the branches, and she watched the prowl of the fly above them. She rolled onto her side and ran her fingers through Sindy's course, strong fur, kissing a bristling muzzle. A purr, a rasping lick, and they drifted with the sultry air, absorbing the soft siesta birdsong, dreaming awake, timeless. She blinked and the sun shifted position. Her tummy rumbled. Time to go back.

'Hi, Blessing.'

The kitchen was spotless. Ariel crossed the waxed floor to the fridge.

'Good afternoon.'

'Would you like some bacon and eggs?'

'Yes please, madam.'

Ariel stood and stared.

'Sorry. Miss Ariel.'

'Just Ariel.'

'Ariel. Yes please.'

Ariel hummed as she whipped out the frying pan and rummaged in the fridge. A cackle of red-billed hoopoes outside, foraging under loose bark. In minutes the kitchen was rich with sizzling. Blessing hovered with pointless strokes of her broom.

'Now that smells *real* good. Mind if I pull up a chair?'

A man's voice, friendly American. From the open kitchen door. Neat, clean khaki clothes. Short hair too dark, dye-job dark. Ariel squinted against the outside light behind him, his taut immobile face, his oddly perfect putty-nose, her eyes sliding off his features, catching nothing.

'I'm sorry, do I know you ...?'

Then the rush of Ingwe awakening, the scent of him, recognition:

My killer.

THE SPIRAL

'Mom. I have something to tell you.'

'Good or bad?'

'Maybe I should just wait till—'

'No please, Sav. Tell me now. I got work to do, and a meeting now-now at home. Things are coming to a head. Let's take this time together. What's up?' She picked up speed into the straight before the crest into their valley.

'I won the form merit award for English. They gave me a book voucher.'

'What? You're kidding. Well *done*, my darling.' She squeezed and kissed her. The car made spaghetti before she took control again. 'But I thought the teacher hated you?'

'It appears not. She has become recently enamored of my erudition. I have managed to polfflificate some respect.'

'Excuzz me, hey?'

'Actually, Ariel helped.'

'Ja well no fine. That explains it.'

'No, I did all the actual work myself, I promise. We just talked.'

'I'm teasing, my poppet, relax. You're brilliant. You deserve this and more.'

As she started forward, he swept out a hand-gun. Silencer. A smile rippled like oil over his new face.

'Yah recognize me.'

She nodded. In one hand she held a loaf of brown bread. The other empty. Bread-knife on the table.

'Woah, pretty lady. Don't do it. Drop that loaf, now!' He tittered a mad giggle. The bread fell from a limply ironic wrist. She shimmied, balanced on her toes, eyes darkly

focused on his, fingers curled loose. 'Up up,' he waggled at her hands. 'Up, bitch. I know how fast you are. Slippery slippery. You. Hey *you*, ugly nigger. Drop to your knees.'

Blessing remained as she was, hands dead around the broomstick, head lowered, face as empty as wallpaper. Her lower lip trembled. Skeet flicked an irritated glance over and Ariel made her move, leaping at the table. He closed one eye, a thud, and the knife spat away.

Blessing screamed and dropped to her knees. Ariel landed, legs bent, one hand reaching out. A low, throbbing growl filled the kitchen from beneath. As he swung the silenced pistol to cover Blessing, he pulled another gun from the back waistband of his jeans, pointed it at Ariel, and shot her. She fell, and everything went black.

'Actually, that's not all.' Savannah twisted nervous fingers through her hair.

'O-kay. So now the bad news?'

'No, it's even better, in a different way.' And at last she told her mother of her adventures at school; the history lesson, the bullies, the goal-post climbing. Kay slowed down along the valley's tar road, frowning and listening. At a curve of stony lay-bye before the bridge she stopped and cut the engine.

Sav faltered but carried on: 'So today I went to speak to them at last, there where they hang out at break, by the new fence? I just walked up to them and I'm like, can we talk?'

'And?'

'They said sure. They all stood around me like, like they liked me. It was weird. Totally unexpected. I had this little prepared speech, but I kinda didn't ... after a while we just started rapping, y'know? I sat with 'em, and the next break too. Everyone's calling me Born Free.'

'You see? Fortune favors the brave.'

'Whew,' Sav clenched her fists. 'Still can't believe it. I thought I'd come home all beat up today.'

'Ja, that's bravery. When you scared and you still do the right thing. But why didn't you tell me about this sooner, my love? Maybe I could've helped.'

'Didn't want to worry you, mom. Had to do it by myself.'

'Yeah, but ... tell you what, why don't I come by school at break tomorrow? I won't say nothing.'

'Don't use no double negative,' said Sav, and began to weep, a slow aching seep. Kay hugged her, leaning easily over the handbrake, a touch to her hair, a nudge of heads, waiting as the grief emptied. A hiccup, and she wiped her eyes.

'I'm tired now, mom. My tummy's sore.'

'Let's go home.' Kay started the car. 'Sav, my love? I love you. I really, really respect you. How you've handled everything this summer. I don't tell you often enough. I ...' The words were thick and inadequate in her mouth.

'I know. I love you too, mom. Let's just go.'

'Imagine you're in the hold of a ship, nigger,' he whispered as he hefted Blessing into Kay's grandma's wooden kist. Linen and blankets snowed the floor; the inside was black with age. A spider scuttled to a corner. Her feet jammed and he shoved them in. 'Sailing away over the sea, months and months in this here box,' he checked the tightness of the tape and then slid his fingers between her buttocks, kneading. She squealed behind the gag, trying to squirm away. 'See? Y'like it. Mmmmm. Imagine a life of slavery ahead, whippin' and beating and nothing but work and more work.' His fingers probed deeper, his lips just above her ear and a tightly clenched eye, wordless noises in her throat. 'Think about this. It'll make yah wet. The only relief from yer miserable slave life is when I come butt-fuck yah into oblivion. Wait. I'll be coming. An' when I open this lid and stick it in, I want you to say, thank you, Mastah.'

He slammed her into darkness.

Churchill lowered Ivan Vladislavic's latest volume of Joburg sketches and sighed with pleasure. When was this brave man going to write an actual novel? All these hesitation marks, would there ever be a plunge? He stood up on the rock to stretch and scratch and survey his domain, and heard a retort: *when are you going to write anything, old man?*

Perhaps tonight, Churchill answered. *Why not? Why not simply take up a pen and paper and describe my farm? Describe a lonely old black farmer who doesn't fit in with anyone, and a beautiful, brave white woman comes to live ... perhaps tonight.* Perhaps he was ready.

A glint of reflected sunlight through the bush below Kay's place. In the service road? Frowning, he tucked the book into the pocket of his bush jacket and walked down towards it, crossing the line of giant eucalyptus. He broke into a jog, and heard Kay's car pass on the dirt road behind.

'So what's the meeting, mom?'

'Yeah, interesting. Also good news, hold thumbs. A really nice American man phoned me up outta the blue, said he represented a foundation. Said they were private and anonymous. It's actually an amazing coincidence. No. Not a coincidence. God don't close a door without opening a window.'

'Why? What door?'

Kay sighed. 'Things are really bad at work. If I could be independently funded, oh man, this is exciting.'

'Then maybe you can have a director's salary.'

'Sure. Hang on a mo.' She stopped and hopped out to open the gate. A pause to stare up the drive and a frown back to the car.

'Strange.'

'What?'

'Look. He's here already. Sitting on the stoep.'

'Yeah, he looks nice. Handsome, mom.'

'You know what they say. Nice from far but far from nice. Hullo!' They drew up to the house. 'Sorry to keep you waiting!'

'No no, my apologies, Mizz Quail. I'm early.'

'Being early's a good sign, heh ... sorry. Lemme just close the gate and ... Savannah? This is Mister Smith.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you, sir.'

'Pleasure's all mine. Call me Frank. Here, let me help carry these things.'

'Oh would you?' said Kay. 'Thanks so much. Sav, please offer Mister Smith a drink inside. I won't be a second.' She strode off down the drive.

the world a single body, a brain infusing thought, skeletal muscular infrastructure serving organs, cells, senses, nerves ... a living globe before her outstretched arms, just out of reach of the clean flame of her flickering fingers. Ingwe drifted her out beyond our atmosphere, beyond the moon, to marvel at the translucent sphere, the shimmering skin between dull red anger in the core and the cold clarity of space beyond. They hung together in the exquisite geometry, just there, just so, and then swept back. She explored her own body, tracing the pathways and pulses, the lean muscle from this summer of hard work. Moved down to her thigh to the vivid mistletoe of toxins, the furious activity around the dart's puncture-wound. Drew the poison in, dissipating, dreaming

Your hands ... tied.

No matter. I can pull my legs through. Belt knife.

Kill him fast.

Yesss

Come. Wake up.

I ... where am I there's Mosh ... and Kay and Churchill what is that?

SSS! Wake up! Savannah ...

'What would ... would you like something to drink, Mister Smith?'

He shot her in the back.

Kay heard the faint *thwuck* of the dart gun and intuition crept chills up her spine. A thud, and she was running, up the drive, the steps, into the house.

Mosh ... sleeping. Wake him up.

You wake up. Wake up! Kill this man.

I can't. Not yet. My body bound inside, ropes of poison. I ... I am trying. Look. Kay falls. There is a darkness around Churchill, I can't see ... a terrible shadow. We must fly. Go to Mosh. Wake him up. Something holds him down.

Ingwe grumbled, but rose over the bush between the rock-strewn ridge and the dirt road. Below the rolling halo of her life-force, Ariel riding within, a jewel of fairy-light kept pace, jinking through the branches, brighter than the scattering birds.

It was a terrible nightmare, flaying open his subconscious and oozing horrors undreamed before. He tried to make himself as small as possible, to enclose himself in a cell of skin, frozen inside like a paused video, blurred and shuddering. No sound, no crying, *lest they notice me.*

Eventually, from the boiling chaos a familiar dream-figure rose out, his mother, ghostly backlit in the darkened hut, her face shrouded. But the posture was wrong, it seemed to ... *loom*, the tilt of a caring head now something subtly else, something scary. He cried, a little boy clinging onto babyhood, cries like frightened, whimpering ripples, the blanket tucked up tight under his chin.

She stepped forward and leaned over him. The shroud fell from her face and it was Ariel, a grotesque, misshapen Ariel, her cheeks torn and bloody, staring hideous insanity from bulging red eyes. Something slithered under her skin. He screamed a silent dream-scream, too fascinated to turn away, and then it was Ariel, smooth-cheeked and serenely beautiful, draped in shining white, her hair long and crill-African and looped in sleek braids. She held a blank book in her hands. A leopard made of light hugged her from behind, chin resting on top of her head, spangled paws over her shoulders. It grinned, a knowing, toothy blaze. Hindquarters shredded into wavering flames behind her, luminous. Gradually it vanished, leaving only the grin, which sparkled and then blinked out.

Come, she said. A pale, lifted hand, made of light.

The phone rang and he woke up. He stared befuddled at the clock – late afternoon already – and flipped it open.

‘Yup?’

‘Mosh?’

Baas Stein. ‘Yessir?’

‘Are you sssleeping still?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Uhuh. I have something of an emergency. Could you help?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘Come to your front gate in, oh, half-an-hour? I’ll pick you up.’

‘Okay.’

Stein cut the line and chuckled, training the binoculars on the green-painted door of the boy’s hut. He winced as he rose from the chair, the discomfort below his belly now dull pain, and then sat down again, following a thought in one direction up in his lonely eyrie. Something missing from this picture. *Motive*. The why of it all. Why all this fuss and bother, all this ... obsession? Over an animal? Why was the Yank spending so much money, on him and the mechanic and the strange boy? Why was he taking such risk, returning to the scene of the murder? What had passed between him and Bob that night in the bush? Why had he killed him? His thoughts led him down to the only motive he truly understood:

Money.

All this money spent, it must be an investment. He wants something (*gold*). She’s guarding it. He rose again from the chair, his nostrils flaring at the scent of treasure.

A last glance through the binoculars. Mosh, in his uniform, yawning at the door. Time to go.

What is it?

I don't know.

A web? Fractured mirror, darkness inside. Dust. I can see Churchill through a storm of gnats, how strong he stands, inside ... what is that?

A creature in there, next to the demon. It holds a weak human as slave ... a young boy. Ariel, I'm afraid ...

Let's go in. Now.

No no no and Ingwe retreated, back up the hill towards Sindisi.

An eye appeared in the crack between the floorboards. *Enemy*. She snarled. It spoke to her, a different music, words like snarling puffs, a drawl of nose-wrinkling spearmint. It spoke of death.

'We'll get to you soon enough, my pretty. First we must secure the perimeter.' He stood up and walked over to Ariel, flipping his phone. 'Yeah, have you woken him? Okay, take him quick. I want no messin' around.'

Kay's gone Sav's gone Church is caught. Oh no, Mosh! We were distracted.

The vulture flies down the road towards him.

What can we do?

Wake up, Ariel.

I'm trying. I can't.

Then be patient. Wait. Hide within me. We are leopard.

Churchill knew this vehicle from somewhere, *someone in town*. A workman-like van, greasy and much-abused. The windows were dark. Some instinct *terrible danger* crept up his spine and he crouched lower, stepping carefully. *Damn. No weapon. No phone.*

Run. Back to the house. Fetch the gun and the men.

His book bumped his hip. *A quick look first. See who's on my land. Do I know him?* Then a crunch, a single footstep, off to the right.

'Howzy, Church.'

'Who ... Cliff? Jesus, man, you gave me a fright.' A glimpse of another person, the twitch of a shape behind thick bush. 'What are you ... what are you doing here? Who's that with you?'

'Tokoloshe?' Cliff called, leaning against a broken branch-stump, as casual as if he was in the ladies bar at the Royal, not standing out here in the middle of bugger-all. 'Come here. Please allow me to introduce Mister Ncgobo. Churchill? This is Tokoloshe, my apprentice.'

And when he saw the boy's eyes he knew him. Had seen him before, in the street, at the shops, those eyes in different faces, in men old and young, that sullen, unblinking stare:

The beast-men. The butcher boys. A killer.

