

**The Memory Altar**

Comprising:

Part A: Thesis

Part B: Portfolio

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

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## Abstract

My thesis is a novella that casts a sideways glance at the real world that at times seems stranger than fiction. The novella is written as a work of realistic fiction, with a plot, characters, timelines and location placed in present time, reflecting real current events. My work is strongly influenced by writers such as Ivan Vladislavić whose *Portrait with Keys* uses a slice of life narrative voice that observes overlays of public and private realities; Marguerite Duras' use of cinematic storytelling and deeply personal exposure in *The Lover* and Yann Andréa Steiner; Kate Zambreno's depiction of inner chaos against the chaos of an anonymous city in *Green Girl*; Otessa Moshfegh who makes the minutiae of the day-to-day seem significant in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; and Samuel Beckett's finely crafted streams of consciousness, in his works of prose and drama, revealing the intimate perspectives of insiders.

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## The Memory Altar

### PART ONE

#### 1

*“...As a consequence, the National Coronavirus Command Council has decided to enforce a nation-wide lockdown for 21 days with effect from midnight on Thursday 26 March. This is a decisive measure to save millions of South Africans from infection and save the lives of hundreds of thousands of people....”*

Lily stabs the buttons on the card machine and holds it out towards the waitress, who’s as focused as Lily on the TV screen above the bar counter.

“Jirre man. Twenty one days without going anywhere. Not that there’s ever anywhere to go in this place. And no jobs. Jussus,” says the waitress, tearing off the slip from the machine and turning to process another table of departing guests.

The advantage of living in a small village at the end of the road in the middle of nowhere is that you can pretend you don’t live anywhere connected to what you used to know as the real world. Until now, Lily has been able to ignore, or at least able to escape, the language that has pervaded the news since December, while the coronavirus was battering shores abroad. The language of the unknown unknowns, unprecedented times and uncharted territory, and let’s stand together and together we can do more, and all that other stuff you usually only hear in times of crisis, war or national elections.

Today’s news is different. In a week’s time, South Africa shuts down for nearly a month in a bid to stem the advancing tide of the coronavirus. This is News, capital N. Lily watches the broadcast for a while, listening to President Cyril Ramaphosa talking about alcohol bans, cigarette bans, exercise bans, travel bans, shopping bans, beach bans, curfews. Talking about masks and sanitisers, pandemics and global health concerns, essential workers and non-essential everything else.

In her early career as a writer for development NGOs, Lily had been an avid follower of current affairs. That was her first life, before opting to be a full-time a mum to Rosie and wife to Jonathan. That life, when she still had a living child and a not-yet ex-husband seems an aeon before today, in her third life as a middle-aged divorcee in small-town South Africa. Before she found the house at the end of her own personal Road to Mecca, to quote the title of that famous Athol Fugard play which put this village, Nieu Bethesda, in lights on Broadway stage.

There is a lot to do. She packs her book, keys and phone into her bag and walks towards the general store. The village is busier than usual for a Saturday in March. She stands in the middle of the main road, the road that passes the Owl House, the place that put this Mecca on the map. She scans the activity. Over there, at The Outsiders Backpacker's, two cars are being packed up. At the Ibis Lounge, while she was finishing her granola, the family who she saw checking in for a week two days ago is checking out. They'd talked briefly, then, in the way she's getting used to in this small village. Newcomers are treated with polite curiosity. Where are you from? How long are you here? Where are you going next? According to the waitress, now concerned that her wages and tips are fleeing with the tourists, they've secured a flight back to Germany. Nieu Bethesda is scared. What now? What next? What do we know?

It is a dusty day. Summer is holding on by its fingertips. Autumn is moving in. The sun and dry earth are battling it out, and Lily feels it in the heat under her sandals. She walks around the corner and joins the queue at the village's only store to pick up some provisions. It's doing a roaring trade with her neighbours and strangers. Inside, Lily pushes through the small crowd, doing mental calculations of what she has at home and what she'll need during the lockdown. So many unknown unknowns. These truly are unprecedented times. But if there's one thing Lily is, it's resourceful. Between her vegetable patch and freezer full of the last grocery order delivered last week, in a more familiar time, she figures she should be fine — food-wise, anyway. As for the rest, well, who knows?

Back home, Lily unpacks the grocery bags, filling the cupboards. She's bought ingredients rather than whole products. More versatility that way. She's a passable cook and a fair baker; knows how to navigate a recipe. Also, when better to nurture the vegetable patch in the back garden than 21 days of going nowhere/doing nothing/seeing no-one? She decants flour, lentils, split peas, beans. Brown, castor and icing sugar. Raisins, sultanas, cranberries, other dried fruit. And so on. Ritualistic tasks her therapist encouraged her to indulge in as a grounding mechanism, like

a domestic-scale stress ball. Anything to quell the panic attacks that came at regular intervals after Rosie died. Mostly, it works.

She transfers her mental to-do list to a scrap of paper. Another coping mechanism — writing lists to create boundaries for living. She makes calls to Johanna Malgas, her housekeeper, and Johanna's husband Simeon, who works in Lily's garden. Don't worry, she tells them, I will continue to pay you during lockdown. She checks in with the church warden. Yes, there'll be a feeding scheme. Yes, she'll register to support in any way. She calls her parents, calls her sisters. All fine so far. Yes, she's fine too. And finally, she walks across the road, to the house with the matching security gate. The house belongs to her. She's having some work done. Minor maintenance, nothing ambitious — not yet, anyway. She has plans, but none that she can afford to implement immediately. She talks to Trevor, the guy who's been there all morning, polishing the floor, cleaning the windows, painting the ceiling. She calls a halt to the project, making an arrangement to pay him for work completed to date.

All tasks ticked off, Lily steps under the cool shower in her back garden to wash off the dusty heat of the morning. She feels a bit like a character in a movie about an impending apocalypse or liberation. Alone at the end of an uncertain world. She dries off lying in a hammock slung between two beams under the corrugated iron roof, wearing nothing but a blue and white linen kimono, enjoying the sensuality of the last of the Karoo late summer heat. This is her favourite time of the year. It's comfortably hot without the searing breath-catching heat of the high season. The trees are changing colour from drab khakis, olives and deep greens to russets, ochres, browns and golds.

Lily's eyes are closed and she is deep in her own world of physical sensation and meandering thought. The phone rings. She lets it ring out. It rings again, and she does the same, twice more. Again, then again. Sighing, she manoeuvres out of the hammock, one leg over the edge, one leg caught in the netting, body twisted, reaching the phone underneath to take the call. She brings it up to her ear.

"Hello?" She sweeps her hair back off her face. It's matted with perspiration.

Lily doesn't talk much, but listens a lot. Her back straightens, she closes her eyes when the caller introduces himself. She responds only with monosyllables:

“Yes, that’s me.” She pulls the kimono around her body, covering her nakedness.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh God.”

“When?” She walks into the house and stands in the dark cool kitchen. She is still.

“Oh no.”

“How?” She covers her mouth with her hand, knuckles white around the phone. She bends over slightly, shoulders tense, eyes closed.

“Meet? Why?”

“Cape Town? Tomorrow? No. I can’t. I’m in Nieu Bethesda.” She flicks through empty pages in the diary next to the kettle.

“Yes, online is better. What time? Yes, that works for me.” She makes a note at 14h00. Tendai Hlatshwayo, Simon & Wilkinson Attorneys.

“Okay. Okay. Thank you. Bye.”

Jonathan.

Dead.

Lily walks into the lounge and pauses for a few moments, her body tense. She drops the phone on the couch and sinks into the chunky cushions, her head over her hands, shoulders rising and falling with each inhalation.

Jonathan.

Dead.



“Jonathan is dead.”

“Jonathan is dead.”

“Jonathan is dead.”

After the first obligatory calls to her family, Lily wonders whether she’d ever get used to saying those words. More, saying his name after so many years is even stranger, as if she’s forgotten what the word feels like when she wraps her lips and tongue around its shape. He’d never been fond of having his name shortened to John, Jonno or Jonny. “It makes me like all the others,” he’d say. So he’d always been Jonathan to her. Jonathan Cottle. No middle name. Simple, no fuss, efficient — just like the man who carried it. Her husband, Jonathan, who became her ex-husband Jonathan, who is now her late ex-husband Jonathan.

After their daughter Rosie died four years ago and Jonathan left three months later, she had to learn how to be Lily. Just Lily. Not Mrs Cottle, Jonathan’s wife, Jonathan’s ex-wife, Rosie’s mum, or even Rosie’s Bereaved Mother. She’d shed all those labels in the months after the events that broke her.

Driving from Cape Town to Nieu Bethesda the day after landing from London three months ago, she tried to work out what should replace those labels. Retreat Owner, Businesswoman, Therapy Client, Middle-Aged Divorcee. Single Woman. Stranger. How many more does a woman carry in her lifetime? In a strange place where she knows no-one, would she ever again be Friend? Confidante? Lover?

She thinks about the labels we carry through life while she’s labelling jars, tidying cupboards, wiping surfaces. These are the therapeutic, meditative tasks she needs to process all she has learned over the past 24 hours. A way to salve the ache in her gut, stave off the tears and suppress the bile in her tightened throat. It feels like hunger pangs though she has no appetite.

So she thinks of the labels. Those labels naming certain things, name tags you only are permitted to wear only if you have ticked certain prescribed boxes.

Accepted a proposal? Tick. You're a Fiancée. Publicly said "I do", preferably while wearing white dress and Colgate smile? Tick. You're a Wife. Been photographed smiling beatifically while cradling a small then medium then large belly bump? Tick. You're a Mother. Struck a pose at the first day of school, last day of school, graduation? Shown the first tooth, first medal, first certificate, first diploma, first degree? Tick. You're a Parent. Held your child's child? Tick. You're a Grandparent. Sat in the first seat of the front row next to the coffin? Tick. You're a grieving widow.

What's the label for a woman whose only child and ex-husband have died?

Her phone buzzes and breaks into her train of thought. The appointment with the lawyers. She'd nearly forgotten, while remembering Jonathan. She wipes her hands on a dish towel, smooths her hair and answers the video call.

Tendai Hlatshwayo, the lawyer she'd talked to yesterday, greets her with a smile. They exchange minor pleasantries. He is fine. She is fine, too. Fine. The word would have to do in these circumstances. Fine, otherwise defined as Fucking Insecure Neurotic and Emotional. That definition works best, though it may not be appropriate to voice that right now. Lily sets up the phone and leans it against a vase on the kitchen counter. She is poised to make notes on the note pad she's fished from her handbag.

Tendai is young, with smooth skin, bright, kind eyes and a deep baritone voice that makes Lily feel comforted somehow, even while she knows why he's calling. The smile vanishes when he begins to get into the formalities, clearing his throat as if clearing away the social niceties to get to the matter at hand.

"Dr Cottle lodged his last will and testament with our firm last month. He appointed us executors. His instructions were that he was to be cremated immediately after his death and gave our firm the requisite permission to do that. We are now going through the Will and discharging his last wishes. We were going to ask you to come to the office for a consultation but with the lockdown announcement, we are concerned that it is going to be too difficult for you to get to Cape Town and back in time to ensure compliance with the regulations. "

“I — I don’t understand. How does this involve me? I haven’t had any contact with my ex-husband for years.”

“Mrs Cottle, Dr Cottle has named you as the beneficiary of his entire estate.”

“I’m sorry? Wha- What did you say?” Lily’s spine straightens and she feels the tension ripple up the muscles in her back, from base to nape. She picks up the phone and moves from the kitchen to the lounge. She feels disembodied from her physical movement, as if Tendai’s words have disconnected her limbs from her brain.

Just at that moment, the doorbell rings. She chooses to ignore it, but it rings, then rings again, taunting Lily with the cheesy Christmas carol set by the last owners of the house which she still hasn’t changed. God rest ye merry gentlemen. God rest ye merry gentleman. Jonathan. Gentle, man. God rest ye.

“That will be a delivery for you, Mrs Cottle.”

“Delivery? For me? How do you know?”

Tendai looks at his watch and nods at the screen. “I despatched it to you yesterday. I was expecting it to arrive about now.”

“Hang on.”

It’s not the courier, but Trevor the handyman, at the door. He hands her a package, explaining that he’d intercepted the courier on her stoep as he was packing up and leaving the house opposite. Puzzled, but distracted with wanting to get back to the call with Tendai, she thanks him curtly and closes the door behind her.

Tendai directs Lily to the package, explaining Jonathan’s instructions to deliver it to Lily in the event of his death. The sender is listed as Jonathan Cottle, Rondebosch, Cape Town, c/o Simon and Wilkinson Attorneys, written in Jonathan’s precise architectural handwriting. She hasn’t seen that script since she signed the divorce papers in the lawyer’s office in London. Three years, two months, some days and one lifetime ago.

She rips the wrapping and, on the table, lays out a pile of photographs bound together with an elastic band and green post-it notes, an A4-envelope, blank save for a stamp bearing the Simon and Wilkinson Attorneys logo, and a smaller envelope addressed to her in Jonathan's distinctive architectural handwriting.

Tendai shuffles a few papers. "Please open the large envelope."

Lily does as she's told, conscious that her hands are shaking and her breath is at her throat. It is Jonathan's Last Will and Testament. Tendai starts to read. Lily follows the words on the page, trying to comprehend what it all means. The Will confirms what Tendai mentioned earlier. Through all the legalese and her tears, and with only the comfort of Tendai's voice, Lily reads that she is the sole beneficiary of Jonathan's entire estate. It is considerable. Enough to give her a substantial springboard into the plans she's been mulling over since she arrived in her new life in Nieu Bethesda.

The Will lists everything in Jonathan's typically meticulous way. Investment portfolio, retirement annuities, some shares. The house in Rondebosch, the mid-life crisis motorbike, the unused quarter-life crisis mountain bike, the over-used RAV4. Everything, down to the contents of his wardrobe (all those thirty-year old shirts to look forward to) and the original art-deco dinner service that was such a bone of contention during the divorce negotiations. Lily's parents had shared the cost with Jonathan's in a fit of Baby Boomer optimism that their union would last until the service became a family heirloom, passed down to generations of grandchildren. Jonathan had won it in the divorce in exchange for enough money for Lily to buy the house she is now sitting in. Quid pro quo, she'd figured. Dinner service for a house.

Mid-way through the third page, Lily's attention begins to wane. She understands, but doesn't. Why would Jonathan do this?

After Rosie died, they'd bounced around, trying to decide on the next move, battered like pinballs between the rock of their grief and the hard place of having nothing left to say to each other. They gave up pretending in the end. The last time they saw each other was the day after the divorce was finalised. He'd come to say goodbye en-route to his new post in Cape Town. She always thought they looked like characters in a movie in that moment; she looking down at him from an upstairs window, he looking up at her and waving from the cab as it drove off into the

mist. She didn't wave back. Instead, she turned back to her life; a new life, without him, without their daughter. Her life, without.

"Mrs Cottle. Are you alright? Do you need a break?" Tendai brings her back to the present.

"I'm fine, thanks." Fucking insecure, neurotic and emotional. "I'm fine."

"There is one condition," says Hlatshwayo.

Condition?

Tendai clears his throat, shuffles his papers.

"Mrs Cottle, do you know someone called Annabel Martin?"

The name doesn't ring any bells. Lily shakes her head. "No."

"Mrs Cottle. You will see that Dr Cottle has listed a Miss Annabel Martin as the full beneficiary of all assets lodged within a Trust called..." he flips some pages. "The Rose-Annabel Trust."

Lily reads the sentence on the page. Rose. Rosie. Rose was Rosie's proper name but they'd always used Rosie because, well, because Rosie was Rosie and she'd never be a Rose. Neither Rose nor Rosie would ever be now, anyway. Not since that night.

The value of the trust carves out a reasonable sum of money from the estate. Not a fortune, but certainly enough to live on for a year or two.

"Who is she, this...Annabel Martin?"

Tendai hesitates, takes a deep breath and starts to talk again. Lily tries to concentrate on his words, feeling comfort in his deep voice. Jonathan, or Dr Cottle, as Tendai refers to the man Lily knew for nearly 30 years but who she now feels she doesn't know at all, has laid out the answer to that question in the letter addressed to her. The letter has been included in the package. On the screen, Lily nods, trying to connect the emotions she feels to the dispassionate expression on the

face she sees reflected back at her.

Tendai pauses for a few moments, giving Lily a moment to collect herself. Lily sniffs and wipes her nose while he turns to more practical issues. What does Lily want to do with all of Dr Cottle's possessions? With lockdown, Jonathan's house will be noticeably unoccupied. Tendai recommends moving everything up to Nieu Bethesda, and to arrange for security to monitor the house in Rondebosch until Lily decides what to do with it all.

She nods and smiles and shakes her head and says yes and no and okay please proceed in all the right places. Tendai wishes her good day and cuts the call. The screen goes black.

Lily looks out the window to the house opposite hers, thinking back to when she, Jonathan and Rosie were a small but perfectly formed family unit with disposable income and hopes and dreams for the future. Everything made sense back then. She and Jonathan had bought the house on a whim as an inheritance for Rosie after visiting the village when Rosie was 10. The privilege of being a small family with academic credentials and money in the bank.

Rosie had been obsessed with Nieu Bethesda's most famous attraction, the Owl House; a place of whimsy, mystery, art and eccentricity. A legacy created by the village's most celebrated resident, Helen Martins, whose legendary status as *Miss Helen* had been solidified on the night she drank caustic soda; and whose three hundred concrete sculptures in a Karoo back garden secured her a permanent place on the global art scene. Her signature sculptural style had birthed a cottage industry of knock-offs of big-eyed concrete owls and petrified cement pilgrims looking east.

Jonathan had transferred the house into Lily's name when Rosie died. Guilt, perhaps, or, in hindsight, a calculated move in his preparations to leave. That was Jonathan's style: if there's a problem, throw money at it to find a solution. Act fast, be decisive, stick to your convictions. Whatever his reason for leaving, after Rosie's death and the divorce, Lily had always known she'd be back here. Perhaps Jonathan had known that too, back then. That she'd wanted to be closer to Rosie and being here was her way of doing that.

The house had been rented to tenants since they bought it, but Lily had ended the tenancy before she returned. Easier that way, not having to bump into the occupiers every day. Instead, she'd

planned to transform Rosie's house into a sanctuary for women like her — women who still had a lot of life to live, but not necessarily the ones they were living. A space where they'd find the time to work out what that life to be lived would look like. The retreat was a natural way of preserving Rosie's memory. Another legacy in this small village. Less artistic than Helen Martins' perhaps, less dramatic, but no less tragic.

The money from Jonathan's estate could secure its existence. More than that, the money could secure Lily's own future. Lily hadn't worked after Rosie was born, and a condition of Jonathan's divorce agreement was that he would support her until she remarried or died, whichever came first. Now that he was dead, without his bequest, that support would fall away. Even within the cylinder of her sadness for losing Jonathan, Lily feels a swell of relief. He'd thought of everything, as usual.

Lily turns the letter over in her hands again and again, desperate to know what it holds but equally desperate to wish it doesn't exist. How did she get here? Why is this happening? She's never felt so bruised, so confused, so alone.

Eight a.m.. Tendai calls to confirm that a removals van left Cape Town yesterday and will be in Nieu Bethesda by 10am this morning. Lily feels off-balance with the speed of events. Tendai says he didn't want things to be delayed, with lockdown regulations in mind. Lily is grateful for his work and consideration and they both wish each other a good day. Had she lived through more than 15 birthdays, Lily imagines that Rosie would have made friends with more Tendais with engineering and law degrees, and maybe one or two who might be directionless but no less interesting, with gentle faces and considerate natures. At least, that's what Lily imagines, though, in a parallel universe, 16, 17, 18-year old Rosie was most likely being Rosie — an otherwise, contrary teenager with strong views on everything and friends who could be described as questionable, at best.

Minutes later, Lily is standing on the dusty pavement in front of the house opposite hers. Rosie's house. The gate interrupts a low white wall that spans the width of the garden. Estate agents in this rural idyll are always quick to point out how safe it is. It's an adjustment for Lily, who's used to high walls in South Africa and double mortice locks on the doors in England. She's forgotten what the crime statistics are, but it's a relief to be able to walk around alone at night and for the house to be invaded during the day only by the neighbour's cats, and occasionally by the neighbours themselves.

Like all others on the street, the house is a single storey rectangle, painted white, with brown wooden shutters covering two wide windows on either side of the single leaf front door. A green corrugated iron roof curves over the stoep. Lily remembers Rosie's 10-year old delight when she learned she'll live down the road from the Owl House one day. The door is covered by an ornate wrought iron security gate shaped in the form of one of Rosie's drawings of Helen Martins' archetypal big-eyed owls. It's there for decoration, but the added security helps, despite the estate agent's reassurances. They called the house Number Ten, for Rosie's age, despite its actual number being no. 16 on the block.

Lily opens the gate and takes the few steps to the porch and the front door. The garden is badly overgrown, parched from the unrelenting Karoo summer. She'll have to make a start on clearing it during lockdown.



The house is shuttered and empty after the last tenants left. She'd mothballed it while trying to figure out her plans for her retreat. Her retreat? Perhaps, yes, especially today, when she feels she wants to hide from the world, to dwell in the grief she feels for Jonathan's death. She is surprised by how his absence seems to be adding weight to her every step. Jonathan. God rest ye, merry gentleman. They'd become strangers in the end, but now that he's dead, the world is stranger without him.

Yes, this retreat will be for women like her, burdened by the heaviness of loss.

She opens the door, steps into the room and closes the door behind her. The silence inside forms a veil that falls over her shoulders. It smells of paint and floor polish, as if Trevor has left a signature scent for her. In truth, she didn't need the work done, but he'd been persistent in his requests to help her. The villagers were generally sympathetic to his presence as an unemployed jack of all trades who lived in a caravan at the end of Martin Street. So Lily had brought him in as an act of newcomer's goodwill more than anything else. It couldn't hurt, she'd decided. He'd done a good enough job, though she was relieved to not have him close by during lockdown.

Nieu Bethesda did that. It attracted a motley crue of people who arrived at the end of the road — whether metaphorical or physical, via the single 27km winding stretch of tarmac and gravel that led from the highway off into the distant hills around the village. The only way in, and the only way out.

Lily moves from room to room, feeling wrapped in the house's gentle quiet; comforted in a way, even in the large empty spaces. Dust has trailed in from under the doors and settled on the windowsills and the kitchen counter. Morning light slivers through the shutters casting white stripes on the floor and shining on the motes dancing in the air. It's a clear, bright morning outside. It'll be hot later and the house is still cool.