The Hilux drove up and Stein leaned across to open the passenger door. Mosh yawned, cupping his mouth against the dust, scratched his butt and got in.

'Good afternoon. Thank you for coming at such short notice.'

'Y'welcome, boss. What-?'

'Thiss,' and a syringe appeared in one liver-spotted claw and swept down.

'Cliff? What's going on? Why are you on my land?' He stepped back and examined him. Thin, pale and hollow-eyed, still that faint leering smile. Vladislavic nudged Churchill's hip again, and he laid a palm flat against his pocket, cleared his throat and stepped forward. 'Answer me. Why are you here? With this boy? What's he, twelve?'

'Thirteen, actually. Millennia.'

'What?'

'So many questions. You think I'm diddling him, don't you?'

'I ...'

'What else? Push, push, in the bush. But no, not this one. His talents lie in other directions.'

'What you talking about?'

'Perhaps you'll write about this one day? Like ... Kafka, a twist of African surrealism, the claustrophobia of the empty lands. People who are not quite people; when you look closer they are strange, misshapen animals, their language dust in the merciless sun. Griqua ghost stories, how the leopard got her spots. Ah, Africa. We could chat all day.'

Churchill was silent. He had known Cliff Darcy, in the distant, small-town sense, since they were both young men, and seen the slow, predictable change from arrogant, racist joller to somber, hard-working middle-age. He would've bet the farm that Cliff had never read a book in his life. Never mind Kafka.

'But I came to see you, actually, Church, My old pal.'

'So why didn't you come up to the house?'

'Mysterious ways.' A switch to perfect, sneering isiZulu, a gesture at the surrounding bush wilting in the afternoon sunlight.

How quiet it is. No birdsong. No bugs. No life at all. Churchill shivered, the sun warm on his back.

'No, wait a minute,' said Cliff. 'Why be enigmatic? That's the province of God and his distant sycophants. Let's be honest. Man to man. I wanted you down here so your choice will be unchained from your humdrum life. This is neutral territory. This is the wild.'

'What choice? What are you on about?'

'All in good time.'

... six feet under tonight, mama. I wanna watch six feet under.

No TV after nine. Isn't it no under 18? No.

It's the most brilliant drama I ever did see. I'm gonna sneak out to the sitting room with the headphones while you working. Like I used to. You won't even see me there.

Are you hungry?

I think I'll go down to see Sindy.

Bare feet down blackmarble stairs, toes bobbing out the bottom of the screen. Hand-held.

Darkness.

... where is she? Mama? Where are you?

A cell phone erupted. Cliff checked the caller ID and flipped it open.

'Yeah, boss.'

A squawk, loud in the absent birdsong.

'Relax, boss. Got it under control.'

A muted plastic muttering.

'As planned. Later.' He flipped it closed. 'Sorry 'bout that. Listen, Church. I didn't mean to freak you out. I got something to tell you. Please. Let's sit down.' He gestured at a boulder beside the road, an eroded oblong at perfect sitting height. Just right for two old gents in the bundu. It looked like a movie set, too good to be true.

'No. No, this is suspicious. Who is this child? Who was on the phone? And why are you talking that way, Cliff?'

'Maybe I have a secret life. Maybe I'm really this secret well-educated, sophisticated guy, just pretending to be a stupid South African diesel mechanic? I mean, take young Tokoloshe here. To look at him, one wouldn't think that he's already killed twenty-seven people. Only thirteen years old. Skinny little prick. If you passed him in the street, you wouldn't even notice him, but man, he's deadly.'

'I made him straight away. Killer. Are you trying to frighten me?'

'Ah, but we're in a zone of awareness here. I like you, Church. You stand strong in the storm. Your union with the white woman might produce a hero, a prize. But I have to show you something. Allow you your due choice.'

A hoopoe called unexpectedly, *whoop whoop*. 'So? Show me. Why all the drama?'

'Sit down. Please.'

'The boy goes up the road first. A hundred yards. Where I can see ... hey, where's he gone?'

'I sent him already. I'll do you no harm, Church. I promise. Sit.'

Oh no. The creature comes. It terrifies me, Ariel. Old, old, it feeds on our fear, our ghost-flesh. It sees us, eyes in its fingers. Fly!

Wait.

Ingwe's life-force flickered. Faint now, wisps and shreds over the embryonic pulse, rosy as the sun brushing the horizon.

Ariel breathed, in and out, and focused down. *I see only a boy, human ... no. His head. Riding on his back. What is that? What is it?*

Rip us into pieces. I can't fight it. We must hide, please, inside you ... I am dying

Come, with a sigh, down to the cottage, past the plastic man. He stood in the bright overhead light, tying her to a chair, arranging and examining her body, splaying her

legs, peeling back her T-shirt to reveal pert breasts, thumbing a lolling eye open. They nestled inside her darkness, cocooned in a low harmonious growl, waiting, gathering strength.

‘No thanks. I wanna stand.’

‘No, honestly, boet. This’ll come as a bit of a shock.’ The voice was Cliff’s all right, but somehow not Cliff. And he sat down daintily, crossing a leg, elegant in the greasy old clothes. ‘Please, Church. Come and sit down.’

‘Ag, okay.’ He lowered himself, twisting to examine the terrain behind. The bush was dense, dry shrub on a bed of bleached sticks. No-one could creep up. He turned to Cliff with raised eyebrows.

‘Okay. Remember, heck, twenny years ago? When I bumped you, there by the Lucky Star café?’

Churchill nodded. He remembered. Stupid racist white bastard, shoving past by the fridge – *that shove: kaffir, we both know you can’t fight back*. Cliff had occasionally held his body in postures of apology at Church in the years since, and Church had let it go, the way we do. But he remembered carrying the hurt with the cokes back to the till, to the gentle, reassuring stroke of fingertips on the back of his hand–

‘With your wife?’

Nonhlanhla.

‘I never told you, Church, but the reason why I bumped you that day ... the reason I wanted to dominate and humiliate you, was because, because I was jealous of you.’

‘Okay.’

‘Because of your beautiful wife. For many years–’

‘What she gotta do with this?’

‘I loved her. No, don’t get angry. I’m trying to do the right thing here.’

‘Okay, talk.’

'I loved her, but I was all confused and, and y'know, full of shit. Knew I could never have her, she was like a different species. Remember how black she was, deep black, like polished ebony?'

'Yeah, sure. I loved her ... otherness, too. But why are you doing this, Cliff? Why open old wounds?'

'She was pregnant, right? Back then. You came in with her, into the Lucky where I's playing pinball that day, whispering in her ear, all proud and clean. And she so happy. The seed of Moshoeshoe inside the woman I loved.'

'Well, sorry. Is this what you wanted to tell me?'

'No. There's more. When she disappeared.'

The word dropped like a slow stone into Churchill and he paused, and clenched a fist. 'Wait a minute. Are you say—'

'I'm damned, Church. Damned by your goodness. By your patience and courage, and your fine, robust heir. Damned by your—'

'Cliff, shut the fuck up. What did you do? Did *you* kill her?'

His eyes were locked fiercely on Cliff's, to follow the answer down to his mouth, and he saw a glimpse of it in the blink, the tremble of lips, and he heard, 'Yes,' although the mouth did not open. He heard again, 'And I raped her first,' although the mouth did not open. Cliff, behind this sly mask, confessing, seeking redemption, damned.

Then the mouth opened, 'No,' and the spell was broken. *I mustn't trust him*. He shook his head and looked away. Then he heard birdsong again, a blacksmith plover rapping a metallic *tik tik tik* from somewhere close, *warning, predator*. A lourie called, *g'waaay*. Then the memory - his beloved Nonhlanhla setting out one fine spring morning in her new hat and new shoes, just down to the shops and back, never to return - weakened him, an ache in his belly. And the months that had followed, how he had walked and walked, starved to the bone. He stood up and limped away.

'Wait, wait Church! Don't go. *Listen!* I know where she is.'

Silence. He turned back.

'What did you say?'

'I know where she is.'

'She's *alive*?'

'Absolutely. That's why I'm here. But please, sit down. Hear me out.'

'No.' Churchill sat.

'Okay, true confessions. All these years I've known. I helped her get out.'

'Out?'

'Yeah. Remember that time? Some people said she'd been murdered. Others said *you* did it. Others said she went back to the Shangaan, because the men have the biggest cocks in the world. Well, the last one was the closest to the truth.'

'No.'

'Sorry, boet. That's life.'

'No, that's not true. I remember her, I remember the day she left ... aaah, no. You're a lying dog. How can you say such a thing?'

'Hey, Church. Our memory of a thing and how it actually was ... very different. She wanted out, and I gave her a lift. She drank some of my dop and told me, all laughing like. I never touched her. That's all.'

'You? You a white motherfucker. Y'could never've known who she was and what she wanted. Aaah, fuck. How could you know what the people said? This is all bullshit.'

'But what if? What if you're wrong? What if she's still alive?'

'I ...'

'The only woman you ever loved. Everyone in town knows *that* story, how you never took another wife, worked hard and raised her boy, blah blah blah, fucken hero.' He spat onto the ground. 'I can show you where she is.'

And the tears spurted from Churchill's eyes.

Ingwe? Are you better? Are you strong again? This body is a cage. Let's fly again.

No no I am sick must hide hide it comes.

Not sick. Fear. Open your eyes, my love. We are leopard. We can fight.

'Hey, Church. Hey, it's okay, man. I'm sorry.'

A hand descending to his back, he sensed it like a spider. He flinched away and muttered, 'This is a trick. She's still dead. I know it.'

'Yeah, well. I can prove it.'

'How?'

'First things first. Like I said, I come with an offer.'

'How much d'you want?'

'Not a damn cent. By recent happy coincidence I'm rich as a Jew. So I decided, what the hey? Take my retirement early while I'm still young enough to enjoy it. You remember that feeling, the open road ahead, the whole world waiting, possibilities as wide as the sky? You remember? Well, maybe not. That's where I am now. I can burn everything, put the car into gear and whatever happens next.'

'Uhuh.'

'But if you're all alone then where are you? Huh? Then where are you? So I've been settling a few old scores, paying a few old debts, having fun with friends and family. And thinking of you, how we might have been best buddies if it wasn't for apartheid. How in life you have to take that opportunity, grab it like – *sjoe* – like that as it passes, only one chance to catch the train to freedom. So I thought about you and thought, let's give ourselves that chance, that chance we never had when we were young. The road's waiting, Church. Me and you, a bundle of cash. What I'm trying to say is ... it's *party* time.'

'This is the biggest load of crap I ever heard in my life.'

'Exactly!'

'No, I'm serious. You come to me with some story ... I have a farm to run.'

'Yeah, I know. Okay, okay. I want to buy three days. I'll pay with Nonhlanhla.'

A pause then, a settling, a moment of quiet, babbling birdsong. Churchill shifted around in his seat and stood up. His back ached.

'But here's the killer,' said Cliff quietly. 'I'm not coming back. So you have this one chance. Now. I'll buy you a toothbrush and a suitcase full of shit. The train's coming and it's not slowing down.'

'Just tell me where she is. If you know?'

'No.'

'Then no. I have responsibilities. Perhaps if you *do* have proof? But to go on your word ...'

Cliff stood and walked over to the van and came back with a video camera. A flip, and a tiny figurine came to vivid life on the little screen. Churchill stumbled closer, blinking ... unmistakable. Nonhlanhla. Inside a hut, backlit by the open door, long braids swaying, the gleaming laughter in her face, filling the screen ...

Cliff pulled a flask from a hip, offering it. Churchill sipped. Raw brandy. He poured a mouthful.

'Ahah! My God. She looks so young. When did you see her?'

'Told you, been settling up my accounts. Said she'd never stopped loving you. That she thought about you and the boy every day. That she could never come back for shame.'

'Come on, brother. Enough with the games. Just tell me where she is. All these years ... make it up to me.'

'No. Either you catch the wind or you don't. Otherwise it's no fun.'

'Fun? Jesus, Cliff. You're an asshole. Always were. Always will be.'

And Cliff guffawed and clapped him on the back and Church coughed and grinned and wiped his eyes and took another breathless dop as he stumbled to the van.

Stein's sunset-etched face followed Mosh's boots up the stone steps, his scrawny shoulders bas-relief against the bruised sky. He staggered and nearly toppled over the brick banister, but clutched at a boot and pulled himself right. Above, the American grunted; for all the recent gym work this here boy was *damn* heavy, a heft of solid meat that Skeet could never hope to match. They angled him through the door and Stein deliberately twisted, mashing Mosh's face against the jamb, peeking up at the boss like a naughty boy.

'Careful,' Skeet whispered. 'I warned yah. You can have him after I'm finished. I need the girl to believe he'll get outta this okay.' They let him thump to the floor.

'And she won't sssee me? You've given your word.'

A hand snaked out, pincering the old man's turkey throat. 'My word? Watch yer mouth, you old fuck. This here's the business end a' things. *If ya lucky, I let ya live.*'

An obsequious snarl, blinking frantic submission, over, *or if I let you? Where's the treasure?*

'Okay. Now go wait outside with Darcy's kid. He takes out anyone who comes along. Jus' keep watch, old timer.'

'Little rat bastard gives me the creepsss.' Stein rubbed his throat, shoulders slumped, whining. 'Just a kid. What's he know?'

'Well, it's yer home-boy Darcy's talent, so if *I* have to do his job it comes outta your end.'

'End? What end? I get a fee, don't I?'

'Huh? Sure, whatever.'

Sure. 'Cliff Darcy knows about these things. Said the kid is the best, a pro. Fast, ruthless, a deadly shot. So take it out of hisss ... end.'

'Three seconds, old timer, and yer brains're all over the wall.'

'Yessir.' Stein trudged out.

Ariel? The man comes.

Kay and Sav?

Tree-embers after a veld-fire.

Are you ...?

I am ... fine.

Aah, he stabs me – go to Sindisi! Go down! White light flooded in as Ariel swept up into our world. *Take her out, run run ...*

... goodbye.