Lily stands still in the lounge and closes her eyes. She hears nothing but the birds outside and her breath. She flicks through her memories of that trip to Nieu Bethesda, feeling her throat tighten with emotion. It was their nationwide road trip before they left the country to follow Jonathan's career path. They'd spent three days in the village. On every day Rosie insisted on visiting the Owl House. She'd been mesmerised by the concrete sculptures in the garden, awed by the multi-coloured grains of glass covering every inch of the walls, furniture and the ceiling; and had even

told a bedtime story about fairies she saw dancing in the corner of the macabre black-painted room where Miss Helen had left her father to languish for years. Lily and Jonathan revelled in watching Rosie's imagination become imbued with a magical reality.

Standing in the quiet empty room, Lily sees how she and Jonathan fell in love a little on that weekend. They'd read books together in the garden, walked hand in hand down the street and shared secret kisses while she made dinner and Rosie was drawing owls in another room. She remembers how they made soft, quiet, gentle love at night and sang at the top of their voices over breakfast in the morning.

And then, she remembers Jonathan is gone. She balls her fists and presses them into her eyes, as if to quell the rising tears.

Lily reaches for a tissue in the pocket of her cardigan, wincing with pain when her hand stabs into the corner of the envelope she refused to open yesterday. She retracts her hand in a sharp movement, as if stung by the reminder that she needs to read it.

The lockdown will only start in a week, but already Lily feels hemmed in. House-bound for nearly a month, though she likes her own company, or rather, has grown used to it. Lily sweeps and cleans the house until it shines, even if Tendai's guys will be tracking their boots through the rooms later this morning. The physical exertion is good for her. She hasn't used her muscles like this for a long time, and it stops her from thinking. Thinking about letters and Wills and dead daughters and strangers who bear a significance she doesn't yet understand.

After Rosie died, nothing was important anymore to Lily and Jonathan, though it did take their daughter's death to finally admit that their marriage had reached the end of its life too. It took three months to agree on how to divide up nearly three decades of memories, of fun and laughter. To agree on the price of the agony of grief, loss, trauma.

When the movers arrive, almost on time, they are in and out within an hour, leaving Lily alone with neatly labelled boxes in all the right rooms. Note to self, she thinks: if ever there is packing and moving to be done after this move, these are the guys to do it.

The RAV4 is missing, which Lily will have to investigate, but everything else correlates with the inventory included in the delivery documentation and the Will. She parks the motorbike and bicycle in the garage and spends the rest of the day doing what she's always loved to do: creating order out of chaos. With an 80s playlist on full volume, she starts shifting furniture and unpacking boxes.

Lily starts unpacking, filling cupboards, and drawers with the things that made up Jonathan's life. Ordinary, everyday things that provide the utility needed to live an ordinary everyday life. A couch, a couple of armchairs, a bed, dining table chairs, cups, spoons, towels, tea strainer, sheets, soap dish and so on. In the wake of his death, though, everything carries weight, meaning. The process makes her curious. Who was this man she was married to for 25 years? What had happened to him in the last four? After Rosie's death crushed any semblance of a relationship and the divorce was finalised, they'd lost touch, caught up in the agony of rebuilding their respective lives as grieving childless divorcees.

Lily sets aside anything that seems to be personal to Jonathan. Documents, files, photo albums, notebooks. A bag full of travel mementoes and souvenirs. Stacks of printed photographs, interleaved with notes written in his distinctive handwriting. She wants to go through them in her own time. She smiles wryly, thinking of what her therapist would say: "You need the closure, Lily. Find catharsis in doing whatever will bring you that closure."

(From the *Cambridge English Dictionary*):

'Catharsis

Noun

UK /kə'tɑː.sɪs/ US /kə'tɑːr.sɪs/

the process of releasing strong emotions through a particular activity or experience, such as writing or theatre, in a way that helps you understand those emotions.'

The streets of Nieu Bethesda are, in the main, long, straight, untarred. Lily walks the couple of blocks from her house to Martin Street, the main street that takes you into and out of the village. She'd woken up feeling stiff from the physicality of all the unpacking yesterday. The walk is stretching and warming her muscles.

The Owl House and Fossil Museum are still open but there's no sign of life in either. The backpackers lodges and B&Bs are mostly empty, some shuttered up. Boetie's Pub is quiet, the pizza joint opposite is open but the waitresses and chef lounging on the tables on the verandah are the only people there.

She bumps into a couple she recognises but whose names escape her. They aren't wearing masks, neither is she. She instinctively steps back to create space between them. They talk for a while, exchanging fearful pleasantries about these being unprecedented times. By the end of April it should be all be over. At least they're in Nieu Bethesda and not in the big cities where there are so many people living so closely together. They wonder about supplies. They've just come back from the general store. There isn't much left on the shelves. They hope Lily has enough food to keep her going for the whole lockdown. They wish her well. They bustle off to have lunch at Die Waenhuis restaurant, clutching each other and their shopping bags with toilet rolls sticking out of the top.

Lily ambles without any particular aim. She sees no-one else, as if the few permanent residents are shadows retracted in the bright autumn light in preparation for the full contraction of life when lockdown starts. She's come to relish the silence and isolation of living here. The village's wide dusty streets, lined with single marching rows of tall fir and poplar and oak trees, form an orderly grid with no markings or pavements, even though the occasional Stop sign stands sentinel at some intersections. She's always loved the contrast of the soaring spire of the Dutch Reformed Church against the typically, and sometimes relentlessly, cloudless blue sky with the curve of the Compassberg softening the view behind. The windmill vanes over the water pump in the plot next door to the church turn the scene into a postcard from quintessential small-town South Africa. There is something comforting about the simplicity of it all.

In a strange way, Lily is almost looking forward to the 21 days of solitude. Time to process her emotions with the news that Jonathan is gone from this world, even if he'd been absent from her life for years. Time to think and plan and unpack Jonathan's life into her own, to find that closure over his death and maybe even over Rosie's. She relishes the prospect of having time to transform Number 10 into Rosie's Retreat. Certainly, Jonathan's money will help a lot.

Pushing aside the nagging question, who is Annabel Martin?, she walks and thinks, inhaling the fresh air, listening to the leaves rustling in the trees. A dog barks in the distance. There is no other sound, no other movement. It is as if the world has stopped spinning on its axis, giving everything on the planet permission to breathe.

The phone is ringing when Lily steps back inside her house. It's Tendai Hlatshwayo. He needs to finalise various matters before lockdown starts. In particular, he needs Lily's instruction responding to the condition Dr Cottle set out in his letter. She mumbles an excuse about being busy with the unpacking, though Lily knows she's lying and she's certain Tendai knows too. She's carried the letter with her since their last call, moving it from her cardigan pocket to her jeans to her nightstand to the kitchen counter. It's been very present, a strange, silent, secretive companion to her confusion and grief.

"I understand Mrs Cottle." Tendai gives a small laugh and comments about how these are unprecedented, uncertain times and everything is happening too quickly. He turns serious in the next moment. "But we need to know your instructions. We need your confirmation of how you would like to proceed."

Lily has the letter in her hand. She might be imagining, or she might be feeling in reality, that her fingers are tingling, hot even, as if the letter is burning into her skin. It's clear from Tendai's tone that Lily has little choice. Some problems go away on their own. Clearly this isn't one of them.

"One thing, Tendai," she says.

"Yes?"

"What happens if I don't agree to whatever this letter says?"

“If you refuse the inheritance, Dr Cottle has instructed that his estate reverts to any living children he may have, once they reach the age of 21. Until then, his goods will be placed in storage at the estate’s expense and any money residing in the estate will be held in the trust.”

“Living children? He only had one child. Our daughter. But she is dead now.”

“Please read the letter, Mrs Cottle. I will await your instructions.”

The headlights are bright, so bright they hurt her eyes. She looks and looks into them, trying to make out the shapes in the glare. She sees Jonathan there, but then he is gone again. She blinks, blinks again, then again, willing her brain to recognise something, anything, in that bright white glow. Eventually, a dark form appears. She starts to make out his hair, his shoulders, his face, his arms, his waist, his hips, his legs. It is him. But when she calls to him, he, or his form, starts to dissolve, to dissipate. She sees Rosie, Rosie taking form, walking with him, on his right. Rosie's hair, shoulders, face, arms, waist, hips, legs. Lily is rooted where she stands. She cannot move. She calls to Jonathan, calls to Rosie. Then he starts to dissolve even more and from the dissolution another form takes shape on the other side of him, on his left. The same hair, shoulders, face, arms, waist, hips, legs, as Rosie on the right. The three move towards Lily, silhouetted in the glare of the lights behind. For an instant Lily sees everything in crystal clear detail before the sharp lines etched into the brightness begin to blur again. There is Jonathan, there is Rosie, and there is that third who is unknown to Lily. They walk in step, in line, coming closer, closer to Lily. Rosie starts to fade. Jonathan starts to fade with every step behind Rosie's shrinking shape, until the third looms large in front. She — who is she? — starts to fragment into ripples from the centre of Lily's vision. The ripples pulse into relentless waves that reach the edge of Lily's sight.

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It's a long time before dawn; or that's what it feels like. The nights are getting longer, and daylight comes later. Lily lies still for a few moments, calming her breath and heart rate after the vivid dream. She feels comforted in her nakedness under the duvet.

Lockdown is in three days' time. Lily flicks through the apps on her phone, catching up on the overnight news of gloom, doom and destruction, trying to make sense of the coronavirus and what it means for her. She reads as much as she can about staying home, flattening the curve, the importance of lockdown to stay safe and protect others. But she processes nothing. Her thoughts keep snapping back to her immediate grid. To Jonathan, the letter, his death, his will, his life. To Rosie, her absence, the crash, the void. And to Annabel Martin. Who?

She lies for a while, reaching into the depths of her memory to eke out any familiarity in the name. None comes. She gets up, showers and dresses. Makes coffee and takes the whole package through to the dining room table. A moment like this needs some formality.

*Dear Lily*

*I know we haven't talked since the divorce — a divorce I didn't want but which was somehow inevitable when Rosie died.*

*It's taken many months and many drafts to write this letter. Writing it was hard and I think it will be hard to read.*

*It feels like the years since Rosie died to today have been forever. That's how long it feels like we've been apart. Forever is what I'm looking at myself, now. The cancer has come.*

Two weeks ago. How strange to think that Jonathan was alive so recently.

*Lily, my Lil - I still call you that when I talk to you, even out loud sometimes. I'm trying to imagine how you'll react when you read this letter. I remember your anger, how it burned you, always. I always thought you loved with the same intensity.*

*I'm writing this to say what I'll never be able to say to you in person. I've wanted to tell you so many times over the past few years. I've wanted to contact you so many times but have never had the balls. I ran out of knowing what to say. So, my dear love, my Lil, this is the only way I'll be able to say what I need to say before I leave.*

*First, I want to apologise. I failed at being a husband. But the truth is, back then, I didn't know any better. I know now. Too late.*

*When I met you, I knew my life would never be the same. Did you know that I picked up a handful of grains of sand under your feet where you stood on the beach when we first talked? I carried that handful home and put it in a jar. I wanted to keep safe the first step we took together. Because you changed my world forever. I also kept the letter you left after our first night together. I still have it. You said: 'if I could I would give you the world on a silver platter'.*



*You did give me the world, but I took you for granted and I lost you. I'm sorry.*

*Second, I want you to know that I forgive you. It's taken me a long time to understand what happened, and to acknowledge the guilt. I do now. Rosie wasn't easy. You had so much on your hands and it didn't help that I was away so much. I share your guilt. I regret so much. If I could turn back time, I would. But I can't and I now need to live out my own time, or what's left of it, knowing I was as much to blame for Rosie's death as you were and as that driver was.*

*I am faced with the inevitable — another forever change, and this one is irrevocable. I've been clearing out my stuff. I found that jar of sand. It's in front of me right now. I hope you'll find it if and when you take possession of my estate. I hope it's when, because that means you've agreed to what I'm about to say next. When you do find it, please know what it means. Every day since we broke up, I've wondered what the earth looks like under your feet. Where have you walked? Where do you stand? Who shares that ground with you?*

Lily feels a knot forming in her belly in an agonising formula:  
grief + confusion - Jonathan x a life Rosie would never live...

She tosses the letter aside and snatches a tissue from the box in front of her. She blows her nose hard, picks up the letter again.

*When Rosie died, I knew we'd died too. After everything. I knew we were as shattered as the windscreen of the car that killed her. After I couldn't save Rosie, I was a wreck. I couldn't fix myself and I didn't know how to make you better. I couldn't save us. I failed. I'm sorry for that. I don't have the words to say anything more.*

*I kept thinking about whether I was doing the right thing. But just like I had no doubt when we met that I wanted to be with you forever, that day my heart was telling me I had to do what I was doing. There was no doubt.*

*My conviction grew and my life filled up. In the next part of this letter, I hope you'll understand why. There is something I need to tell you, first, and ask you, second. Please don't stop reading.*

She does. Here it comes. The conditions after the charm offensive. So typically Jonathan. She walks a circuit of the house and the garden. She is numb, every muscle in her body taut with anger, grief. She starts reading again, conscious of feeling like she's watching a train crashing but can't look away. Mesmerised by the horror of knowing whatever it is she's about to learn.

*A week after Rosie's funeral, I received an email from someone called Annabel Martin. She told me she is my daughter. My other daughter. This was the first time I knew she existed.*

*Annabel was born nine months after Rosie's first birthday. I don't need to remind you I was speaking at a conference on the weekend Rosie turned one. She was sick and you were angry I was going to miss her party, even though I tried to explain I had to go. We had yet another fight and we both said words I regret saying and hearing. Neither of us would back down and so I packed up my anger and carried it with me all week. I met Heather, Annabel's mother, during the conference. That was the first, only and last time I saw her, until I came back to Cape Town after our divorce.*

Lily's knuckles are hurting with tension from clenching the page. Do you remember, Jonathan? Do you see you and me in Rosie's room talking over her fever? Do you remember my pleas for you to stay, stay just this once, this one time when I need you the most? The one time she will turn one. The weekend you say you must go is the weekend our one daughter will have her first birthday party. Do you recall how I begged and pleaded and you shouted and stormed out? I hosted the party alone and you went anyway, Jonathan, and you came back to us with a smile on your face and a tacky airport gift in your hand. Now I know what lies your smile was hiding.

*After Rosie's death, I was looking for something, anything, to help me be a better man, a better father, maybe even a better husband. When Annabel found me it felt like I'd been given another chance. I knew it was too late to improve as a husband. That's why I came back to Cape Town. I wanted to try again to be a good dad. I felt a failure for not being able to protect Rosie and this would be my penance, in a way, to try and protect Annabel. Heather died last year. When I am gone, Annabel will be alone.*

Lily can't stop the tears. She is shaking, a full body-wrenching shudder with every breath she takes. She blows her nose, forces herself to keep reading, as if watching a train coming out of the tunnel while she is tied to the tracks. Helpless, immobile, riveted to the inevitable destruction the

next moment will cause.

She knows what is coming. ...*There is something else I need to tell you, first, and ask you, second.* Well, he'd told her...

In the letter, Jonathan has included a codicil to the will, which structures his estate in a way that locks Lily into a form of guardianship over Annabel Martin.

Lily will get R1 million immediately on accepting the condition outlined below, and the balance, less what exists in the Rose-Annabel Trust, when Annabel turns 21 in four years' time. The balance of the estate runs into several million rands in stocks, property and investments, structured to disburse monthly payments until the end of Lily's life, with lump sum payments every five years.

He stipulates the care arrangements: they are to talk every month at least by phone and to get together at least twice, on the day before each of their birthdays (Lily's on 4 April, Annabel's on 27 November), every year until Annabel's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Photographs and recordings of these events are to be sent to the lawyers within two days, as an ongoing record to ensure she and Annabel do his bidding. If any commitment is missed, a donation to the value of the interest earned on each portion of the entire estate — Lily's inheritance and Annabel's trust — for the year will be donated to the Gift of the Givers. As far as penalties go, it's not significant, but the fact the penalty exists at all indicates Jonathan's intent.

Annabel will receive an annual contribution to cover her tuition and living expenses until she turns 21. She may not apply for any additional monies, unless motivated to the Trustees as an emergency, such approval not to be unreasonably withheld. Annabel is to complete her university studies with distinction, and to take a gap year for the year after graduation. Only when she returns will she receive her inheritance. The Trust will fund a ticket to wherever Annabel wants to go, on condition that she spends the year at that destination volunteering for a charity working to eradicate infectious diseases.

Lily reads and reads and re-reads the letter and the codicil.

The dawn is breaking outside and the chorus of doves in the trees is rising to a cacophony,

amplified in the indigo silence. Lily opens the double patio doors, as if to evict the air inside stained by Jonathan's indecent proposal. She is still shaking, wordless at his audacity, grieving his death not because she misses him but because she wants to smash down the door to wherever he is now and ask him why the fuck he thinks she's willing to look after his love child simply because he and her mother are now dead? But more than anything, she feels the guilt return. The guilt over her actions that caused Rosie's death. If Rosie had lived, would Jonathan have admitted his infidelity, thrust his love-child on Lily, forced her into such a Faustian pact? I give you this day your daily bread, and forgive your trespasses, as long as you forgive those who trespass against you.

Visions loom large of the Jonathan she fell in love with on that beach on that day. His tears of love on the day they were married. His excitement each time they moved house, city, countries. His sense of adventure. His big smile and eyes that would shine with it. The tenderness when Rosie was born. The joy with each milestone of her short life. His abject grief when she died. It all dissolved in the aftermath of the hit-and-run. He and she dissipated, like blood leaching into soil, like the figures in her dream. And now, this.

Jonathan's request has fanned the embers of Lily's rage, her pain, her inability to process anything about his sudden death. A daughter. Another daughter, who has replaced Rosie, and who he now wants Lily to care for.

If Lily couldn't keep one biological daughter alive, how and why does he think she can do the same with his? More, why would she want to? Apart from the more than a million reasons he's dangled as a gilded carrot in front of her.

Now, all she can see is Jonathan, at first crystal clear, then separating, then fading, dissolving into the looming shape that she now knows to be Annabel. In life as in death. He was there, and now he is gone, and he's left an impossible decision in his wake.

She sits on the swing on the patio under a dim lamp, with her legs curled under her, feeling the morning air on her skin. It is fresh and nearly warm. She holds up the photographs to the lamp, swapping images first of Annabel, then of Rosie. They could be twins. The same strawberry blonde mane of curls. The same swimmer's build, with broad shoulders and slim waist. Same smile, with an upturned nose and a gap between the teeth. Clearly Jonathan's genes run strong.

At least there's no doubt about his paternity. If only there were...

There is a woman in some of the pictures of Annabel. Heather. She's dark-haired and seems much shorter than Annabel. She is always smiling at the camera, laughing, even. In this one, looking over her shoulder with Annabel. In another, her hand is up, seemingly shy, rejecting the camera's advances. She and Annabel lying on a rug on the beach, squinting up at the camera. She and Annabel, each on a couch, reading, bundled up under blankets, and oblivious to the moment being pressed into digital forever-memory. She and Annabel on a game drive, with an elephant in the background. A note on the back reads *Addo, December 2019*. December 2019? Lily had been there at the same time. Had they passed each other in the wild?

Lily casts those aside and sorts through the pile to find pictures of Rosie. She sees herself in some of them. Sees her hair becoming shorter and greyer through the years. Her smile is more pinched, skin more sallow, frown deeper, as the chronology of their life together and apart is laid bare. She and Rosie at a farm, feeding the goats. *Cape Town, 2009*. She, Rosie and Jonathan outside the Owl House. *Nieu Bethesda, 2011*. She and Rosie in a rigid family portrait with Shadow the dog, in front of a Christmas tree. *Devon Christmas 2012*, says the note on the back. She and Rosie in a roadside diner, engrossed in the menus with a large cartoonish hotdog sign behind them. *Vegas, Easter 2013*. She, alone, with a photograph of Rosie, pictured in a newspaper clipping, after Rosie had landed on the tarmac fifty metres away from impact. *Local woman grieves for daughter after hit-and-run in Dartmoor. Exeter Express & Echo, 26 October 2016*.

She doesn't read the clipping. She knows what it says because she has a copy of her own. *Lily Cottle, wife of local celebrated academic Dr Jonathan Cottle, is appealing for witnesses after their only daughter died in a hit-and-run crash on Redhills at 6.30pm last Friday, 21 October. Exeter police have asked for anyone who knows more about the incident to come forward. In the meantime, Dr Cottle asked that the family is given privacy at this difficult time.*

What the clipping doesn't describe is Rosie's fury and Lily's rage during the argument in the car. Another day, another teenage tantrum, another day of single parenting even though Lily was still married to Jonathan, who was, as the clipping describes, in Istanbul. Another day, another conference. The angry words they exchanged. How Rosie slammed the door and lurched out of the car when Lily stopped to let another car past on the narrow lane. The relief Lily felt when

Rosie and her rage had left the confines of the car. The rain falling on the windscreen. The terror of seeing oncoming headlights swerving across the road. And, as Rosie's body lifted into the air, the disbelief of knowing that the last words she'd said to her daughter were: "Don't do this, Rosie. I will never forgive you."

The clipping is in a box she keeps in her wardrobe. It lies on top of a pile of mementoes from Rosie's life. Her birth certificate, school reports, achievement certificates, medals, rosettes, portrait photographs. Her death certificate. Her ashes. Her ashes, which she brought back with her to Nieu Bethesda, where she and Jonathan agreed they would lay her to rest. She'd been holding on to them until she plucked up the courage to find Jonathan and invite him to the village for an interment ceremony, to bury the ashes under the willow tree in the yard of Number 10, the house Rosie loved so much.

Lily fans the two piles of photographs on the swing seat in front of her. She spends a long time looking at every picture of Annabel, setting them alongside pictures of Rosie. Indeed, if she didn't know better, she'd think they were twins. The similarities between them are remarkable. The way they throw their head back when laughing and how they share Lily's least-favourite quirk of Rosie's, when she put her hand in front of her mouth when smiling.

Annabel is real. Annabel exists. Like a mantra, Lily repeats the words to herself. Rather than the moon on a silver platter, Jonathan has presented her with a fait accompli on a steaming pile of grief, wrapped in a tie that will forever bind her to this young woman. Rosie is dead, and here is this imposter who at least in looks, is, well, a dead-ringer for her dead daughter. She scrunches up the photographs and goes back inside.

Minutes later, she hits Send on the email. The email that came from her gut.