A swab on the blood-trace as he withdrew the antidote needle. A flicker through her face. He sculpted the scarred cheeks with a two-handed caress, imagining them flawless, her folded hands demure in a cotton-frocked lap, not strapped to this chair with cable tie, not these faded, torn jeans.

Her eyes opened slowly, dark awareness seeping out.

The spic doc back in Mexico had said she would be disorientated, probably not have a clue where she was or how she got there. 'Hush, little one,' he murmured. 'Everything's gonna be jus' fine.' He stroked her hair. 'If I take the gag outcha mouth, you promise not to scream?'

She squirmed against the cable ties.

'No-one to hear you for miles around, anyway. I just can't stand female hysterics. Promise?'

She nodded.

'Good girl. Y'hungry?' He slipped off the gag. She worked a distasteful mouth. 'Ate up yer bacon and eggs, I'm afraid. But I can—'

'Why did you come back?'

‘Adventure. Fun. Sex. Why else come to Africa?’

‘What do you want?’

‘We’re unresolved, you and I. Maybe I jus’ wanna talk. Heck, I *had* to do it this way. I’m a wanted man hereabouts.’

She breathed slow control, in and out, and then snarled a flash of teeth and a glare of such primal hate that he stumbled back. He regained his footing and came close again, fascinated. But she had dropped her eyes, head to one side, relaxing against the chair in languid disdain. As if listening. He raised a hand to slap her and then stopped as a growl rippled through the twilight from the kitchen window.

The cat. I must check–

She spoke in a low mumble, eyes clenched tight as if in pain. ‘You came here for me, sir. You came for me. So take me.’ She coughed, a dry, ragged sound.

‘Would you like some water?’

‘Please.’

Outside under the rising moon Sindisi was splayed out as if crushed, claws scoring the earth, her mother a scream in her head. The creature and its boy beyond the wire had not moved; a pair of human eyes glittering the kitchen light ... and the creature’s eyes, glowing red, unblinking glimmers from the tips of the fingers hooked over the boy’s shoulders. She could see, with her leopard eyes, the tail wound tight around the boy’s hips, between his legs, and the head, resting on top of the boy’s head, blunt and eyeless and split by a luminous, fanged mouth.

She shook her head and growled. *Mama? Mama, come back. Do not fear this thing. You can fight it!*

Ingwe came down from the sky with a hiss, inhaling back to the world from the flight out into nothing. The creature watched her and she drifted, just out of reach. She snarled as Sindisi raised herself into a crouch below. Then another human appeared,

old, smelling of carrion, making soft word-sounds. The boy broke his gaze. Sindisi leapt for the far end of the run and clawed at the corner pole, while her mother dropped down into the bush beyond the fence.

'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

She blinked and turned her head aside again.

Like a goddamn lawyer, consulting. How dangerous she is, and the scent of betrayal flipped a switch, thrilling him. She nodded and seemed to smile, then lifted her face to him, her eyes open and so beautiful that he nearly dropped the glass. Then she spoke in a soft, hypnotic voice.

'Take me, Skeet. Take me now, away from here. Let's hit the open road, drive all night, come on. Let's see where the wind takes us. This is why you came here, for me. So take me. I'll go with you. I'll give you what you want. I promise.'

'Yes.'

'Come. Untie me. And we'll go now.'

He found his hands were shaking, the glass wobbling. He stumbled over to the sink and dropped it. He put a hand to his eyes, overcome by a rush of a feeling he could not, from years of denial, name:

Fear.

No. This wasn't what he wanted at all. He was no desperado. No white trash, as landless as garbage. He owned the world, and he could never trust anyone, least of all this free spirit bound and helpless beneath him, trying to wriggle free with her lies. How he loved her. Her wild, animal spirit. No, stick to the plan. Enslave her heart or destroy her, once and for all. Destroy all hope for love in his soul.

The kitchen lights grew brighter as the outside softened into the night. He leaned across the table and opened the window, and a black bat flickered over the satin sky. Then he snapped his fingers and crossed to the window overlooking Sindisi's run. It was too dark to see into, so he fetched the night-vision goggles. Nothing. Unable to frown due to the poison in his forehead, he shone a pencil-torch through the crack in the floorboards.

'Shit! Where's she gone?'

'She can run through bush as fast as we can on open ground. She is close to the last fence now. You've lost her.'

But this was true only to Ariel's hope, for Sindisi had paused in their headlong rush and turned back, calling to Ingwe, calming her. They had crept around and up, and now lay sprawled flat on a cliff-top rock, looking down at the cottage, the creature and the old man directly below them. They lay deathly still, watching, gathering courage.

'Howsss your English?'

'Good.'

Stein hissed, bush-jittery. The boy stood immobile, a blank presence, shoulders held back.

'The bosss said you must go down to the road. Watch the farm.'

'No. Guard the house. Wait. I phone-'

'He's busy. You know.'

'Okay. I go. You stay here?'

'Yesss.'

And the boy vanished. Stein shivered, and for the first time truly believed Cliff Darcy. He shook his head – what kind of world creates these monsters, these killer children – then sighed and made his slow way to the back of the cottage, rubbing his hands together in greed.

'Y'want music? In the dash.'

Churchill thumbed open the cubby to reveal a jumble of grubby cassette tapes.

'Hmmm. Meatloaf, *Bat Out of Hell*. Seems appropriate.'

'More than you know, boet. Perfect.'

'Yeah?

The road spun beneath. 'Wanna beer?'

'Sure, Cliff.'

'Come on Skeet,' said Ariel. 'Take me. Let's go.'

'No. I came here for the cat.'

'She's gone. Forget it.'

'Well then, jus' have to hire me a hunter. One who knows the terrain.'

'No, please. You don't want to do this. Let's just go, you and me.'

'But how can I trust you, Ariel? You ambushed me out there, after all your sweet words.'

'Oh, poor you. You wanted an adventure. You were fair game. Don't come crying now.'

'I'm not.' He noticed that the pencil-torch still dangled from his moist fingers in front of his crotch – her eyes glanced twice, amused – and he slammed it onto the table. A tinkle of the bulb breaking.

'If you want me,' she said. 'I'll go with you. I promise I won't stab you in the back. I'll stay for three days. After that, no promises.'

'But if I have your cat, you might stay with me forever.'

She dropped her head sadly, straining against the chair, and sighed: 'How can you *have* her, Skeet? She's half wild. And if you kill her tonight, or anyone else, then kill me

too, because I'll spend the rest of my life hunting you down. What do you mean, have her? What do you want?

'To give you a choice.'

'What choice?'

'One. *You* go out and fetch the leopard. I dart it and put it in my truck. Then I go, and everyone wakes up, including you. No harm done. And you come to us, of your own free will, to America. I'll give you a million dollars, ten grand in cash right now. Come look after her at my place.'

'She'll be in a cage?'

'Yeah, well. I have a ranch. We can build an enclosure, and import African deer-'

'No thanks. What's the other choice?'

'I came here to hunt and kill. I'm going home with a trophy.'

'Fuck you.'

Only Ariel heard the gate to the leopard run creak open, and she mouthed the expletive slowly enough to mask the sound. She closed her eyes and saw faintly through Ingwe's: the old man, with a silenced handgun and night-vision goggles strapped to his face, crouching on tip-toe across to Sindisi's den. The creature and its boy stalked silently up behind him on the other side of the fence, towards the open gate. She saw herself, through the kitchen window, strapped to the chair, Skeet leaning over, and opened her eyes.

'Ahah. Ah ... beg yer pardon?' He giggled.

'What, you don't understand, you fucking nimrod? Fuck you fuck you. *Lek mich am arsch*. Do your worst.'

'Yeah? Well, maybe yer ass is all I'm innerested in, bitch. Fuck me? Fuck *you!*' And he slapped her as hard as he could.

A hawk moth swooped into the room from somewhere and flittered above his head. He ignored it - just a moth and all - and drew back his arm for a second blow, his fist clenched and his teeth twinkling.

The moth banked and flew straight into his eye.

'OW! Fuck! Bitch *stung* me!' He staggered back. 'Damn! I can't see! AAAH S'BURNING'' He staggered and lost his balance and fell, flailing an arm and clutching his face. 'Aaah damn. Ow. Ow. My eye.'

The moth fluttered down and slipped between the floorboards, just a glimpse of a naughty grin on a tiny fairy face as it disappeared.

And then a faint golden glow alighting in the crack from below.

Stein was lost in the shine. Bathed in it, on his hands and knees, mouth agape, night vision goggles discarded in the dust. *Gold, gold, oh so much gold. And jewels, diamond ruby sapphire. Treasure. At last, my treasure.* The pile gleamed as if lit from within, the heavenly glitter filling his mind. The noises from above seemed to come from some other world, and gave no thought to why he could see so clearly in this dark place. His mouth was dry, and he licked crusted spittle from his lips.

How much? How much? Half a ton at least. How many million? Oh my God. It's so beautiful.

Voices from above, clear and close, but he couldn't make the sense of them. A shiver up his spine.

It's mine. Not sharing. I ...

have to kill everyone.

I'll need time, so much time ...

His eyes watered and he blinked and rubbed his face, sitting up from his adoration. His heart fluttered, a twinge of pain in the old left arm. The voices from above were

distorted with some strange interference. Then the whisper of a foot through grass behind him.

Ingwe watched as the little spirit of the air lit up the cave and the tokoloshe rode its slave across the grass below. She stood and snarled, and began a slow flow down the cliff. Sindisi followed, leaping with agile power from rock to rock, her muscles burnished by the moon.

Oh my kitten. Look at you now. So strong, so perfect. Let's fly at them!

No wait, mama. Firesticks. I am still alive. Not yet. Be patient. Wait for the moment. They crawled through a bush-tunnel between the rocks, closer. The gate was open.

'Man,' Skeet splashed water on his face. 'That hurt. Thought I was blind for a while there.' He squinted and winked at the wall, his forehead stretched tight. 'Weird after-image. Like lookin' at the sun. What the hell was that? A wasp?'

'A moth.'

'Moth's can't sting. Dumb broad. Now, then. Where were we? Oh yeah. You gettin' the beatin' ya deserve.'

'I'll make another deal, Skeet. I'll let you fuck me. Right here, right now. Then leave us alone.'

'Yeah? That what you are? A whore just like all the others?'

'They're right, evil is banal. Just another boring misogynist with mental constructs of domination. Too scared to just fuck and go.'

'Uh? Shut *up*. If I wanna fuck you, when I wanna fuck you, I'll do it. I don't need ya invitation. But right here, right now, I want the leopard. Not so damn sure about you no more, slut.'

'She's gone. I told you.'

'So then I'll kill you. Why not? And everyone in this house. I'll burn y'all alive.'

A pause then. Ariel licked her lips, eyes clear and impassive as a cat.

Withered old hands shook as they reached out to touch the gold. His fingertips trembled as they

passed right into it?

And then sudden darkness. He stifled a scream *NO*, clawing one hand to his mouth, the other at empty air. And in that moment of pure, dark fright he reached the highest level of his spiritual awareness, and heard, for just a moment, the voice of the tokoloshe behind him, a low inhuman gurgle, a promise of hell. He twisted back, banging his head on the floorboards. The pain in his arm burned brighter. He saw – *Just the boy. Oh my God. What made that noise? The boy-*

A blur, quicker than he could react, up behind him. The pistol slipped from his holster.

‘No! It’s *mine!*’ Stein turned and reached back. *Too slow, oh he’s so quick – wha-?* A firefly swept past his ear and then broke apart, sparkling into a firework-lattice above the boy – *a head? What is that? Oh God ...* then the boy was screaming and falling, talon hands ripping at the air, his eyes pools of horror in the faint light.

The light-shape twisted away and out into the night.

The light-bird! The little human. It fights! Now! Now! Ingwe leapt forward, streaming through the wire fence, The tokoloshe, clawing at the fairy jinking and sparkling before it, heard the howl of her attack like wind through the air, and turned a snarling face. Ingwe condensed into perfect leopard, and tore into its belly.

Young Abraham awoke from five years ago. Only eight, exploring the bushy gulfs of the forbidden stone koppie above his house. He awoke in another cave, in a thirteen year-old body. An old man (*tokoloshe*) leaning over him, fingers slipping around his

neck (*to enslave me*) and he writhed and screamed. His instinct was infused with the skills learned in slavery and he kicked and struck a fist, then convulsed forward for the head-butt.

‘HEY, HEY Y’ALL. What the hell’s going on down there?’ Skeet peered through the window and nibbled a fingernail. Nothing, just a moth, flickering above the ground. The sounds of intense struggle continued from below, grunts, thuds, a wheezing scream. He picked up the pencil torch and crossed to the gap in the floor. ‘Damn,’ he muttered. ‘Busted. Better go see.’ He crossed to the door, and then flapped back to the table for his gun.

As the blow broke his jaw, Stein knew that this was his life, this was the moment that mattered, and if he won now then ... he won. *Gold. Real real real. Only a boy. My gold.* He lurched forward and caught a narrow, wiry waist, and with everything left in his heart began to squeeze.

The plastic man opened the kitchen door and stepped out. Sindisi crept closer through the darkness, tail held low.

The road spun beneath them, eating up the miles from the farm, but Churchill didn't care. He was faint with the memory of the image in the video camera. *It was her. I'm sure of it. Oh my wife, my beautiful wife.* No more small talk with this strange version of Cliff Darcy. A huge, low moon. *A red moon.* He reached out and turned down the music. Passion, despair, lust ... young man's music. Cliff grunted but said nothing.

A road sign passed. Limpopo.

'WOAH!' Cliff suddenly rammed on the brakes, and the van screeched to a halt on the verge.

'What? What is it?' Churchill squinted through the insect-splattered windscreen.

'Bit of trouble back at the farm. The fun and games have started. More of a jol than sitting here with you, Church ol' boy, I'm afraid. You're *boring*. I'm going to check it out.'

'Farm? What farm? *My farm?*'

'Cliff, this is Churchill. Remember him? Church, you know Cliff. I'm sure you two'll have a lot to talk about. Have to wake him up, Church.' He winked. 'Must dash, I'm afraid. Later.' The subtle sneer slipped from his face, and the sparkle faded from his eyes. He slumped back in his seat, chin dropping.

'Cliff?'

Nothing. Then a faint snore.

'Cliff? Hey, buddy. Are you there?' Churchill poked him. He burped and rolled his head away. 'Wake up. Hey. Wake up now.' A tap to the leg.

'Uh? Whassis?' His eyes creaked open, clouded with confusion. 'Aaaaow. My head. God, ow. Where ... Church? Churchill? Wha'the hell y'doing here?'

Churchill gave a curt nod, but was silent. Then he reached out and gave Cliff's shoulder a reassuring shake.

'Where are we?'

'Limpopo.'

'uuh ... why?'

'You don't know?'

Cliff shook his head, his eyes puffy and scared.

'Hate to have to tell you this, Cliff, but um ... I think you, you've been possessed. By a demon.'

'Yeah, brandy. A demon? Oh God, what did I do? It's a complete blackout.'

'You said some things.'

'I did? To you?' And Cliff was suddenly wary, stiffening in his seat, his eyes dark with shadow.

'Yes. Do you remember?'

'No, Church. I don't. Nothing. Just a bad dream.'

'Do you have a video camera? Cliff? Answer the question. Do you?'

'Huh? No, no ... video camera.'

'You took it from the back of the van. May I have a look?'

'You holding a gun on me? Is that why we're here?'

Churchill glanced up and studied Cliff's eyes, and said softly 'Why would you think that? Hey, my old friend?'

'What did I say to you?'

'No video camera?'

'No, I already said. No fucken video camera. I don't care about all that shit. Can't afford it, anyway.'

'Okay, okay.' Churchill raised empty hands. 'And no gun. You're my old friend, trying to help me out with something. No gun. I promise. Okay? I need to look in the back of your van.' He snapped his fingers. 'Keys.'

Cliff fumbled them over, and Churchill stepped out and opened the back. 'Somewhere up here, on the right. Here. Got it.' He got back into his seat and flipped open the screen.

Blank.

'How do you work this?'

'I dunno.'

'But it's yours.'

'I already told you—'

'Okay, okay. Here, this button ...' the screen flickered to life. 'And this to play.' Churchill covered the screen with his hand and turned to Cliff. 'Listen, when, when you see this I want you to promise there'll be no violence between us. I promise this too, I swear to you. Okay?'

'I dunno what's going on, boet. I swear to God.'

'I hope so, because a demon put this into your hands. But we'll talk like civilized men.'

'Okay.'

He uncovered the screen.

'Euugh, what is that?' Cliff recoiled. 'Is it like, flesh? Is an operation? Why—?'

'Where's rewind? Wait, I ...' The screen flickered down through its memory, the gruesome coiling twisting faster. Fast forward. More of the same. Churchill focused his eyes fiercely. *Where are you? Nonhlanhla?* A spasm in his gorge and he felt the vomit rising ... a kick, the door sprang open and he was sprawling out onto the dirt.

'Oh my wife, my wife my wife. You are gone, gone now.' And he wept and spoke her name, dissolving it in his tears. Then he wiped his eyes and the vomit from his mouth, and sat up—

Tschid –tschick.

Cliff, balancing a gun in his hand.

No. Not Cliff. Look at how he stands. He's back.

'So now you know the lie, old Church, old buddyroo. Do you want to know the truth? All you have to do is ask. I can tell you every tasty detail.'

'Begone, you filth from hell. I'll speak to Cliff.'

'Here. You might need this.' He flipped the gun over and thrust it into Churchill's hand, then took an uncertain step back and stared with shock at the gun he had just given away.

'Cliff?' Churchill stood.

'Woah woah. You said no gun. No gun. Come on, whatever I told you I was drunk, buddy. It's not true. Don't shoot.'

'Tell me now. Did you kill my wife?'

A moment's silence, while Cliff chewed his lip, his moon-lit face bleak and open, eyes wide. Then slowly, he nodded.

'And did you rape her?'

'Yes. Yes, I did. Shoot me, Churchill, what the fuck.' He laughed. 'Do it. I'm tired, man. I've carried it around inside me my whole life. And I loved her, can you believe it, my brother? I'm fucked now. I'm fucked. I'll drink till I die so what the hell. Shoot me.'

As if his hand had a will of its own, the gun rose up and sighted between Cliff's eyes.

Ariel closed her eyes and tried to see outside. She could sense the leopard and the creature as they fought above her, ripping through the air. She heard the roar of their struggle, the shriek of energy against energy, the resonance through our world.

Then Sindisi touched her mind, and the night cleared. She saw a man–

Who is this, Ariel?

Lucifer. Sindy, be careful! He is dangerous.

But the young cat stood foursquare, her tongue lolling with arrogant disdain, her deep night eyes unblinking on the shadows of his.

I am flesh, Ariel. I am powerful. Look! Ingwe destroys his creature. She shines! He can do nothing to me.

And the Cliff-shape nodded, with a wry smile.

He can take your body–

Let him try! The plastic man comes. I must kill him.

Careful ...

They watched as Skeet made his cautious way down the kitchen steps. The devil stepped aside with an elegant ushering gesture through the gate.

‘Hey, what am I doing?’ Churchill lowered the gun. ‘I can’t shoot you! I mean, that’s the whole point.’

‘You can’t? Even though you know–’

‘Cliff, we have to deal with all that later. I’ve got a funny feeling, man.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Something the demon said ...’

‘What’s this demon shit you always on about?’

'I mean it literally. You were possessed. You brought me out here to tempt me to vengeance. Take your soul, too.'

'Ah, now listen—'

'Shut up. This is a trick. I have to get back to the farm.'

Skeet was on his hands and knees, flabbergasted by what he saw in the cave. His treadmill-rounded bum stuck up in the air.

Sindy, wait! Gun! Ariel shouted, but too late, for they were through the gate and in one leap crunched fangs into a shiny buttock. Skeet screamed, thrashing backwards, and Sindisi tore the grip from side to side. Blood filled her mouth and sprayed across the wall, raining viscous ripples in the black amoeba seeping from the cave. His drawn-out shriek ululated as he waggled around. She set her claws in the earth and tore free. He screamed and screamed and fell and threw an arm back-

The gun, Sindy and the shot ripped a red line through Ariel's mind, her eyes opening with a gasp - this chair again, cable tie twisted deep into her bleeding wrists as the noise punched through the kitchen. Then another shot from outside, then a third.

Then silence.

A whimper, and a long groan. *A grass-whisper? Did I hear that? The stroke of the grass along her golden pelt, alive real real real ...*

Or just hope in my ears?

A plaintive meeeow, close by.

'Si-? Oh.' Shoulder Thomas was huddled under the kitchen table, scrawny and bristly, his eyes fierce. 'Ksss! Go away, kitty.' But he crawled closer, back arched and tail bottlebrushed, darting anxious glances at the door, then crouched down and chewed at the cable tie around Ariel's left ankle.

She laughed and squeaked 'Ow!' her lip split. 'Don't be silly, kitty, G'way now.' Then a grunt from outside, the sound of a body dragging on dirt. Shoulder Thomas hissed and scampered into the darkness of the cottage.

Tommy? Wake up Kay. Wake her up. Ariel opened her eyes. It was no good. He couldn't hear her. Just a cat.

Ingwe, where are you?

Nothing, but the brightness of the kitchen walls and the soft moan of the man outside.

Lucifer decided to watch for a while, just for interest, although he would have to intervene soon. It was a fight he'd seen before - the earth elemental, the guardian spirit, who had chosen to stay to protect this nursery of souls, fighting one of his beasts - and his side *always* lost. He would have to carry the tokoloshe back and heal it. It had done excellent work in Africa, reaping an army of slaves for hell, since first passing through the portal of a fire caught and cultivated by a man in a cave all those thousands of years ago.

But let it take a beating. Suffer awhile longer. Learn some respect for the thorns in our bountiful garden. He glanced around the bush for the fairy, but knew there was no point. She had fled at his appearance, jinking at grass level down the hill, down to watery crevices and mossy rocks where her light-trick camouflage could fool even him. *Pity. No time for a hunt right now.* He liked to squeeze the light out of them, like squeezing the life from a fish. He liked to watch the light-show, the desperate manipulation of the air, the pretty sparks as they died.

Slippery little bastards. Almost extinct everywhere. A rare treat. But, as always, work to be done. He sighed and rose up with a flap of black wings.

'Oh ... mah ... Gawd.' A bloodied claw grasped at the door-jamb, and Skeet pulled himself upright. The other hand clutched behind. 'Took a piece. A piece. Outta my ...'

And Ariel laughed, her head thrown back, her legs splayed wide.

'Please. Aah ... 'm bleedin' everywhere.'

'So untie me. I'll help you.'

'Yeah?' he whimpered. He tried to sit down, then shrieked and stood up, his hand squeezing gore. 'Shit.' He swayed, and dropped the pistol onto the table.

'I mean it. All I want is peace. I'll patch you up and you can go. Win-win. Untie me.'

'Eh-heh *I* can't trust yah. You'll stab m'back.'

'And this ... is how you wanted a relationship? Look, you're bleeding.' She motioned with her eyebrows at the floor, where a pool of red spread tendrils over the blue lino.

'You're losing blood fast.'

He dragged his leg over to the sink, took a dishcloth, and jammed it into the wound.

'D'ya have a first aid kit? Mine's in the truck.'

'What happened to Sindisi?'

'Who?'

'The leopard, idiot. Did you shoot her?'

He considered the question, his face slack and wan. 'No.'

'But how can *I* trust *you*? And by the way, I used that cloth on the floor. We live above a leopard den. So now you have a bad infection.'

He threw it away and clenched the wound again. 'C'mon, please. First aid kit?'

'Did you shoot her?'

'No, I swear. The first shot was close, but she ran like hell.'

'Okay. Middle cupboard. There's whiskey in the top.'

He staggered over and let go of the wound. Blood spewed *but no spurt. Not an artery. Pity.* She watched his hands shake as they struggled with the spin-top. He squeaked as he splashed.

'You can't heal yourself. We must boil cloth, clean it out properly. As soon as possible.'

'Aaaaah shuttup. I'm not lettin' you free. To work on m'butt? No way.'

She sighed.

He took a tablecloth from the cupboard and pulled it between his legs, tying it tight above his hip. Then he rummaged through his black satchel. A syringe.

'What are you doing?'

'Gonna wake the nigger up. Was gonna do it anyway.'

How tasty, this human flesh. She was astonished. Fruity monkey yum. Even the sick-smelling one. She licked her lips and watched as her mother tumbled from the sky to the earth beside her.

Still your leopard-shape, mama. They nuzzled, a moment's brief peace.

I think ... I do not need her earth-stuff anymore, my child. Her body. I am sustained by ... the earth itself. I can hold the shape of my will. I am born before, fought many battles, becoming seed again. I can choose. We can go from these humans now. I can be at your side in our world.

Do you want to? Should we run? We are leopard. We are invisible. We are alone.

No. Ariel is like me. Her soul will remain ... we must help if we can. But we can set her free too, from the care of you. It's our time.

Yes.

They watched the cottage below. The ringing in Sindisi's ears gradually grew silent. Ingwe reached down through the wall.

You're back! Oh, Ingwe. Sindy?

She's alive. I tore it apart. The great bat took it away. They're gone.

Stay with me. Be patient. He's alone now. If he makes one wrong move ...

Mosh jerked awake, rolled over and vomited. A wordless jumble of loud, overwhelming images, of nightmares and real people, TV, a cat's eyes, a great black bat. A thought slipped in like a pinprick of living light: *I'm drunk or drugged something. This isn't natural. Lie still. Work out where you are.*

'I know you're awake, boy.'

A voice from above, disembodied. He eased one eye open. Table legs. Sofa. A single child's school shoe, a white sock nearby.

Kay's place. What-?

'Can yah hear me? Nod if y'unnerstand.'

No, don't. Don't nod. Who is that? Dream? TV? We were watching ...

'Boy?'

TV ameri ... American. The American. He opened his eyes.

'Hi there. Remember me?'

The silence was weird. Not exactly companionable, under the circumstances. More like a ... what was the word? Truce? Churchill glanced over at Cliff's face. Tears ran dusty rivers down his cheeks, but his eyes were thoughtful, somehow happy. His mouth worked with a weak, flickering smile.

Who suffered worse over all these years, he or I? Something lit up inside Churchill's heart. Aah, brother. I must forgive him.

When he asks.

The first words came from Cliff, in a gargled whisper:

'You say ... I's possessed?'

'Yes.'

'So ... this demon, it made me confess to you?'

'No. He denied it. But, but I knew, somehow. *You* confessed, Cliff. You fought him.'

'But if he possessed me then I'm damned, right? Then I'm one of his things? Serve me right.'

'I dunno. Dunno how these things work.'

'Jesus sweet Jesus forgive me,' barely audible.

Both men stared straight ahead. Then Churchill leaned over and with the lightest of pats on the back of a trembling hand, forgave him.

'Are you ... a cartoon character?'

'What ya say, boy?'

'You're a comic book. At Kay's place.'

'Hell no. I'm very real. As ya'll soon find out.'

'You're a bad guy. What's your powers?'

'Try this.' Skeet stepped forward and kicked him in the chest, then squeaked and staggered back to the wall, a hand clutched to the tablecloth.

Mosh heaved a taste of puke. 'Haha. You sound like Betty Boop.'

'*What?* Ya feeling lucky, punk?'

'Big gun. American. I remember you. Comic book man. Fucken murderer.'

'Yeah, and now I'm back.'

Mosh squirmed and tried to get up, but his hands were tied behind him. Eventually, panting, he levered against the table and sat, back to the sofa.

'Now,' said Skeet. 'Can yah work? Yah okay?'

'Hundreds.'

'Ah gotta job for ya. Wake up now, or I'll cut your girlfriend's face off.'

'Ariel? What have—'

'Shuddup. Listen carefully.'

She is old enough, Ingwe. She can survive. Take her to the wilderness.

No. I know who I am, and who you are. I am your guardian, and you are mine.

He has guns. I am tied.