Yes, she's read Jonathan's Will and letter. Twice, and then twice more. Yes, she's considered the offer to inherit all of his considerable estate if she acquiesces to his posthumous demands. No, she isn't prepared to accept Jonathan's conditions. She will pack up Jonathan's goods and will return them. No, she won't be convinced otherwise. And no, no further correspondence would be entered into.

She shuts down her machine with a slight slam. Now that she's despatched the problem of Jonathan's estate and illegitimate child back into the hands of the lawyers, she's free to start on Rosie's house, clearing it to make way for the retreat she'll open up when lockdown is over. While the windfall would have been very useful, her savings will have to do for now. It'll be a long haul without Jonathan's money, but she feels up for the challenge to make it work, all in the name of the cause. It's the perfect timing. Lily feels excited for the first time in months, clearer, as if the unrestrained instructions she issued to the lawyers have blown away the last layer of dust in her heart.

Despite the conviction of her email, Lily feels a sense of morbid curiosity about the young woman who filled a Rosie-sized void in Jonathan's life. She spends ages stalking Annabel Martin on as many social media platforms she can access, trying to understand, to make sense of it all. This is his daughter. His other daughter, who shares the same hair, the same build, the same smile, even, as his — their — daughter Rosie.

The pictures tell a story of her life as a seemingly happy girl who is growing into a young woman. Birthday parties, school dances, netball matches, mountain hikes, surfing lessons, swimming galas. Days out with Heather — Jonathan must have had a thing for women named after plants. Days out with friends, days out with her grandparents (maternal, obviously), days out with her school. Night shots of her doing shots, her reading, her sleeping, her hamming it up for the camera, her with goofy grins, serious selfies, candid moments. Annabel is living the life Lily wanted for Rosie. Perhaps if they'd met in a different life, they'd be friends. Grudgingly, Lily thinks Rosie would have liked her, though in truth Annabel seems a lighter spirit than Rosie. Jonathan always joked that Rosie had the perfect balance of his optimism and Lily's pessimism, creating a perfectly realistic rational child, who always seemed to carry the tension between her left and right brain on her sleeve. Grudgingly, Lily thinks she'd like Annabel too. She is reminded of herself and the lightness she carried before motherhood and wifedom added their weight to her shoulders.

Jonathan starts to feature in the later years. He seems shy, reserved, almost reticent to be in the pictures. Of course he would. He's trying to hide his other life. Does Annabel know about Rosie? How much did he tell her? Did he pick up where he left off with Heather after Annabel found him, even if where he left off was leaving her bed on the morning after a seedy one night-stand?

Scrolling through Annabel's posts and photos, Lily feels like a voyeur gazing into the public-private life of a young woman she's never met but who she now, against her better judgment, feels bound to, even if she's rejected everything Jonathan has asked of her.

Jonathan has given Rosie what she'd always wanted but which Lily was never able to provide: a sister. The miscarriages and subsequent failed fertility treatments wrought havoc on Lily's body. They'd given up after doctors suggested the only way she'd be able to have another baby was to



pay a surrogate. Rosie was too young to fully understand, but there was no question she felt the loneliness of being an only child. Maybe that was the source of her ever-present anger as she got older. The feeling she was part of someone who wasn't part of her.

Lily would hear Rosie talking to her dolls, playing Sister Sister, hosting tea parties and gardening days with her favourite doll, which she called Bella; bringing Bella to the dinner table; insisting that Bella was never left behind.

Well, now, look. You have a sister, Rosie my darling. Her name is Annabel. Bella, for short.

Back to the pictures. In the last year, Annabel becomes more serious. Heather features only in memoriam. Her absence is etched into Annabel's face. A young woman trying to process death too soon. Lily knows how that feels. The agony of premature loss changes the shape of the face, the curve of the mouth, the cut of the grooves in the forehead. She sees it in the mirror every day.

Something in Lily starts to shift. She shuts it all down, feeling slightly grubby about the depth of her invasion into the life of a young woman who she will never meet. She feels like someone has stuffed cotton wool behind her eyes. Her brain is foggy from all the looking, and all the thinking, feeling, remembering.

As if to create a physical distance between her and Annabel, Lily goes into Number 10 opposite.

It is late afternoon. The heat of the day is subsiding and the light is changing from bright white to softer gold, casting dappled shadows through the trees. Inside, something is different. It feels different now. The air has moved around since Jonathan's furniture moved in. She has a sense that physical things have been moved around too, though she can't be sure. A drawer in the chest in the bedroom is slightly ajar. There is a spoon on the kitchen counter, a knife in the sink. In the bathroom, a towel is on the floor. Did she leave them there? She was sure there was nothing on the floor when she locked up after unpacking. And the spoon and knife? Did she leave them there? She feels like she can't be sure but leaves the thought to lie. She's tired.

Ignoring herself, she sets aside all packages and boxes marked *Personal Effects*. She may be returning everything but she still feels a sense of possession over the items he's held on to after all these years. She moves it all to her own house, making two trips. These are the things, not

tables or curtains, lampshades or soup tureens, that make up a life. The parts that make you you, that make a marriage, parenthood, partnerships. These are the things Lily feels she owns. We collect these things. Totems to show that we existed, that we did things and went places and knew people and loved and mourned others. The pieces of our physical puzzle which can never be replaced or replicated on a screen.

She'll call Tendai in the morning and ask his moving team to collect what they dropped off just yesterday. It'll take longer without Jonathan's pool of cash available to her, but she'll acquire what she needs to replace; furnish the retreat herself. If Jonathan wouldn't help her then, she doesn't want his help now — especially when that help is so conditional on Lily setting aside her daughter's life in favour of the other daughter she didn't know he had. It's a kind of investment in her own sanity, even if the decision could constrain her own quick progress.

Back in her own house, Lily arranges the boxes and packages containing Jonathan's personal effects in order of size on the floor of the lounge, placing the largest box on her left and leading to the right with three other boxes and two reusable shopping bags. There is a feeling of ceremony about the ritual of going through Jonathan's sentimental life. She unpacks the contents of each with slow reverence, like an archaeologist exploring their latest discovery.

She clusters the items into similar categories. Photographs in one pile, cards and letters in another. Notebooks, academic papers and certificates. Theatre programmes, ticket stubs and souvenirs like fridge magnets, teaspoons and snow globes. She smiles at that collection, remembering Jonathan's wry sense of humour. He'd seek out the most kitsch trinket from their travels and when home again would add it to what he called his Memory Altar, opposite his desk in his study. She finds the jar of sand, which was always placed at the centre of the altar. Had she ever asked him about it?

Over the years, the Memory Altar formed a dusty time capsule of their travels together. When he moved out the collection was the first to be packed into his car. She notices some new additions which must be from his life after Rosie. A bumper sticker that reads *Come to Bellville and CY*. A mug that reads *Absolute Fucking Legend*, with a signed Christmas gift tag from 'Elona Musk'. A *Harry Potter wand-ering star*, which is, well, a wand with a star hanging off the end by a silver thread. An empty jar with a label that reads *Air from Sossusvlei*. A garden gnome mooning the world from inside a snow globe.

The lounge floor is covered in the detritus of Jonathan's life. She picks up a diary from the year 2016, the year Rosie died. Jonathan had been an acclaimed infectious diseases expert. That year, she remembers he'd travelled a lot, and the diary attests to that. She flicks through the pages which show his itinerary. In January, an AIDS conference in Jakarta. In February, the Ebola summit in Ghana; March, the World Health Organisation Regional Committee Meeting in Sierra Leone, and so on, through to October. She pages to the dates that are forever impressed on her mind, 20-26 October 2016. Istanbul, speaking on a panel about a new strain of TB he'd discovered in his research.

The images of what happened during that week starting on 21 October 2016, are etched into Lily's heart. She and Rosie, driving, talking, then arguing, shouting. Her stopping and Rosie slamming the door. The other car losing control in the twisting lanes slamming into Rosie's body. The flashing lights of police, fire brigade, ambulance. The coroner's truck. The gawking bystanders. The news reports. And later, her aloneness.

As he'd predicted, she finds the jar of sand with her letter inside. This breaks her, and she gives in to what she's been fighting all day, her shoulders shuddering again, hands clutching the jar tightly enough to choke the blood from her knuckles. Tears are streaming down Lily's face. Her lungs feel constricted, suffocating from memories of the crash. She needs to move, get out of the house, get away from the taste of death that lingers permanently in her throat.

Lily steps out on to the stoep of her house, eyes closed, breathing deeply, trying to expand her lungs and expel the claustrophobia of inside.

"Miss Lily? Are alright? Miss Lily?"

"Trevor! You gave me such a fright."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean. I just walking past, on my home. Goodnight," he says, in his distinctive syntax of missing words, which leaves the listener grasping for understanding.

“What do you mean? Why? All I’m asking is to arrange for Jonatha— Dr Cottle’s goods to be taken back to his house in Rondebosch. I do not want to be the beneficiary of his Will.”

She is aware of the tightness of her voice, the clipped enunciation. Lily is shaking and her stomach is churning while her brain tries to process the conversation she needs to have. How did she get to this point? How did this become her life?

Tendai is explaining that because of lockdown she’s not able to return any of Jonathan’s goods, as she instructed in her email. Not even the generous amount of money which Lily is willing to pay would help. Time constraints, a global pandemic and national stay-at-home orders have made everything impossible, and lockdown starts tomorrow. Removals companies are fully booked, and the process of disclaiming the inheritance is blocked because it all needs to be signed in person, with witnesses, in triplicate – it may as well be in blood – before being despatched to the High Court, which is overloaded even on a normal day, and will be locked up until lockdown ends.

There is a long silence between them. Lily paces the kitchen, practising her square yoga breath. Inhale for four beats, hold for four, exhale for five, and repeat until you are calm.

“Mrs Cottle? Are you there?” Tendai’s voice is softer.

It doesn’t help. Her breaths turn into a shuddering sob. “I don’t know what to do, Tendai. You have to help me. I don’t want this.”

Through her sobs, she can hear tenderness in his words, his deep voice is quiet. “Look, there is still time until —” He coughs a little, stumbles over his next words. “Um... I mean...erm...that th- there, there is still time to think about this. Until lockdown ends, I mean.”

Lily stands in the lounge holding the phone at her side, shoulders drooped with defeat, looking at the debris spread about on the floor. Her eyes land on the last stack of papers, which she’d designated *Important documents - do not destroy*. Rosie is smiling up at her from within a frame. In the photo, she is looking directly into the camera. Lily picks up the sheet. It’s the order of

service from Rosie's funeral.

*Rose Amelia Cottle. Our Rosie.*

*11 February 2001-21 October 2016.*

*Rest in peace.*

*Always loved, always remembered. Taken too soon.*

Seeing the order of service is a gut-punch. She can't breathe. She grabs her bag, keys and phone and leaves the house, aiming for nowhere, which is exactly the only place to go right now. As she approaches the village's centre, she remembers the market fair, advertised on a flyer that landed on her doorstep this morning. Small town escapism. Just what she needs.

The fair is in full swing by the time she arrives. Perhaps the last blast before the world ends — or that's what it feels like, anyway. Lily is conscious of a feeling of dread, almost as if this is the last day before the apocalypse. In one way, it does feel like her world is ending.