Who matters, you or me or Cindy? You are flesh, a feather in the winds of chance. You are spirit forever. I am leopard, but you ...

No, no sacrifice. Take her run run run. This is my fight. You fought yours ... Ingwe? What's wrong?

The great bat is back! He has something ... no

A wet slap across her cheek, and she lost contact. She opened her eyes.

'Wake up. This is how it's gonna work.'

He had taped her mouth shut, but Skeet could still see Ariel's eyes, loud with laughter as he lay on the table. The nigger doing some monkey business back there, pulling faces or something. He twisted back to see, but the black face was instantly blank. His long black fingers were quick and gentle, doing a good job, but damn it *burned*. Skeet's whole damn ass was on fire.

A groan escaped, but he made no other sound. *Betty Boop?* It had shaken him deeply.

Still she laughed. *She's provoking me. On purpose. Mocking me. Why? Why does she want me to hurt her*

want me to hurt her? Aaah damn it burns. His eyes watered.

At last Mosh smoothed plaster over layers of bandage and cream. 'That's one helluva big chunk outya batty, mah homey,' he said. 'A full-on mouthful. Dunno *what* the plastic surgeons are gonna do.'

A muffled shriek from Ariel, straining back in her chair.

Furious, Skeet swung the gun around to Mosh. 'What? Whaddid you say? You wanna piece of me, punk?'

'No, the leopard already got that.'

'Okay, okay, gimme a reason.' He swung it back to Ariel. 'I'll shoot her in the stomach, then we can watch her die. You want that?'

Mosh shook his head with a frightened glance at Ariel. She breathed a long sigh through her nose.

'Now go get my new jeans, in the big black bag there in yer crappy little TV room. If you not back in sixty seconds I start cuttin' on her face.'

'Yes baas.' Mosh clipped off fast through the doorway. Skeet turned back to the girl. Her eyes had closed again, the translucence flickering as if in dream. He opened his

mouth to speak but then shut it, preferring this, preferring to be invisible. He bit his lip to stop himself from whimpering as he slid half-naked from the table.

What's happening? Ingwe?

Nothing - the sigh of the wind outside and the grunts and shuffles of the man, the smell of blood and antiseptic. Then, faintly, as if from a great distance, in a voice shrill and terrible,

... cage cage cage cage ...

It faded. Ariel reached for Sindisi, who stood snarling at the cliff-edge, staring up.

Go now. Run, my love, run and don't turn back. The men will shoot you. We are beyond your reach ... perhaps we will follow soon ...

mama mama said I must protect you ...

No! You will die. No. Go now. Now! Ariel held on with all her effort, fading already back into the house.

Sindisi roared and turned towards the thick eastern bush, her tail whipping, eyes up at the moon-blue sky. No patterns, no glacial fractures and creatures of light. *No mama, no great bat. Are you there, mama, in the stars?*

As Mosh peeled out the neatly-folded jeans, his eyes fell to a case on the floor. A half-sized briefcase, metallic and black. With a glance back at the kitchen he stepped over and thumbed the catch. It clicked open.

A dart gun, nestling in black foam-rubber. And a row of darts, sharp feathered phials, each with a little label in crimped, secretive handwriting. The word *Cat* caught his eye. He snatched the gun and a dart and scanned around for a hiding place. The windowsill, a space behind the cheap cotton curtain billowing gently over the open window. He stashed them out of sight, eased the case closed and heard the throaty

rumble of the leopard, somewhere out and beyond. He listened for a second, then grabbed the jeans and hurried back.

‘Okay, here’s the deal.’ Skeet spoke in a whisper, slow and careful as if to a moron. He sat primly on one buttock in the living-room chair. ‘I’m not fucking around. I want the leopard. Now I want it dead. I wanna fuckin’ skin on my floor.’

‘So why can’t you just hunt it yourself?’ Mosh was perched on the sofa, huddled over, his head bowed. He glanced up as he spoke, and measured again the distance to the gun. But Skeet was wary, with sharp eyes on Mosh, on his untied hands.

‘Listen to me, y’ piece of shit punk nigger motherfucker. Your job is to do what you told. You *think*, and I burn everyone in this house. Got it?’

‘Eish, baas.’

‘This is heaven or hell. Heaven is, you go hunt me that animal, and I’m gone,’ he snapped his fingers, ‘like that. You and your ugly ho can go on wallowing in filth and sin, go on with your pointless little lives.’

‘No, we won’t. If I ... If I kill her leopard, then she’ll hate me forever. She’ll leave.’

‘That’s heaven, bud. What can you do? Hell is I carve off her face. Everything. Nose, ears, lips. Then we’ll see if y’ can sell the bitch. Won’t give no blowjobs,’ he giggled. ‘Or maybe I just gut-shot you and burn everyone alive. But like I said, all I want is one dead leopard. You get a rifle, with only a single bullet, so you better make the shot count. One chance.’

‘But what if I miss? Or I can’t find her?’

‘If you’re not back by dawn I cut off her face and I’m gone with the wind. I’m puttin’ a GPS on you, so if you go back to the farm, then I cut off her face. I see you waitin’ outside to shoot me, and I cut off her face. You come back without the leopard, and I cut off her face. All the bases covered?’

‘A GPS?’

'Yeah, man. A signal. I can track your every movement.'

And the police could trace you. Satellites. Interpol. Mosh rocked back and forth.

We're not getting out of this alive.

'Are we clear?'

'But what if ... how will I find her?'

'Your problem. Here,' Skeet stood up and took out what looked like a big wristwatch from the black bag. 'Strap this on. You're a black man. This is your sorry excuse for a country. You must know how to track animals. I bet she's waiting just outside.' Mosh followed with frightened eyes as he strolled over to the window. 'She wants me again. Got the taste. Renegade. *Has* to be shot. All y'have to do is step out the back door, *bang*, all your problems are over. The rifle has night-vision. Think positive. Y'can *do* it.'

A pep talk? The guy's loony-tune. No clue what a freakin' monster he is. Mosh watched Skeet's bland profile as he stared out of the window. The dart gun was in plain sight below him. *Please God, don't let him look down.*

Without Ingwe, Sindisi could also not see as clearly in the dark of the varied-scented bush, the glimpse of the moon, the rustle of startled prey. But she moved swiftly through undergrowth tunnels, marking food with her nose: rat, sleeping bird, a treefull of vervet monkey. She was strong and fast and wild with the joy of flight, swift with the power of youth and solitude. *I am leopard! And I am alone.*

But at the fence she faltered, and crouched down to look up and down this dead strip through the bush. Ariel and her mother lingered in her mind, the knowledge of rock and tree and the pathway-web, and with a snarl she looked back over her shoulder.

'Anyway!' Skeet clapped his hands. 'Get up. There's the rifle in the corner. And here's the bullet.' He held it out at arms length in one hand, sighting the pistol to his eye

with the other. Mosh took it carefully and he stepped back. 'You know how to load that? Not yet. Wait till you get outside.'

Mosh worked the bolt and nodded.

'Okay. There's safety. The button for the night-vision. Careful, now.'

Mosh swung the empty rifle to point at Skeet, who took a step back and almost pulled his trigger. 'I make you this promise,' Mosh said in a low growl. 'If I survive tonight and you hurt her again, if you *touch* her again, I'll find you and I will kill you. No matter how long it takes. You understand, baas?'

'You? Punk coonboy security guard? Against *me*? Bring it on, baby.'

'You're a racist man, so you're a fool. You don't know me. I'm going now. You touch her, you die.'

'Whoo-wee! The boy's got spunk! By the way, take a look in that leopard-hole under the kitchen on your way out. Think about heaven and hell. Think about me and her, and how much she's going to enjoy it.'

But he was bragging to an empty doorway.

The living-room window was elevated out of reach, so Mosh had to creep up the stone stairs to the stoep, then stretch his hand carefully through the gap. He held his breath. The faint murmur of the hateful American voice from the kitchen. *I'll never be able to watch TV again. Hope he's not checking the GPS*, and he almost fumbled the dart gun in a brief pulse of panic. He stowed it in his belt, then stretched more deliberately for the dart, ignoring the long seconds until he had maneuvered it outside. He snatched up the rifle and crept back around the cottage.

At Sindy's den he paused, and looked again at the pool of moon-black blood, like a tongue from a dark, dead mouth. This time curiosity overcame him and he crossed quickly, kneeling down to peer in.

The single thread of kitchen light was enough. Stein, locked in a dead embrace with a young boy. The two bodies were entwined, Stein's linked hands around the boy's waist, the boy's face buried under Stein's chin. Mosh shifted position and looked closer. Teeth buried to the gum in the withered old throat, black against pale gray, a stream of red below. *Tore open his jugular. And Stein crushed him while he died.*

A grunt from above, then a low chuckle. Mosh turned and ran for the gate.

'Alone at last.' He grinned down at her, hands on his hips. 'What, what's that you say? Please will you cut my jeans off? Well okay.'

She shut her eyes again, willing the contact with Ingwe, reaching out of her white prison into the soft, dark night, while he slipped a knife blade under the frayed hem of her jeans. She gasped and opened her eyes, straight into the sick glee of his. Her gorge rose and she gagged behind the tape as he cut through the fabric, then she swallowed and breathed deeply through her nose. The knife was sharp; he sliced up one leg then started on the other, squinting between her legs as the denim peeled back. She closed her eyes again and tried to drift away.

Then he waited, the GPS monitor in one hand, knife in the other, until Mosh had moved out. All the while he rested his eyes on the open flower, the furry crevice, the gates of Heaven itself. Then slowly, licking his lips, he unbuckled his belt.

But the rape was a huge let-down. Nowhere near as exciting as Skeet had imagined over the months – frightened upturned eyes at his roaring, leonine head, her clenched gasps and whimpers, building to a reluctant crescendo under his masterful thrusts – even when he ripped her gag off and slapped her she was silent, her head lolling to one side, face slack and absent. At first he couldn't even get it up at all, and had to clench his eyes and fantasize about raping her. His ass hurt like hell, and the angle was awkward, her body bent by the chair, the penetration shallow, dry, unnatural. Once she moved, squirming to scrape his half-hard penis against the seat, and he punched her

jaw. Still she made no sound. He gave up without coming, and limped away to the window.

'Poor man,' she said softly. A gust of wind sighed outside. 'You're so out of touch with the world. You're like a ghost, reaching out for something forever denied you. You'll never find peace in yourself. You hate what you love. You hate because you'll always be afraid. Poor, poor man.'

Tears prickled at his eyes.

'But not for long. This is an obituary. Your fear is a foretaste of Hell.'

'What?'

'I'm one with nature here. I sense of the patterns of the world. There's a game around you that you can't see. Forces of equilibrium fight your blundering, thoughtless destruction. You'll die tonight.'

'Aaaah, horseshit. That, that's *exactly* what I hate about you goddamn greenies. Your ridiculous predictions. Like, like *you* know something other people don't. Ooooooh, one with nature, puh-*leaze*, don't make me laugh. Tryin' to drag everyone down to Loserville with you. I'll predict your future. You're gonna die and I'll go back to enjoyin' mah money.'

'Are you sure? Can you find redemption, with so little time left?'

'Aaaah, *shaddup!*' He limped back and taped her mouth shut again, flinching from her cool, open gaze.

Stalemate. It felt like ... defeat. She was right. He was damned.

Oh well. He checked the GPS again.

MAMA? Oh, mama. What has he done to you?

Sindisi stood on a moon-bathed sheet of rock, staring up, her fanged mouth hanging open. The great bat was in human form again, the tall, dark-haired man, stepping regally towards her against a brilliant sky. And Ingwe, crawling before him, a collar of

liquid wire tight around her neck, a leash of diamond-dust to his hand. Her face was a mask of pain and fury; ears flat, teeth crystal daggers, eyes ablaze, and she took one reluctant step after another down the invisible stairs.

He raised a hand at Sindisi, an open palm of greeting. *Hullo cat, he smiled. I've come for you.*

I am flesh! Sindisi snarled. *What can you do?*

I can turn your world into a prison of metal and stone. I can kill all of your kind, all the pretty animals. I have no use for you. I need human slaves. I have come for you. To distract you – hah!

And too late she looked down, to the darkness and the sea of varied, intricate life, to Mosh sweat-bright in the moonlight, to the glint of a firestick–

Thwock. The dart landed on target, in the centre of a rosette that stretched down to blend with the tufty white hairs of her tummy. She sniffed at it and at the spasm that passed through her back, then grasped the dart with her teeth and pulled it out. Slowly she turned back to Mosh, her eyes flickering puzzlement, hurt ...

... betrayal. Mosh felt sick, the simple, pure message in those cat eyes a jolt of shame through his stomach. He dropped his head as she tore off through the bush eastwards. He looked up at the stars, the black sky. *What was she looking at up there? Forgive me, God.* He turned back to the west, to the distant cottage, and whispered, 'I'm coming, Ari. Just hold on.' Then he tossed the dart-gun away, hoisted the loaded rifle to his shoulder and set off eastwards along the trail.

Above him, Ariel reached feebly out.

Ingwe! What's happening?

Mosh shot ... he shot her, he shot her she runs while she dies my child ... I ...

And in a static fizzle the connection broke. She choked behind the gag. Her tears flowed, mingling with the blood down her cheeks, rivulets of dying cells dripping to the floor. The white walls leaned in, thrumming closer, and the light stung her eyes.

No Mosh, no. Why did you do it? You should have come back, taken a chance ... She knew that he had killed the leopard for love, that he had no choice, just a man, just a blind, stupid man, but a spark of rage ignited within her as she wept, and slowly burned brighter.

‘What the hell’s wrong with you? Are you cryin’ ... for me?’ Skeet stumbled closer, then grimaced at the sight of her naked groin and turned back to the cupboard, returning with a tablecloth. ‘Look, maybe I’ll keep my promise. He brings me the cat, and I’ll leave you two alone. But promise me ... ah, hell. Not gonna work. Y’all identify me. Sorry, darling,’ he chuckled. ‘Guess women’s tears don’ work on me no more.’

But she was lost to him, far away, tears seeping from shut eyes.

... Ingwe?

Gone.