Bunting hangs between lampposts, crisscrossing the street above the stalls. The stalls have been set up in the middle of the main road. In places like this, no-one really ever bothers with formal applications for these kinds of events. Small-town anarchy greasing the wheels of community-building. The offerings on display are as the flyer promised. A collection of traders selling home-made preserves, artisanal cheese, craft beer and handicrafts. The Owl House has a table full of books, statues and trinkets at half price. The local community cooperative is displaying a range of bowls, pewter cutlery and picture frames made of slate. The bookstore is offering a half-price lockdown apocalypse-themed reading selection. The line of tables stretches the half block from the Owl House to the beer garden attached to the Ibis Lounge.

It's already hot with that deep autumn warmth that heats the skin but which withdraws as soon as you sit in the shade. The leaves in the oak trees are showing their autumn colours. It seems like the whole village has come out to mark the day, as if, as a banner draped over Die Waenhuis's patio says, "Let's get [#Bethesdabevok](#)." Bethesda psychosis, madness, mania. Lily recognises some faces but chooses not to make eye contact just yet. She needs to re-acquaint herself with being around people again.

One of the stalls at the end of the row is selling a smorgasbord of masks and home-made sanitisers. Buy three masks and get one *Lovely Lavender* sanitiser for free, for only R200.

On any other day, this little market would be full of tourists, too. Seeing so many locals there makes the absence of visitors even more marked. Lily hasn't been in Nieu Bethesda for long, but she's come to recognise the difference between locals and visitors. It's in their dress, which for locals is the sartorial equivalent of comfort blankets. Khaki, blue and green. Trainers and boots. Fleece and jumpers. Visitors tend to be more fluid. In summer, flip flops, shorts, floaty dresses, Panama hats and trilbies. In cooler or wetter weather, designer wellies, wind cheaters and snoods. But it's also in their conversation, which Lily relishes. She most enjoys the moments when she can eavesdrop on their discussions about what they've seen, where they've been, where they're going. She misses conversations about ideas and art and travel and experiences. Her experience of Bethesdans has been more perfunctory. Is there water...? Did you hear about...? Please can you contribute to...

She makes a mental note to introduce conversation sessions at the retreat. She'll invite speakers: artists, designers, start-up founders, engineers, writers, to talk about interesting topics. She'll encourage debates and discourse. She'll facilitate workshops and creativity sessions. They will be women claiming and reclaiming their place in the world.

Feeling a bit rebellious, Lily takes a seat at an empty table at the Ibis Lounge and orders a beer. Jonathan didn't think it was seemly for a woman to be drinking alone. Two middle-aged men with moustaches pluck electric guitars and sing their own renditions of easy listening rock classics. She orders another beer, too quickly after the first, but hey, what's a couple of ales between neighbours on the eve of the world's end?

She feels better for being out of the house, away from the hydraulic pressure of Jonathan's bizarre request. On one hand, bequeathing everything to Lily makes sense. He was an only child, Rosie is dead and Lily has known him for what feels like forever, but it is also a completely irrational decision.

Regardless of his motives, which she'll never know, maybe she acted too rashly and she needs to rethink her knee-jerk reaction. Rejecting Jonathan's estate has cut her retreat dream short. All the business books tell you that short-term decisions don't necessarily help you achieve long-term

goals. Maybe Tendai has a point. Could the blockage of lockdown be a good thing? Perhaps it'll give her the time to process everything more carefully. She could close up Rosie's house and ignore its contents until she can do something with it all once all this is over, in 21 days' time.

She thinks about the money. If she reconsiders, after four years she'll have an annual income and some valuable Cape Town real estate in her back pocket. She'll be set for life in a way that her current meagre investments could never allow.

The money is appealing, to be sure. Lily had put her career on ice when Rosie was born and Jonathan had supported them. He'd agreed to a fair payout after the divorce but that settlement is dwindling. And anyway, what's four years? That's only eight face to face meetings and 48 phone calls. How hard could that be? Lily was good at polite conversation. As an academic's wife, she'd developed it as a super-power. It would be an entirely business relationship. How are you? What do you need? Here, go and buy some coffee and birthday cake. Hello, happy birthday to you, to me, and good-bye. Transactional. You've got to put in the time before serving out your sentence. Four years and they'd be out of each other's lives forever. Done and dusted. Let's all move on.

It's getting warmer. The music is flowing and the garden is filling up. She allows herself to become immersed in the moment, enjoying the freedom of her decision. She greets a few locals she recognises, Trevor among them. They wave, she waves, they exchange jokes about doomsday and how it may be the last time they see each other, so they may as well enjoy the last few moments of life as we know it.

Trevor gets up, offers her a seat, offers to buy her a drink, offers to walk her home later. He's distinctive among the crowds. He's at least a head and shoulders taller than Lily, with a head of tangled dirty-blond curly hair, deep-set translucent blue eyes, a patchy ginger-grey beard, acne scars and buck teeth. He looks the part of a lost-lander, as she's come to term those who check in to Nieu Bethesda but who never leave; clothes slightly too big, pupils slightly dilated, shoulders slightly hunched. Eyes in a sideways gaze. She takes the seat, declines the drink and makes light of her internally vehement response that he won't be walking anywhere with her this evening. His appearance on her doorstep over the last couple of days has unnerved her.

A while later, the locals make to leave and Lily gives in to the urge to linger for a little longer.

Maybe it's the alcohol, maybe it's the music, maybe it's the lively group of men and women who've commandeered the benches at her table with her nod and hand gesture as permission. She is immersed in the momentary feeling of freedom, the sense of having regained control over her life — whatever that is, and however long it will last, as long as it gives her something else to think about.

The visitors are in their late thirties, early forties. The women are lithe, the men lean, with short hair and a languid casualness about them. They are in three couples and one extra tagging along. He, the extra tagalong, seems the most interesting of all. Khaki combats, long-sleeved white linen shirt, greying stubble, leather wrist bands and brightly coloured woven bracelets on one wrist, large, loose silver metal watch on the other. Neatly clipped fingernails, strong hands. She thinks she recognises him. Something about his eyes. She sips her beer and digs into her memory bank but comes up with nothing.

He leans over towards her. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

She laughs, too loudly. "Oh, come on. Of all the pick-up lines...A simple 'hello' would suffice." She's aware that her face feels hot. She's leaning towards him too, despite her cynical outburst.

He holds out his hand with a grin. "Hello. Paul Woods."

They shake. "Lily Cottle. Pleased to meet you."

"Now," he says. "Let's get down to business."

"Business?"

"Yes. I need to figure out where I know you from. Your face is so familiar. I've been trying to work it out since we got here."

The exchange rolls between them for a few minutes, covering schools, universities, where they lived, what they do. After a while, they join the dots. He's a manager at a small game reserve in the Addo National Park. Lily and her family had celebrated her dad's birthday there in December, three months ago to the day. *Addo, December 2019*. That was when Lily decided to



shift her life from the chaos of London to the predictability of Nieu Bethesda.

Paul had been on duty on Christmas Day, presiding over a sumptuous lunch at the water hole and guiding them through the park at sunrise on foot and on viewing vehicles at sunset over the next few days. Talk about a coincidence, they'd laughed. Small worlds are even smaller in small villages. Still, it's plausible. The reserve is only 3.5 hours away, close enough for a pre-lockdown mini-break.

"I'm amazed you remember so well," she says to him, stumped, and perhaps embarrassed that she herself had forgotten him.

He leans towards her, raises his glass towards her. "First, it's an occupational hazard. I couldn't help but notice you and I always make a point of remembering our guests." He gestures around him. "You never know when you might meet them again."

"And second," he continues, "you were all so much fun. Always laughing."

"You have an insane memory, but yes, it's coming back to me now. We saw the big three and the little five."

"You're right. Those leopards are damn elusive and the rhinos were in hiding that day."

"And thanks for protecting us from the marauding dung beetles."

Paul laughs, a deep belly, head-thrown-back laugh. It makes Lily feel good.

It's only 7am. There is a lot of day ahead. There are lots of days ahead. It's a sunny morning, though the early autumn chill is distinct. Paul pulls two slices from the toaster, gasping with the heat burning his fingers, and spreads butter evenly on each slice. Lily is scrambling eggs and frying bacon. Two fat tomatoes, sliced in half, sprinkled with origanum, are spitting juice under the grill. The French doors are open and light is streaming into the idyllic domestic scene.

"I really loved last night, thank you," says Lily, keeping her eyes down over the eggs.

She feels strangely coy, despite the total exposure of the night's antics. They had explored each other's bodies time and time again, with the desire of two people immersed in the very real moments of a time that doesn't seem real. Later, she'd stood in front of the bathroom mirror after her shower, enjoying the sight and sensation of her body again. It's been a long time since she's been seen by someone in that way. Not just looked at, but seen.

Paul leaves the toast and moves behind her, sliding his arms around her waist. "You are a magnificent woman."

She loves the feel of him. His body is lithe and he moves with sensual grace. His hips press into her and she gives into the pressure of his body behind hers leaning into the stove's edge. He reaches around her and switches all dials back to zero, before turning her around to face him. He kisses her, cradling her head in one hand and stroking her cheek with the other. She kisses him back, melting into him and the arousal that's returning to her legs, her breasts, her breath, her inner softness. Her arms are around his neck. He's taller than her by a few inches, which means that her neck is arched and exposed to his mouth when he leans down to trace a feather-light trail with his tongue from ear to throat.

He increases the pressure from his hips to hers. He's hard under his combats and she feels that delicious sensation of warmth inside her own body. She runs her fingertips down his face, his neck, towards his chest, where she starts to undo his shirt buttons. Her fingers trail beyond the shirt to slide under the waistband of his combats, down to the hardness she needs. She undoes his button and fly. She lifts her arms and he inches her shirt upwards. They are moving slowly, with intensity and purpose, needing more of each other. Bra, jeans, shirts, combats, knickers form a

pile on the kitchen floor. Their bodies follow.

They move in quiet unison, as if discovering each other for the first time once again. There is no rush but there is a burning need to take these moments to the most natural end. She reaches that point first, he succumbs moments later. They lie still for a long while.

Lily hasn't been involved with anyone since Jonathan left, though god knows she'd learned well how to satisfy her own needs. But this...this man, his body, his mind, his humour...she could most certainly fall for all of it.

"You're leaving." It's a statement rather than a question.

He sighs and pulls her towards him. "I am. I must. But, hey, I'm only in Addo. After lockdown, I'll take you for another long walk to places where no-one can find us."

"As long as you can find me."

"I will search until I do."

"Sounds like a cunning plan to me."

He kisses her on the forehead. They laugh a little, but there is a knowing there.

While Lily sets out knives, forks and napkins, Paul looks over at Jonathan's life stacked on the floor of the lounge.

"What's all this? I didn't see it last night."

"Hm, yes, well, you were slightly distracted." Lily feels the joy of mischief and flirtation. It's unfamiliar but delicious.

Paul reaches over and kisses her hand, sending sparks of sensation up her arm. He eats quickly, neatly, cleaning his plate of every morsel and wipes his mouth with a satisfied grunt. She gets up and starts to clear the dishes while he crouches over the papers, books and photographs, lifting

corners and cocking his head to read occasionally. He picks up the order of service and brings it to her.

“Your daughter? She’s beautiful. Just like her mother. I’m so sorry Lily.”

Lily maintains her focus on the soapy dishwater. “She is — was. I miss her. A lot.” She wipes her hands and flicks on the kettle. “Coffee?” Her voice is a little too bright.

Just then, the doorbell rings. She looks at Paul, feeling panicked. He raises an eyebrow and says nothing. Why does she feel like she has something to hide? Grasping control of the moment, she opens the door with a flourish, grinning at Paul in acknowledgement of the over-response.