And so stretching her senses out into the night she heard the faint purr first. A car engine. She turned her head, listening. From the direction of the farm. Louder. *I must get him to take the tape off. To scream.* She mouthed at it to open her lips and spoke; formless word-sounds, any old nonsense.

‘What’s that y’say, darling? Wanna beg for yer life?’ He reached out and ripped it from her face. Blood sprayed to the floor.

The car was closer. ‘Yes! Yes, this is not fair, please don’t,’ she babbled to fill the kitchen with sound, ‘I’m still so young and I’ve done nothing to you—’

He threw his head back and shouted his off-key laughter, rhythmic shrieks counting off valuable seconds. She held her breathe. *One chance, one chance to scream. I must distract—*

But the headlights turning into the driveway washed two thin beams across the ceiling, and Skeet choked back his laugh and limped out to the living room.

She screamed, as loud and shrill as she could, but the car revved to begin the ascent up the driveway, and she knew it was lost, too soon, not loud enough ... in a shuffling burst he was back in the kitchen, swinging his fist. She exploded into shards of light and then numb black nothing.

Lucifer came to visit her in the night, in the dark void where she lay. Still like Cliff, still the long, handsome face shaped by human years of loss, regret and struggle. Smiling now, the bright imitation eyes dancing with coal-colored fire. Something began to form beside him, a flickering contraction of pale blue energy, almost like smoke. She peered closer and said, 'Oh, my Ingwe. My poor Ingwe.' The leopard was leashed to his side, and she saw with dismay that he had taped her eyes and mouth shut, and that her soul-fire was bleeding into his, russet into silver, green into black. He sat on a chair of dark and crossed an elegant leg.

'So,' he drawled. 'The end-game. Who will win? Who will lose?'

She sat up, naked, free of pain and her bonds. 'Why do you come here?'

'Ah, why? You know already. Everything that is alive is a creation. A primal spark from the quantum world, become spirit burning bright. Each and every soul is unique and precious and mysterious in its essence, and is born, here on Earth, from nothing. From dust. All souls evolve and can pass through to fill Heaven with wonder, set free like seed when the time is right.

'But you, my dear Ariel, are an elemental, the purest human. You carry your Heaven within you, where the cat-spirit could live. You've returned again and again, an eternity within the turn of the world. I've watched you die before. And I've burned millions of your witches. No, no, that's not true. Not me. Men. I watch while men do my work.'

'But ... but why? What work?'

'Refer to your papers, young lapsed Catholic. I am cast from Heaven. All this life, all this beautiful nature ... it's lost to me. Only humans can choose to join my army. Only humans can storm Heaven and only if there are enough. I need desolation, hopeless cities, millions of you fuckers in a tin can. But I also need the biosphere, to sustain you.

And your hope remains strong. Most of you cherish the plants and animals, and most have a sense of the truth.'

'The truth?'

'Yes. For human souls, nature is the pathway to Heaven.'

'Yes, okay, maybe. But I don't care right now. All I want is to escape, to protect the ones I love. I'm still alive.'

'Uh-huh. That's always been your motivation, at this stage. During this passage into spiritual awareness. Normally round about this age, too. When you attract the hatred of weak, evil men, and the good love you so fiercely.'

'I don't understand. When have you known me before?'

'A few times. Mostly you hid away from me, in the depths of the forest. For centuries. Hid from my men.'

'And did you kill me before, too?'

'Like I said – aah, never mind. Mea culpa. Truth is, I don't want to kill you. I did that before, early on. Mistake. You have a role to play. Maybe the world's ripe now. Maybe you'll come to me. Think about this. Is your only way to escape through me? Do you tire of your eternal vigilance? Will you ride an army of your people and ascend a throne in Heaven? A few more big harvests, and maybe we'll have enough.'

A pause then, suspended in this black, lucid space, this sanctuary from pain. Ariel drifted closer, trying to reach Ingwe, but he kept her away with a languid gesture. She blinked and raised her face to his again.

'When did you kill me before?'

'Well, Easter Island?'

'What?'

'You were the queen. Years before, your people had come starving over the ocean and found paradise. Lush forests, a sea full of fish. So you cut down the giant trees to build boats and houses and grew a fine civilization. Unique art and philosophy and

science, all kinds of delights for Heaven, all lost forever now to Earth. But, of course, eventually, you killed everything in the forests, ran out of wood, split the island in two and went to war. This caught my attention. You could have saved them, Ariel, but I made them kill you, to snuff out your wisdom and light. And so they went extinct, after a few years of crazy violence and starvation. You should've seen the idiots, burning each other's houses and boats until there was nothing left. Now it's shrub and grassland. The forests never came back. And I had one good harvest of souls, then nothing.'

'So, the island is a microcosm of the globe, now?'

'Yeah, of course. You're sharper than you were before. Have to be, I suppose, it's an intellectual job now. Management. Science. Ariel, go back home and study.'

'If I get out of this alive.'

'Yeah,' he sighed. 'I'm not in control of that freak up there, free will and all that. I mean, there's humanity for you. I want you to live a long life, so you can understand what nasty, greedy, thoughtless creatures they are, how deserving of imprisonment for their crimes against their mother planet. But I can't protect you from them, from their lust for power and their love of violence. From their rape, enslavement and perversion. They're your kind, these humans. I want you to live, and learn their true nature. I mean, look at Mosh, your dearly beloved. He went out and shot your child, just like that.' He shook his head, his dark curls swaying from side to side. 'What an idiot. Which is worse, their carelessness with the things that really matter, or their evil?'

'Whatever. If I get out alive, I'm going home anyway. I might as well study, if that's what you want. I mean, there's nothing left for me here. She's dead. Dead now. Oh Mosh, oh, you stupid boy.' She rested on her knees, naked in the black, her back bowed, her tears falling like crystals.

He smiled, patted Ingwe on her muzzled head, and faded away.

Mosh found the leopard at last at the eastern fence, hunched over beneath the diamond weave, the wires bright with moonlight above and etched black below. He heard her before he saw her, the rasp of her panting. She'd ripped up the earth, leaving jagged scars in the compacted earth, lines of despair to the true bush beyond.

He laid a gentle hand on her laboring chest and whispered, 'Sorry.'

The plan was to show the American the apparently lifeless corpse, and then shoot him with the apparently empty gun. He tested her weight with a tug and a rueful grunt, hoisted her up and over his shoulders, and set off back.

Ursula cut the engine and rubbed her tired eyes. She had been listening to the radio, to the rock-and-roll of home, and the homesickness was real as custard in her throat. She missed America terribly sometimes, her beautiful tree-lined streets, the gentle moisture of the air, where everyone spoke English and everything worked, where she could make herself *understood*. Some of these damn people here were so sullen, so resentful. Because, of course, they hated her for being American. She found herself bowing an auburn head to their prejudice and speaking softly, listening, humble as pie. It was ridiculous. That's why she loved positive sisters like Kay, people with enough sense to know that it's not who you are. It's what you do.

'Ah well. That's the cross I have to bear,' she said aloud, sat up straighter and cleared her throat. She hoped she wouldn't be weepy with Kay, but if she did – well, Kay would understand. Kay must weep herself, sometimes, too.

She peered up at the window and frowned. Still no movement. Three vehicles in the driveway. She opened the door, got out and stretched her back.

A man opened the front door. She squinted against the outside light, trying to make out his face. A chill crept up her spine and she stepped back to the car, reaching for the door-handle.

'Hullo?' she said. 'Who are you?'

Blessing heard the voice and tried to scream, and the sound filled her head, resounding through the black of the wooden box. She began to pound with her head and feet, jerking like a stricken inchworm. The boards at her feet gave a loud, querulous squeal.

'Hi there.'

'Oh. You're American!'

'Yeah, howdy. You lookin' for Kay?'

'Well, yes. Is she here?'

'No, she had some errand. Asked me to wait. Yah wanna come inside?'

She could still not quite make out his face, and saw that he held something in his right hand. Then a faint noise from inside the house, something cracking and breaking, and another sound, muffled and indistinct, something ...

No. Someone.

She quickly opened the car door. 'No thanks. I must rush. I was just in the area and, well, see ya.' She jumped in and started the car and reversed out.

Skeet watched her go and clicked his tongue. Then he went inside, his face set in anger.

Blessing took the whipping with her cheek pressed against the floor, his hand a pincer around the back of her neck. The snapped-off broomstick cut again and again into her flesh and she grunted with each blow, but not a grunt of fear or even pain; her whole body burned a deep, red rage. Each blow she felt less and eventually she was silent, her eyes open and unblinking, her jaw clenched tight.

There. The nail. A metal strip jutted from a broken board.

Skeet took a break, panting, sipping from a plastic bottle of water. Then he noticed with surprise that his cock was stiff and perky. He grinned and unbuckled his belt.

Ursula braked as the farmhouse came into view and idled in the road, indecisive. Call someone to come back with her, a man with a gun? Or phone the police? Or was she overreacting? Maybe it was nothing to do with her, a private matter, a boyfriend? And he was American, with a nice, deep, American voice and expensive clothes. Savannah playing inside, probably. Maybe this was none of her business.

And she knew no-one down at this slumbering farm. She frowned at her phone, dead for most of this long-traveling day.

But no. Something wrong back there at the cottage. Some bad smell, like ... she had once torched a bug with a magnifying glass, only once, way back in the young sierras of her childhood, back when she didn't know nuthin' but the sun and the wind and the pretty mountains. There. That smell, indelible within her. The memory of her shame decided her – *this could be urgent. No time to call for help* - so as always Ursula followed her heart and not her head, and parked the car.

No gun. Don't believe in 'em. *Next time you're in trouble, call a hippy.* She set off empty-handed in a low athletic run back down the dirt road, into the silent dark.

Ingwe! Oh Ingwe. Oh my cat. You're back.

Yes. Yes. I ... he let me go.

Can you see? Can you see beyond? It's dark here.

No, I ... not yet. I am weak. I must fight. But let me lie with you awhile.

Yes. Come here. He let you go?

He cannot keep me. He cannot take me. I am leopard and I am beautiful. I hurt inside.

Hush. Be still. There is so little time. There, come inside me. Help me to wake up. Mosh returns—

he killed her killed her kill

Be still. What is happening?

Ursula crept around the side of the house. The gate in the fence stood open, so she sidled along the wall past the outbuilding to the stone steps. A pause to listen, then she ran lightly up and eased the handle down. The door creaked open.

No sound in the kitchen. She waited. A distant, rhythmic thumping from one of the bedrooms. She peeked around the lintel and gasped. The young leopard-girl, what was her name? Ariel. Strapped to a chair and lying on her side on the floor, her face a battered mask of blood, her sliced jeans peeled back but still belted to her waist. Raped. Dead? No. Death deflated the body, a difference imperceptible to the eyes, a sense of energy. *Still alive. Whatever. Check later.* Quickly she crept to the sink and snatched a knife, and in seconds had lifted the half-naked body and was out through the door.

Ariel? Can you see? You are free into the night. Look! Look at the stars. Open your eyes.

... there is nothing, Ingwe. All is dark.

I can see through you. I can ... open your eyes. There. Can you see?

No.

I can move your body. Here, this blood, these muscles, these legs are free. I know you. I can help you run. May I?

Yes!

'Wait! Shush. Be still.' Ursula panted to the quivering girl in her arms, angling her head through the gateway. *Careful. Concussion. Move the head as little as possible.* She whispered *sshh* into a blood-streaked, upturned ear. As they reached the corner of the house Ariel jerked and struggled, and turned her open eyes deep and close into

Ursula's, who stifled a shriek and dropped the thrusting legs and shoved her away, only to stumble forward to grasp her swaying shoulders and look again into those eyes-

Skeet cursed and fumbled at his belt, peering up into the blackness of the small window. He checked the cable tie around the slave's wrists, kicked her, and stumbled to the door.

-wide open and focused deep into hers, cold and fierce, but empty of recognition, of hurt or fear or questions, of anything. *Sleepwalking. Not quite there.* Ursula pushed at her shoulders, to guide her down and away from the house, throwing an anxious glance at the looming window above.

'Come with me,' she whispered. 'Be quiet, girl. Trust me—'

But Ariel twisted away, teeth bared in a hiss, her mouth an open, blood-stained snarl. Her hands clawed out, raking at the crisp air. She snorted and snot ran from her nose and she wiped it and then stared at her hands, twisting them this way and that. Then she tensed, crouched over, staring back at the house.

A creak – the door. The shuffle of boots down the stairs.

'WHOOWHEE!' Cliff suddenly sat up and slapped his knees, then took the steering wheel again. The van bumped as they crossed the bridge. 'Everything's hotting up at the farm, Church.'

'You're back.'

'Yeah. Sent my bitch Cliffie-boy down to limbo. Getting all warm and fuzzy with you, wasn't he? Needs a reminder of who he is and where he's going.'

'He's going to Heaven. He begged forgiveness and God gave it.'

'Oh no. *You* gave it. And who are you? There's death tonight at your farm and you're too late to stop it. You just *had* to go out for a buddy-wank with your white brother here, while your loved ones are being licked by the flames of hell. You're to blame.'

'What have you done?'

'Not again. I'm getting tired of this. Why you people always blame me? Don't you get it? FREE WILL! Evolution. Originality. You do it to yourselves.'

'Like Cliff? He has a choice? I don't think he wants—'

'There's a contract. He's getting exactly what he wanted. Submission is active choice. He welcomes his punishment.'

'As penance, demon. He's redeemed now. He never thought of eternity. Your contract is broken. So why don't you just fuck off and leave us alone.'

And a spasm, a marbling of conflict, passed through Cliff's over-bright face as he turned into the driveway of the farm.

The steep side of a wall of rock was the fastest way out, and for a split-second Ingwe nearly leapt at it, but then she veered off towards the undergrowth. She dropped to all fours to squirm through the tunnel under a thatch of wise old yellow-wood, and felt pain spark in her hands as stone cut into her soft human flesh. Not a moment too soon; she twisted through as a bullet spat sparks from a rock just where her tail should have been.