“Trevor.” Her grin leaves.

“Morning Miss Lily. I just wanted know if needed me to get from Graaff today. I’m going in. Doc asked me go for him and I know had visitor. I check if needed me to get anything.” He tries to crane his neck around the door, but Lily blocks his view of the interior.

Gritting her teeth against Trevor’s comment about company, she sends him off with a list designed more to placate him than to meet any specific needs she has. Kitchen towel, gem squash, fruit juice, wine if it can be found at this late stage before the alcohol ban kicks in at midnight. Lily locks the security gate when he leaves.

“That’s a very generous offer. Friend of yours?”

Lily brushes off the question. “Just a guy who lives down the road. A handyman.” Lily hands Paul a fresh coffee and sinks into the couch.

“You were saying?” he says.

The story pours out of her. The marriage, the argument, the crash, the divorce, Rosie, Jonathan. His death, the Will, the house full of his stuff across the way. His bequest, Annabel, her decision. Lockdown and life at a standstill with a cloud hanging over her but no solution that can be activated until the pandemic is all over and life returns to normal in a few weeks.

Paul has been watching her intently throughout the outpouring. She feels exposed. Surprised at how much she's sharing with the stranger who had seen, found, taken, awakened, more of her in the past 15 hours than anyone had in the past 15 years. He gets up and comes back with the box of tissues from the kitchen counter. He pulls one from the box, leans over, wipes a tear from her face, then leans back against the opposite armrest and crosses his arms.

"Want to know what I think?"

"Of course. It'd be good to get an objective perspective. Even from a relative stranger who I may never see again." She acknowledges the barb, recognising the moment of self-preservation. He's going to leave anyway. No point in hoping for the impossible.

He raises an eyebrow. "I'll ignore the last comment. You will see me again. As to your first point, you won't like it, but here it is."

She leans back, crosses her arms and looks directly into his eyes. Challenging him to show that he knows her.

He meets her gaze: "I think you're being ridiculous."

She jerks her head back, raises an eyebrow, gathers her breath. Then: "Excuse me?"

"I think you're being ridiculous."

"Yes, you just said that. I'm just trying to understand what you mean." There is ice in her voice.

He says, "Hey, relax," which has exactly the opposite effect on Lily.

She gets up from the couch to create distance between them, marking a battleground. "I don't think you get how difficult this situation is."

"Oh I do. You've been very clear. Thing is, everything you've told me since I met you, and especially in the last hour, points to the fact that this girl...Annabel...you need her."

Lily feels the flush rising from her chest. Her face burns and that knot returns to her stomach. She feels her eyes squint. Sits on her hands, forcing herself to stay calm. “How dare you make judgements about my life. About me.”

He raises an eyebrow and smirks. “You know I’m right.”

“I think you’ve overstepped the mark.”

He doesn’t flinch. He holds her gaze until she looks away with an angry flick of her head. “Look, you’re alone in the world. She is the only connection you have left to your past life, even if—”

“Even if she’s the child of my dead ex-husband, conceived when he fucked another woman behind my back?”

He reaches forward and touches her knee gently. “Hey, I—”

She pulls away, coiling herself into a protective ball.

He shrugs, leans back into the couch. “Look, I get the dilemma, but, think about it. We’re social creatures. We’re not meant to be alone. And in this place...”

“I am.”

“You are...what?”

“Meant to be alone.”

He reaches forward again and strokes her face. “I’d disagree. May I continue?”

She dips her head and gestures for him to continue. The pause and movement somehow break the tension between them.

“This girl....”

“Woman.”

“Sorry. This *woman*, Annabel,” he says, with pointed emphasis on the word, “she’ll be hurting right now. She’s young. Without any parents. She’s lost so much. You’re the only direct connection to her dad, potentially the only kind of mother she has. I know how that feels. To be young with no-one. I guarantee she’s looking for a parent.” He snorts a little and rubs his hand through his hair. “S’what what I needed, for sure.”

What is this man’s story? Infatuated by the unusual sensation of being the only focus of someone’s attention for hours on end, she’d not delved any deeper into his background and he’d shared little of his story, if anything at all.

But before she can ask for more, he keeps talking. He shrugs, leans forward to rest both hands on her knee. “You’re it, and as much as you might hate the idea, she is it. I think you need her as much as she needs you.”

Lily gets up off the couch in one sudden, emphatic movement, to create even more distance between them. “Maybe she is alone and needs someone. Maybe I am too and maybe I need someone. He’s put me in an impossible position.”

She pauses, trying to suppress the part of her that has traditionally opened her arms to others.

“Look,” she continues, “if I’m honest, I do need his money. I want it but I don’t want her. But because of the little deal,” she makes air quote marks and spits out the word, “he’s structured so neatly, I have to make nice to Annabel, despite everything she represents.”

She feels her throat closing up. She needs air. Needs him to leave so she can breathe again, on her own. There is a long silence after her outburst. She knows she’s exposed the worst of herself. She stands up and opens the front door, avoiding eye contact with him.

“It’s too much. I think I need to be alone.”

Paul gets up, stretches. “Geez, that was unexpected. Um. I s’pose I’m leaving.”

He collects his phone, wallet and keys from the bedroom and walks towards her, slowly, deliberately, almost with caution. He takes her hands and looks deep in her eyes. "I would like to speak to you again, maybe even see you, but it's your call. Literally." He cocks his head back towards the bedroom. "I've left my number. Use it. Don't use it. But I hope you do."

She doesn't look up when he leaves. She hears the garden gate click, imagines him turning left, his sensuous mesmerising movements shifting the atoms as he goes. From the village, from her life, perhaps forever. Like they all do. Everyone leaves, forever.

Moments later she steps out on to the stoep. She doesn't see Paul but she sees Trevor loping towards her, coming from the same direction Paul left. He waves at her. She nods and steps inside before he speaks. Why is he always there?



Nieu Bethesda feels strange. The silence is heavier and thicker than usual. Lily likes being here. She doesn't mind being the newcomer when there are so many newcomers in the transience of this tourist village. She is still getting to know the village's moods, its textures, its depths and shallows. When it's full of tourists, it's lighter. It offers itself to the strangers flocking to the village, carrying themselves either as reverential pilgrims or as box-ticking passengers on a tourism conveyor belt. Table Mountain, tick. Garden Route, tick. Ostriches in Oudtshoorn, tick. Cango Caves, tick. Valley of Desolation, tick. Owl House, tick.

It's the Owl House that brings people here. A shrine to art, isolation and rebellion, created by a woman who was either a genius or slightly mad, depending on whose account you're reading. Helen Martins' trademark owls, forged in cement with car headlights for eyes, stand sentinel at the front door. In the garden, hundreds of figures shaped with chicken wire, glass and cement are forever petrified in the deep-etched Karoo sun.

The box-tickers shimmy past the camels, past the statues of baby Jesus, the mosaicked mermaid and the hostesses wearing beer-bottle gowns. They flow through the house, into the gift shop and out again to find a cold pint for the grown-ups and a Coke for the kids at Boetie's pub, before they hit the road out or retreat to the pool at their guest house. The pilgrims are earnest when they go into the house and solemn when they come out. They bow their heads to whatever tropes they see, whatever provocation they read into every concrete curve.

Lily thinks these thoughts while walking through the heavily silent streets. Today the country is to be locked down for 21 days. In the main road, Martin Street, she sees no more cars with registration plates from KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng or even Cape Town. Those who were here and who could leave, did. Those who didn't, well, they're not seen nor heard in this moment.

When she passes the Owl House, Lily thinks about the conversation with Paul. It unnerved her.

Now that she's vocalised it so explicitly, she can't ignore her admission. It makes her feel slightly grubby to say out loud that she needs Jonathan's money, but now that she has, she's willing to accept the admission. A hands-off guardianship seems like a trade-off she's willing to make. It feels like some kind of payment to apologise for Jonathan leaving her. A penance, if

you like, for his infidelity, his absence during their marriage and his desertion after Rosie died. Still, she feels soiled, somehow, as if being so bold about her material needs has tainted Rosie's memory in some way.

Maybe she is destined to be alone; to be the next dowager, the village curiosity swallowed up by her own madness. She is alone here, with no living child, distant parents and now no living ex-husband to connect her to the life she lived before. She has no history and no future she can immediately visualise.

Paul is patently wrong point about her needing Annabel. She needs Jonathan's money and Annabel is her tool to get it. She'll tick the boxes, comply with requirements, do the legal minimum. There are no emotional ties that bind Lily to Annabel, and Lily will make sure that status quo remains. End of story. Whatever Lily's feelings about her role in Rosie's death, she's certain she'll be no mother figure to Annabel.

To remove the layer of mental discomfort, she concentrates on her physicality. She focuses on the sound of gravel crunching underfoot, the breeze shivering through the leaves overhead. A dog barks in the distance and others respond to its call. The sun is lengthening the shadows, evaporating the day's heat and softening the shapes of the buildings against a paling blue sky.

She walks across the riverbed which may as well be called a sand bed. She's never seen water running over the rocks and shrubs in the dip that passes under the low bridge. She turns left towards the outskirts of the village, past the big white-walled guest house. One car, a red RAV4 with a Cape Town registration, is parked in the driveway. They're cutting it fine, with the long journey and the lockdown curfew looming. She ambles towards the paddocks where grumpy horses snort at any passer-by. She keeps walking, skirting past the farmyard at the end, into the lonely scrubby brush behind the houses, in a wide circle, back over the bridge towards home.

The RAV4 passes her while she's on the bridge. She glances up and sees a young woman with long curly hair behind the wheel. Lily waves absent-mindedly, more out of habit than conviviality. The woman slows down, waves back, then drives on.

When Lily arrives back at her house, the RAV4 is parked outside the gate. Lily stops in front of the car and leans in to take a closer look at the driver, squinting a little and blinking as if to realign what her eyes are seeing with what her brain is thinking. She moves closer. Her world slows down. The features of the driver, the woman with the curly hair who waved at her, become more distinct. They are features she knows well. Pale skin, long curls, big almond shaped eyes.

They are the features that Lily made, that Lily owns, that Lily lost. The features that belong to Lily's Rosie. But it's not Rosie. As Lily gets closer, she sees a set to the mouth, a broader brow, slightly larger ears, a higher forehead. Rosie's face is, was, more refined, more of hers — Lily's — than his, Jonathan's. This woman is more Jonathan.

Annabel. Here. Now. Today.

Why?

The woman is watching Lily. Both hands are gripping the steering wheel. She does not move. They make eye contact briefly and the woman smiles before Lily looks away.

Lily walks past the car and opens the garden gate, acutely aware of how her body is trembling. Her breath is coming in short inhalations. Her palms feel damp and her face feels hot. Behind her, she hears the car door close. Lily fumbles the key in the lock to the front door.

“Hello. Are you Mrs Cottle? Lily Cottle? Mrs Cottle. I'm—”

Lily turns to face Annabel square on, wishing she would stop saying her name. “I know who you are, Annabel. I'm just not entirely sure what you're doing here.”

Lily takes a step backwards over the threshold, as if to create a separation between Jonathan's life and hers. Annabel takes a step back, perhaps for the same reason, then holds out her hand. Lily takes it and they shake firmly. Clearly Annabel has been taught well. A firm handshake makes the best first impression.

“Jonath — my dad — he told me about you.” Annabel’s voice trails off, perhaps responding to Lily’s growing frown which Lily knows is as visible as she feels it to be painfully physical. Annabel’s hands are at her side, fingers moving constantly.