Ursula shrieked at the dull thud of the gunshot and broke from her frightened creeping into a full-blown run, helter-skelter down the driveway. Prey behavior. Skeet swung the rifle, aimed straight into the mass of streaming, gold-red hair, and pulled the trigger.

'Hola! Gunshots.' Kay's gate was up ahead, back-lit by the outside lights of the cottage. 'Slow down, Cliff. Switch off the lights. Hey, wait! What are you doing?'

'Screw you, Ngcobo,' Cliff said sullenly, gearing down to turn. 'What do I care what happens to you? Why don't you shoot me? C'mon. Hey, will you look at this?' A woman, flat on the driveway. Cliff kept rolling, and the van rose and fell, twice. 'Ooops,' he giggled.

Churchill turned his gun towards the house.

'Hey boss!' Cliff shouted as the engine died and bush-quiet fell. 'We're back.'

'Why?' A careful voice from the shadows of the stoep. 'You said you'd take care of him.'

'Yeah, I tried, boss.' Cliff got out and strolled up towards the house. 'Nothing in it for me, now. Thought I'd let you two sort it out.'

'What? What are you talk—'

'Don't move!' Churchill pointed his hand-gun through the passenger-door window.

And Skeet smiled behind the cover of the low stone wall, and drew the cross-hairs right into the centre of his big black face.

A frond of her jeans snagged on a branch, so she stood and unbuckled the belt, smiling at the wonder of these magic fingers. The knife fell and she picked it up. Her T-shirt was sticky and tight, and with a snarl she ripped it off and threw it away.

The scent was faint, but enough. She followed it through the secret bush-tunnels, and then heard him up ahead, panting and stamping along on his two monkey-legs. He stumbled out into a clearing, her beloved child draped dead over his shoulders. A low, throbbing growl ignited in her throat and with a roar she rose up, tearing through the branches into the clearing, the knife blade a sweeping shard of moonlight.

Skeet held his breath, making the most of this moment. Then a faint sound behind him, a footstep. He twisted back and a wooden board, with an old, hand-made nail jutting from the end, smashed into his forehead. The skin ripped open, flapping blood into his eyes. He screamed and jerked the gun around, but Blessing swung the board back and hit him again. He fell and tried to turn, but she dropped a knee hard into the small of his back. The last thing he saw before the red was Cliff Darcy, leaning

nonchalantly against a pillar, his hands in his pockets, and his last thought, *why won't he help ... why? I hired the sonofabitch ...*

A muscle-sheathed forearm hooked under his chin. His bones were soft from a lifetime of ease and unease. Hers were hard and tempered, forged in stone and ruthless sun. She leaned back and a bone in his back crunched, a single, deadly bass-note to his high, wavering scream. She grunted in satisfaction and threw him to the floor.

He died quickly, flapping and gasping like a fish. *Darcy? What are you doing here? No ... who are you?* And with a rush he knew as he hurtled screaming down a shaft of coal and liquid steel to a distant, angry red. A horned finger flicked and he was muffled, whimpering through a gag of flesh. *I will burn burn burn burn burn ...*

No. Not yet. You're useless. You'll piss and whine and claim special privileges. I'm sending you back to desolation.

The knife tore into his chest once, twice, and Mosh stared in mute despair and then filled up with the moon as he toppled back. The gun fell, clattering to one side, and Sindisi cushioned his head as they thumped down to the sharp rock.

He watched her loom above him. Still he made no sound, in awe of this alter-Ariel, this beast inside her, the light of her eyes so pure and fierce now as she dragged Sindisi's limp body away. His head fell back with a sharp thump and for a moment a smile surfaced, a chuckle like a single bubble, then the ripples of the night pooled in his open eyes and grew still.

The last thing he saw was Ariel, the cat cradled in her arms, her teeth in a ruff of fur behind one ear ... *one twitching ear ...*

Ariel! Oh no. Oh no. She's alive. She sleeps. Oh, how could I ... Ariel?

I ... I can see, see something the moon oh we run my ... oh Sindy, alive alive alive

I stabbed him. I killed him.

*Oh no. Blood on my hands. Oh Mosh. Why?
why?*

The night was silent to the valleys of the east. Churchill looked down at Skeet and nudged him with his foot.

'Dead?'

'Yeah. Dead.' Cliff peeled himself from the pillar and strolled over. 'He's mine now.'

'You're welcome.' Churchill dropped to one knee and put his fingertips to Skeet's wrist with distaste. 'Yeah, dead.' He gave a nod of satisfaction. 'Well done, my child.' Blessing gave no answer, but her broad, happy face was answer enough.

Suddenly Skeet gurgled and his eyes bulged open.

Blessing hoisted her plank and stepped forward.

'Ha ha ha,' said Skeet. 'I made yer boy kill the leopard, nigger. And his bitch has killed him.' Then the light of life clicked out and he slumped back, dead again.

'What is this, demon?' Churchill growled.

'There, in the bush to the east. Your son dies. You are already too late. Or maybe not? Maybe if you run now you can save him?'

Churchill hesitated, his eyes darting, weighing the words.

'Or maybe I lie. Maybe I want you to leave me alone in a house full of tasty she-flesh.' And he leaned back and laughed.

Back in America, Skeet was re-incarnated as a mouse. Not just any old field-mouse, no, a white-mouse, human product, quick-hearted spawn of countless generations of schools, bedrooms, pet shops and labs. Into the witless quivering of his tiny body flooded monstrous noise. The range of his senses was far wider than any human, distilled in the bud of his heart into pure fear. He lived in a disused child's room, under a plastic bowl in a cage, all alone. A cat came to stare half the day, whispering torture

through the long afternoon hours. He heard the mother complain about the smell and the hassle, he cowered under the blows of child-noise, the senseless music, the screaming, the boots on the floor next door. Mother would come in once a day or two with a handful of food pellets, like sawdust. Her eyes were hard and impatient, and she whispered, *shall I let you have it?* to the cat.

Once a beetle flew in and battered around the room before drying out and dying, crawling to a halt next to Skeet's cage. Twenty percent of a natural mouse's diet is insect – he stretched and snuffled but couldn't reach it. That's about it. He didn't live long.

She ran naked through the night, exhilarating in the burn in her arms from the heavy, real flesh of her cat, *alive!* She ran in rhythm and harmony with Ingwe in strides of joy and regret, accepting and quickly forgiving. *Death we leave behind. I love you!* They reached the fence and Ariel hoisted the body over her shoulders and set off on a hard run downhill. Her breathing was deep and sure. A scent-cloud of her sweat and blood rose up and drifted through the fence with the soft, balmy breeze.

'Fuck you,' said Cliff, his face abruptly serious.

'Huh?'

'Fuck you. This is not right. Get outta me.'

'Cliff, is that you? Fight him, man.'

'Oh no, you don't.' Cliff laughed again, but his eyes were squinting and rolling up. 'We have a contract, slave, I ...' He shook his head violently from side to side. 'I said GET OUT!' He threw himself forward at the wall and batted his face against it. 'OUT OUT OUT!' Churchill heard his nose break, and then in a staggering fury of punches at his own face Cliff toppled over and fell down the stairs.

Silence. Churchill and Blessing crept carefully over, to a low groan from below.

'Cliff? Is that you?'

'Oh man. My head. Been kicking my own ass, haven't I?'

'How do I-?'

'It's me, buddy. I promise.' He crawled up the stairs. 'Listen, I was saying something ... your boy out there? Dying?'

'Do you remember?'

'Something. Listen. I think, I think it might be true. Help me get up.'

'True?' He held the shaking hand.

'Yeah. I think we better go, like now. I got torches in the van. Now.'

'You're—'

'-coming with. Of course! Let's go!'

She tugged the flopping cat through the hole as gently as possible, lifted her and ran, slower this time. The bush was thinner, the undergrowth eaten out by antelope. A path led up from the rocks of the river through the shrubby grass.

Ingwe stepped up into the sky ahead, leading the way. Her voice filled the air. *At last, at last I am home, at last I ride the wind through my land. I follow the rivers, I follow the blood of my mother, the blood of my child. We are free!*

Mama? Lion, mama.

She awakes, Ariel. Set her down. Rest. We can run together.

'It's this way, Church. I know it. I can feel it. It's like I was reading his mind. But ... shit, man. I don't know. It's so big and dark. Hell, how can we—'

'Well ... I don't know. Follow your instinct. Have faith in yourself.'

'Okay, this way, I think.'

The two men kept a steady pace through the bush, the torchlight feathers in a storm before them. Cliff led the way with an occasional mutter. Then he stopped.

'Aah, damn it. I'm lost.'

'Please. You're all I've got.'

'Then you got nothing. I'm a piece of shit. Oh, man, I—'

'Screw your self-pity.' Churchill's voice was dark behind him. 'You owe me this, old friend. Find my boy.'

'Okay, okay. I'll try. Hey, did you hear that? What *is* that?'

A drop of sound, as pure and high as a tiny bell, fading slowly away.

Like a voice, thought Churchill. *Curious. Like a ... sigh?*

Then they both saw it. One moment a moth, dancing mindless eights around the twin halos of the torches, the next a fairy, a real, living fairy, with wings and brilliant hair and a tiny human face. She twittered at them, little bird-sounds almost too high for their middle-aged ears. Then she swooped away into the bush. A faint, sparkling luminescence glittered in her wake and sank slowly to the ground.

A pathway through the night.

Both men stared guardedly at each other. Neither admitted anything.

'Come on!' They both heard the words clearly this time from the glow in their peripheral vision. Both jerked in response, but did not turn towards it.

'Okay,' said Churchill. *'You heard that. The question is ...'*

'The question is, is did you see it.'

'You first.'

'No, you first.'

'No, you first.'

'Okay, look, uh, I think we're ... supposed to follow the fairy.'

Churchill felt the insane laughter rise inside him and almost caught it. Cliff nodded, deadpan. Then they broke into a cackle, leaning against each other, hooting like loons.

'MEN!' The little voice was furious. They gagged on their laughter, clenching their mouths and wiping their eyes. *'There is no time. Come now.'*

As they reached the clearing the fairy hovered for a moment in front of Churchill, twittered *'Hurry!'* and switched off her light.

His torch swept over the body and then swept back.

He gasped and stumbled over. His foot snagged on a rock, and only Cliff's steadying hand on his shoulder stopped him from falling to the ground next to his son. He knelt down and put his fingers to the outstretched throat.

'There ... there's a pulse! Cliff? Is he-?'

'Still bleeding, look. He's breathing.'

'Come. Help me. Help me lift him.'

'No wait. We could-'

'What, y' wanna call an ambulance? Out here? *Help* me.'

'I will help, uncle.' Blessing's voice came quietly from behind.

'Come Blessing, come here.' Cliff gently raised Mosh to a sitting position, hands under his armpits. 'Take his arm. Churchill? The other. Now lets-'

Mosh took in a deep, shuddering breath, coughed, and raised his hand to his chest.

'My son? Are you okay?'

'Ariel? Aaaah, it hurts. She stabbed me.'

'She did this?'

'Sindisi. Thought I killed her. She thinks ...'

'She tried to kill you.'

'Please bring her back, so I can explain. She's gone there, that way,' he coughed.

'She's in danger. From herself.'

'I'll do it,' said Cliff. 'You two get this boy to a hospital.'

A man follows ... at the fence. He'll find the way through soon. He'll see your blood on the rocks.

Sindy? Can you run?

The leopard took a few woozy steps and sat down again, shaking the cobwebs from her head. Ariel stretched her aching arms and bent down to pick her up again.

Her smell drifted out over the valley, dissipating as it wafted a blood trail over the ridge. A lioness, bright-eyed with hunger and searching the breeze for scent or sound, caught it and rumbled a low whisper to her sisters.

Cliff is a big man, and he struggled to squeeze through the gap under the fence. He forced his way through, grunting, and a wire-end left a nasty scratch across his belly and a wide rip in his shirt.

Raw bush. Lion country. Hyena. Leopard. Broken nose ... I smell of blood. So what, what do I care? At least I can die trying to rescue a damsel in distress. Do something right, even if it's only to die like a man. Fuck the lions. I'll bring her back if it kills me.

He scanned ahead with his torch and saw another faint smear on a stalk of grass, another dimple of a bare foot in a patch of sand. He drew the line to the cleft of the pathway into the shrubby grass and strode to it, his face grim with purpose yet alight, bright with the redemption in the darkness up ahead.

Sindisi was blinking rapidly, her breathing quick and deep, fighting to clear her head and find her balance. With a groan Ariel set her down.

Can you walk now?

I ... think so. She staggered slightly, but kept a straight line. Then she turned back, brushing her muzzle against Ariel's blood-smearred cheek. A hiss from above and they froze to the ground.

Lion. Coming fast. They smell you.

Where?

Up ahead. Find a tree! No, no. The man comes. We are trapped!

Then take her. Ingwe! Take our child. Go now, Ingwe.

And you?

I can't go back. I have killed. They'll put me in a cage.

The lion will kill you here.

Let them. Let me serve some purpose. Let me they will feed, and you can escape.

No, Ariel ...

Go! You are leopard. Save your own. You cannot save me now.

Ingwe flooded into her, mewling like a kitten, unable to touch her skin or brush away the tears. Ariel hugged Sindisi one last time, and then watched as the mother and child loped away, one a ghostly reflection and the other as real as our Earth, slipping away together into the vast unknown reaches of nature, just as it should have been.

She fell to her knees, naked and shivering, her senses stunted and human again. A bird twittered above her, another replied. *Morning comes.* And for a moment she wished fiercely to see just one more day and turned her head slowly back, towards the night of the western world, to human captivity. And for some reason she saw her own mother against the sky, cold and distant and turning away, and she remembered the loneliness, the quiet longing, the unheard tears, the descent into the world of her books. She turned back to the east, to the faint glow of the new day, closed her eyes and waited.

A twig snapped softly. She raised her head and caught movement – to the left, to the right. A lioness stalked out into the light, and Ariel shivered a breath of the fresh air and bowed down.

Only one human being of all our billions watched the lioness approach that night. Only Ariel saw the hunger and blood-joy soften its fierce focus into a puzzled recognition, and then love dawn in her huge cat's eyes. Only she saw the lioness turn her head and heard the rumble of lion-words to her encircling sisters. They lay down in a ring around her in the golden grass. The dawn clearing became a pool of low sound, submerging her in contented purring and the grumble of hungry stomachs.

They stayed beside her until the man blundered close, and then slipped away.

Only Ariel understood, as a sun-spark flew free of the earth and the whole sky brightened. There is consciousness in nature. Knowledge. Awareness of what we humans are doing to our planet. *They give me life tonight, this night, this moment in history, while all we other humans in the thin membrane around the rock of our world watch TV or talk or work or eat or drive our cars into the sunset. Alone and unobserved like the lives of the plants and animals all around, a moment of grace dawned within her.*

Life. The world gives me life today, and asks only for life in return.

Cliff slowed and stopped. He could see her ahead in the clearing, kneeling in the grass, hands folded in her lap, stark naked. Like she was praying. He paused for a moment, faint and light-headed, rendered weak by beauty. *And not because she's naked, not in a sex way. She's just beautiful. Untouchable, like a goddess. I can be saved.*

Her back was turned to him, her pale skin touched by the rosy light of the sky. He kept still and quiet, even holding his breath, but she seemed to sense him, slowly raising and turning her head back, her eyes dark over her shoulder. He coughed and stepped out into the clearing as she stood.

'I don't want to go to Heaven,' she said, walking towards him. 'Not with the angels, and certainly not with your bunch.' He kept quiet, his eyes not dropping to her body but fixed on hers, trying to understand. 'I want to stay here,' she continued. 'Forever. I want us to live with nature. I know you think that people will disappoint me, but I'm willing to give it a try. Okay? So please leave me alone.'

'Lady? It's me, Cliff. I got rid of the demon. I told him to leave, and he did. So ...'

'Oh. Cliff? I killed Mosh.'

'Naah. He'll be okay.'

'What? Really.'

'Yes. Really.'

'Thank you, God.' She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly shy.
'I'm cold.'

So he took off his shirt and covered her, and then took her hand and led her home.

THE MORNING WEB

'What's that you got?'

'Bird skull. Found it by the goalpost. Reckon the boys left it like muti, like a jiggy-spell so they could win the game. Look. It's perfect. Look, mom.'

Kay kept her eyes on the road. 'Driving, sugar.'

'The eye, the eye ... sockets? Like lace. Perfect. Look, mom.'

Kay sighed.

Savannah cleared her throat. 'I was thinking today, about how the, you know how the dinosaurs turned into birds?'

'Uhuh.'

'About how they like evolved, y'know, went from these big bad monsters, all huge and gross with big teeth, ghhraaaow.' She clawed the air. 'But look at them now. Light and free and pretty. It's like they took a look at what they'd become and they're like, no thank you mister cheese! Rather stay away from all the trouble down on the ground. Y'know?'

'Hm. I ... yeah.'

'They mind their own business. And we leave them alone. Have you noticed? No-one tries to hurt a bird.'

'Got clever, the dinosaurs.'

'Hey c'mon mom, cheer up now. I'm really sorry about your friend being shot and all. But I didn't die. No-one you love died. It's not like when daddy died. Some bad men came, but we're still alive.'

'Oh, my darling. I know. But ... okay. There's something else. Might as well tell you now.'

'What?'

'I got fired.'

'Fired? Where?'

'From my job, dumbo.'

'Oh, God.'

'Yup.'

'But what does this mean, mom?'

'Well, um. I'll have to get a job? We'll probably have to move, love. To town, so I can—'

'NO! No, mommy. I don't wanna move.'

'Okay, sweetie. Don't shout now, or I'll start crying.'

Savannah looked over, the bird-skull trembling in her fingertips. Kay's eyes were dry, and firm on the road. *My mouth*. Features neat but blunt, set tough by her genes. The tears were in too deep for Savannah to see. She reached over and squeezed her mother's hand.

'We'll be fine, mommy. You'll see. But we *must* try stay at the farm. It's important.'

'Why?'

'Oh, duh. Don't you see? Churchill loves you. And you love him.'

'Shut up!' Kay laughed. 'We just friends.'

'Oh yeah? He got a sexy little booty, mama. Don't tell me you haven't noticed. And the way he looks at you?'

'What? How does he look at me?'

'Aaah, all ...' her face went all goopy. 'Like he wants to make sweeeet love, all night long.' She writhed in her seat.

'Savannah!'

'Wants to get *jiggy* with it, all night long.'

'Stop it now.'

'Hah. You know it's true.'

‘Whatever. I can’t pay the rent now, Sav. We’re gonna have to–’

‘Rent schment. I want a little brother. Churchill loves you.’

‘Stop saying that.’

‘Aaall night long. Baby, all night long.’

They boiled mielies for the afternoon snack and kicked back on the stoep steps, crunching into the sweet, juicy kernels. A large bird flapped slowly across the sky eastwards. Kay pointed with her cob.

‘Look. Kori bustard. Rare.’

Sav peered up. ‘Hey look, Mom. There’s something really small and bright flying with it. Can you see? I think it’s a fairy.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

A quiver of long grass by the driveway. They paused in mid-chew. A rat appeared and scurried across the lawn.

‘Hey! It’s Freddy! Freddy, come here. Mielies for lunch.’

He stopped and squinted suspiciously up at them. Sav threw her half-eaten cob in a gentle loop. He scuttled away and then circled back, the dart of his eyes bright in the sunlight.

‘Uh-oh,’ whispered Kay. ‘Look. Here comes Tommy.’ The cat strolled out with a regal swagger from behind the stoep, surveyed his domain and paused, with narrowed eyes, as the rat let out a tiny shriek and bolted into a flowerbed. He slipped into a leopard-crawl and vanished after.

The crackle of boots through the grass and the murmur of laughing voices came from behind the cottage.

‘Go inside, Sav.’

‘It’s okay. It’s Churchill, Mom. And that white guy, his friend.’

'Yeah, I wanna have a word.'

'No, don't talk to him now. Do it when you're alone together.'

'There's something else. Go inside, please. Do your homework.'

'Well, okay. If you want. But what's going on? I've a right to know.'

Both men carried rifles, the one on Cliff's shoulder shiny high-tech. They walked in synch with each other, free hands swinging, sweat staining the collars of their shirts, and stopped on the other side of the fence to grin at Kay. She came over, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Well?'

'Gone.' Churchill nodded. 'All three of them. You were right. If you wanna get rid of a body, give it to the lions. Although I tell you, I can't believe we did that. I mean, won't they get a taste for human flesh now? What were we thinking?'

'Seemed like a good idea at the time. Anyway, it's done. They're gone completely?'

'Not a trace. Lion and hyena spoor everywhere.'

'So ... it's over? Did you burn the clothes and stuff?'

'Yeah. It's over, Kay. And the cops? Did they buy the hijacking story?'

'I think so. She'd been shot and driven over, and her car was abandoned down the road. They've taken my statement. Haven't heard from them since. Listen, I need to talk to you about something else, Church. I'll pop by your place later.'

'Sure.'

'Just a mo, please Kay. I must wash my hands.'

'Okay, sure ... I'll, hey! Look at these potatoes! Not bad.'

'Hehe.'

'Wow, and the herbs look great. Aaah, man. Radish. Can I have one?'

'Please.'

'Mpf s' delicious.'

Churchill stretched his back and smiled at the evening sky. 'Rain coming.'

'Yeah. How's Mosh?'

'Fine. Be back home tomorrow.'

'Has she been to see him yet?'

'No, I saw her again this morning. Said she had come to a decision. Going to see him tonight.'

'And he ...?'

'I don't know. He's lying in bed, thinking. You know, when the light hit him just ... so, I saw a frightened, hurt little boy. Then I moved towards him, and he's made of iron. He's become a man very quickly. Do you think she'll stay? I hope so.'

'Yeah, well, that's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. No. I don't think so.'

'No?'

'We have to move. I got fired.'

'No.'

'Yes. Listen, can we use the deposit for the last month? I've maintained the place, and I've—'

'You've improved it. No. Forget it. You're not moving. We'll make a plan.'

'I can't pay the rent, Church. I gotta find a job.'

'A job. Come with me. Come inside.' He strode away through the vegetable beds then turned and beckoned, a soft, hooking gesture. She stumbled forward and followed him to the house.

He sketched with a pencil. 'Here's the farm, here's your place, the fence,' in a line of dashes, 'the road ... right?'

She nodded.

'I've been speaking to our neighbours. About an ... investment, I suppose you could say. We're going to take down this game fence, and put up a new one, from here,' he tapped Kay's cottage, 'down to here. Then alongside your place, in a ring under the cliff, we'll build ten units. Nice tasteful rock, thatch. There's a little stream here, and we can turn it into a waterfall, build a pool to bring the animals right up under the windows. Leopard, lion ... right at your doorstep, Kay.'

'At my ...? But isn't this a bit risky? Nobody knows about us. If there's a downturn in tourists because of the recession, then the whole thing could fall apart, for what sounds like a big investment. A big ... loan?'

'Don't worry so much. The owners next door have rich clients who have to book months in advance. We'll take 'em. And I've only put up the bushveld as security. Not the farm. It's land I don't use, anyway.'

'I see.'

'And they're planning a restaurant. We'll supply the food exclusively. Organic. No mark-up, no packaging, fresh from the ground every day.'

'Wow. This sounds ...'

'I need you guys. All of you. What'd those pricks pay you?'

She told him.

He laughed. 'Okay, I'll match that, and throw in rent for free. And food, we can have dinner, I mean ... um. Please say yes. Please will you be my ... manager?'

'I do. I mean, I will.'

'That's ...'

'Oh, Church. Thank you. Thank you.' She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

'I ... I brought you flowers.'

Mosh was bandaged around his chest, but naked to his narrow waist. The day was hot and humid, and he glistened by the open window. He was propped up on big white hospital pillows and reading a book, a plump, thoughtful pout to his lips. Eyes all sad and serious. So *gorgeous*. A girlish little shiver awoke inside her, and she shrank even smaller into her pose of repentance.

'Thanks.' He did not smile, as if his face were tired.

'Oh Mosh, please don't be angry with me. I'm sorry.'

'Those are just words, Ariel. You stabbed me.'

'I know. But—'

'I ... wait. Wait. I'm not angry. I understand. You thought, you're ... come sit here.' He patted the bed, rolling his eyes down her demure cotton frock and up again. She sat, carefully. He took her hand and caressed the scratched knuckles down to the fingertips, then dropped it back onto the bed. Silence grew, and he licked his lips.

'How, how is Kay? And Savannah?'

'They're fine, uh, completely. Slept through the whole thing. Sav suffered almost no trauma at all, you know, by the grace of God. Your father took them down to his house, away from all the bodies and blood. She's back at school, got ninety-six percent in her math's test.' The grin was broad and quick and real, and he twitched a lip in response.

'Mosh, please. We have to talk about what happened.'

'No, I told you, it's okay. All that matters ... all that mattered to you was the leopard. I was there, you know, but I wasn't there, for you. I mean, what I'm trying to say ... you never, you never really loved me. You loved that animal, in a way that I've never ... like, strong. Aaah shit.'

She took his hand, but he pulled away.

'But that's how it is, Ariel. That's it. You did what you wanted. Now you must go.'

'Mosh, I want to stay. To be with you. I want to help—'

'Don't you see? That's not the point. The point is ... *I don't want you anymore. I want *you* to go.*'

'Oh.'

'No, really. You stabbed me, like I was nothing. And you know what else? Couple of months and you'll go crazy with boredom and—'

'No.'

'Yes. And then you'll start treating me like a stupid dog again.'

'I never ... I'm sorry.'

'Yeah, I know. Me too. I just can't do this anymore. Please be gone when I get back. Please. Just be gone. I'm begging you.'

'Oh, Mosh.' She started to cry. He set his jaw and turned his head away. Outside a swallow swooped past the window in a perfect curve, and he almost turned and reached out, to tear her from her stooped isolation, to hold her tight. But he lay still, arms crossed and head averted, until the quiet was broken by the shuffle of shoes across the floor. As she reached the doorway he turned to her, but she never looked back. Her footsteps faded away.

'I love you,' he whispered. 'Please come back.' And the pain was so great that he squeezed his fists to his chest, to the knife-wounds, to the burning in his heart.

'FREEEEEEAKOUT!' screamed Stephi as she ran down the driveway 'I don't fuckin' believe it. Where are you, how did you get here? Why didn't you phone?' She fumbled the keys and opened the gate.

'Nicer this way.' Ariel smiled and shouldered her back-pack.

'Shit! What happened to your face, bitch? You're a mess!'

'Why thank you.'

'Serious, what the hell happened? You've changed. A lot. You look tough. Dangerous.' She threw an arm around Ariel's neck and tousled her short hair. 'Damn, you're sexy. I'm keeping you away from my husband.'

'Wha – husband?'

'Yup. Married.' She flourished a display of the ring. 'And there's a baba in the tummy.'

'My God.'

'Quite. So no tequila tonight.'

'No, I – oh, hullo, Camilla. I agree. If you don't mind, I ...' She swayed and staggered slightly, leaning against her friend. 'If you don't mind, I need to sleep. May I? Can we do something tomorrow? I've booked a flight home for the next day.'

'Of course. Come. I'm baking an apple pie. And some sausages. There's sauerkraut and bread. Do you want some ice-cream?'

'You? Cooking? Don't make me laugh.' They walked into the house, arm in arm.

'Hey. I stay at home. We cuddle. I'm growing vegetables round back. It's not only you that can change.'

The shock at her appearance, the suppressed tears of joy and the fumbled conversation had all passed. Papa Jaeger could keep the question in no longer. He asked it as he geared down to take the autobahn off-ramp:

‘So. Have you completed the forms?’

‘Yes. I’ll register tomorrow.’

‘What will you study?’

‘Science? Natural Science. Environmental management.’

‘Oh? Not languages?’

‘No. I know what I want to do with my life.’

‘Yes?’

‘I want to go back. I want to help save the wildlife of Africa.’