My dad. How strange that sounds coming out of a mouth that isn’t Rosie’s, like some kind of fake video where you see one person’s voice and mouth superimposed over another person’s face. What do they call it? Deep fake. When your brain tries to process one thing but the reality is something completely different.

In another life, at another time, with another person, Lily’s instinct would have been to open her arms and hug the pain away. To let the speaker sob into her shoulder. Stroke their hair and whisper words of comfort, help and welcome. But now, the only movement in Lily’s body is her heart beating too fast. Her brain is racing. What is Annabel playing at? Why didn’t Tendai tell her anything about this?

Annabel’s shoulders are shaking. Her face is in her hands.

Lily turns, walks into the house and fetches the tissue box from where Paul had left it this morning. Was it only this morning? She remembers his words: *“You’re the only direct connection to her dad, potentially the only kind of mother she has. I know how that feels. To be young with no-one. I guarantee she’s looking for a parent.”*

She hands Annabel the box and says: “Let’s walk.”

Annabel blows her nose, pulls some tissues from the box and stuffs them in her pocket.

“You took a risk coming here,” says Lily. “Lockdown starts tonight.”

Annabel replies simply. “Yes. I know. I don’t know. I had nowhere else to go. All the flights — the traffic...”

She keeps talking, stumbling over her words. She’d come to Cape Town from Joburg for Jonathan’s funeral. She couldn’t bear to be in the house on her own so she was staying with friends but using Jonathan’s car. That would explain the RAV4’s absence from the delivery, Lily

thinks. When lockdown was announced, Annabel had tried to get a flight back to Joburg but all flights were full with the cross-country pre-lockdown exodus. She'd decided to move into his house to wait out the lockdown, but when she turned up she found it was empty. The security guard gave her Tendai's number. She decided to take a chance driving back to Joburg in Jonathan's car. But the highway was clogged with people who had the same idea. She saw a sign to Graaff Reinet and impulsively switched plans. She turned off the highway and drove to Nieu Bethesda.

"I arrived last night."

"How did you find me?"

"My dad showed me a picture of the gate he had made for Rosie. I just drove around..."

Lily is hit with full understanding. She stops and turns to face Annabel.

"You mean —"

Annabel's face is red and blotchy from crying. She holds both hands out to Lily "Please, Mrs Cottle. I have nowhere else to go."

"Where did you stay last night?"

"At Klein Geluk Guest House, on Pienaar Street."

"Hm. Luxury choice."

"It was the only place I could get into at such short notice. But they are closing for lockdown and in any event, I could never afford to stay there for the whole time. And no-one else is answering when I call other B&Bs."

Lily feels a surge of anger. They are rounding the corner and nearly back at her house. "Maybe you should have thought of that before you drove all the way up here the day before the country is shut down. Tell me Annabel, why did you really come here? What did you hope to achieve?"

More to the point: what do you want? Or rather, how much?"

Annabel winces and draws her shoulder away from Lily. A defence response to the venom in Lily's words.

"I had nowhere else to go. All the roads were so full —. Honestly, Mrs Cottle, it was the only thing I could think about. I don't want anything."

Lily's voice raises pitch. She can hear the argument rising. "But what about your friends? Is there no-one—"

She stops talking. It's all academic anyway. Even if Annabel did have somewhere to go, she wouldn't be able to get there. Lockdown starts at midnight, and with that, a strict curfew and a complete ban on travel between the provinces for 21 days. Nieu Bethesda is in the Eastern Cape, Cape Town in the Western Cape, at least eight hours' drive. She looks at her watch. Five pm. There isn't enough time to get back to Cape Town now.

They stop at Annabel's car. Lily feels wary, suspicious of Annabel's motives, confused about her own response. And yet, despite all that, she still feels some compassion for this young woman who has lost everything. She gestures to Rosie's house across the road. "That's my daughter's house," she says, emphasising the words my daughter, as if emphasising Rosie's presence. "You can stay there until lockdown is over."

She turns back into her house without another word.

Later that night, Lily is on the floor in the lounge, surrounded by a spread of pictures of Rosie.

She's so much like you, my darling, she thinks. Her eyes are the same colour as yours, the colour of almonds, just like yours. I remember holding you in my arms and looking into your eyes just after they opened for the first time. I remember holding you in my arms, looking into your eyes, so full of pain and fear before you closed them for the last time. Annabel has your eyes. She's about the height I'd imagine you'd be if you were still with us. About the same height as me, as tall as I was when you'd reach up on your tippy toes to try and be as tall as me. She has the same freckles too. Freckles spotted across her nose in the same way you had freckles spotted across

your nose, though her nose is a little wider and her forehead is a little higher. She has the same hair, the same curly hair you inherited from your father's genes, which are the same genes Annabel inherited. There's no doubt her father is your father, though I wished there were. I wish I could doubt that, but I can't. You have a sister, my darling; well, a half-sister anyway, a sister of a kind, who has the same hair and freckles and height and eyes and genes as you.

## PART TWO

### 1

Lily jolts awake, her legs kicking under the duvet. What has she done? And why? She lies in the pre-dawn darkness for a long time trying to find the answers, replaying the conversations with Annabel, with Tendai, with Paul. Annabel was shocked, almost suspicious, at Lily's instruction. That's what it was: an instruction. You stay here.

She gets up, makes coffee and opens the curtains in the lounge. There is no movement from the house opposite, though the lounge curtains are glowing from a light inside. Annabel is an early riser. She thinks about how quickly things had moved last night.

They'd talked in vague terms about leases and tenancy agreements and nominal payments to cover utilities. Annabel had agreed to it all, tears pooling in her eyes with each nod of her head. She looked like a little girl taking instruction from a teacher, just like Rosie used to. Wide eyes, serious mouth, slight frown between the eyes, back straight, hands still at her side. The resemblance was uncanny, unnerving, as if Annabel and Rosie were twins from different mothers. Jonathan's genes are strong. While they were talking, Lily was conscious of the sensation of looking at an older Rosie. Rosie as she would have been had she lived to the age of 18. Of course, now, Lily would never know.

With the guest house closed for lockdown, Annabel's luggage was already in the car. What would Annabel have done if she hadn't found Lily? A niggling question left unasked, and perhaps best left unanswered.

Lily had opened up the house, reeling from how quickly everything was happening, standing aside while Annabel unloaded a large suitcase, a laptop bag and a large leather tote bag from the car. It all seemed so convenient. The timing of Annabel's arrival, finding Lily, her luggage already in the car. Was this situation really all as Annabel had described? Of course it's possible, but with Jonathan's estate in the background, did Annabel have an ulterior motive? How much does Annabel know about Jonathan's dying wish? If Tendai had told her, clearly Annabel would be wanting to be on Lily's good side, to build a relationship with Lily as a trade-off to access the healthy sum with her name on it in four years' time.



Lily had to reach deep down into herself to remember the compassion Paul talked about, suppressing the sense that Annabel had planned this all along.

They had exchanged bland comments about how lovely the house is and how much work the garden needs. Annabel dropped the laptop and tote on the couch and left the suitcase standing next to the coffee table, with movements more confident, more casual, than when she arrived. They'd stood at opposite ends of the room, like feuding gunmen, Annabel in the centre of the lounge, Lily just over the threshold, her back to the front door. Lily felt unsure, uncomfortable, unconvinced that this was the right thing to do. It seemed too soon to have her there. She'd prefer that Annabel starts to mark her scent in the more public places of the house before the intimacy of what would have been Rosie's world.

What had she done?

They'd agreed that Annabel would settle in overnight and Lily would be around this morning with the lease documents, which, in a legal reality, probably wouldn't stand up to scrutiny, but in Lily's reality creates a barrier of obligations and formality between them in a way that suits Lily just fine.

Welcome to adulting, Annabel.

Later, Lily is standing at the threshold again, on the outside this time, as a guest waiting for the host to let her in. She is almost disappointed when she sees Annabel at the door. It wasn't a dream. Annabel exists.

"Mrs Cottle, I really do appreciate this. I know it must be ha—"

"It was the best solution at the time, given the circumstances. I'd like to take an inventory of any damages or breaks now and record it on the lease." What is it about this young woman that makes Lily this Lily? Lily the rude, abrupt, short-tempered?

"Okay," says Annabel, standing aside to let Lily in.

They walk through the house in silence as Lily makes a note of the marks, cracks and quirks she

knows so well, some of which Trevor had been working on in the days before. The windows in the kitchen don't fully close. The handle on the bathroom door sticks. There's a crack in the skirting in the dining room, a scratch on the lounge floor. Lily has seen these all before, having recorded the same when the last tenants left. She talks to Annabel about the house's idiosyncrasies. Annabel has already discovered the hot tap in the shower is cold, cold is hot. Lily goes on. The extractor above the stove doesn't work, so the window needs to be open when cooking, there is a trick to opening the lock of the cage holding the gas bottles outside, the lid on the water tank needs to be turned once clockwise and then twice anti-clockwise, and so on. She's aware she's marking her own territory but allows herself to revel in the hierarchy of possession.

If Annabel has a response to the familiarity of Jonathan's furniture, she makes no comment, though at times Lily does see her swallowing hard, as if to choke back her grief. Lily trails her fingers over certain pieces. His armchair, his desk, a chest of drawers he built. How much of a father was Jonathan to Annabel? Were they close? Annabel does seem appropriately sad, so perhaps he'd risen to his ambition of being a good father after all. That's what his letter said. *'When Annabel found me it felt like I'd been given another chance. I knew it was too late to improve as a husband. That's why I came back to Cape Town. I wanted to try again to be a good dad. I felt a failure for not being able to protect Rosie and this would be my penance, in a way, to try and protect Annabel.'*

When they get to the main bedroom, which should have been Rosie's, Lily blinks back the tears. Had there been more than one bed in the house, Lily would have locked up this room to preserve the memory of her own daughter's desires, even if she'd never see it in life. But Jonathan's one bed is too big for the spare room. It's Annabel's room now.

Lily goes through the motions of checking the room for the inventory, but in reality, is taking a mental snapshot of this new world that has been created without her. The bed is made. A fluffy white bear is resting on the pillow. A pair of sheepskin slippers is next to the nightstand closest to the door. On the nightstand closest to the wall is a phone charger and a Kindle e-reader.

An antique dresser stands under the window. There are pictures on the dresser, in matching silver frames. Annabel with Heather. Annabel with Jonathan. A hairbrush, a can of Dove deodorant (*Original* scent), some hair ties and a red and white polka dot make-up bag are set neatly next to each other. The empty suitcase in front of the wardrobe tells Lily Annabel has unpacked already.

Annabel has moved fast, as if staking her claim with the homely scene in the room that shouldn't be hers.

Lily rushes through the rest of the process, needing to get out of the house. As she leaves, the door closes behind her with a slight slam.

Instead of going straight home, Lily decides to take a walk, despite the restrictions. She'll go around the block to clear her head. It's illegal according to lockdown rules, but she's willing to take the chance, as people do in this village at the end of the world where nothing ever happens. She rounds the corner deep in thought.

"Hello, Miss Lily. You be illegal." She freezes when she hears Trevor's voice behind her. Fumbling with her mask, she looks back over her shoulder and lengthens her stride to create distance between them.

"You're doing something just as illegal, Trevor. I guess that makes us co-conspirators. I won't tell if you don't."

He laughs and in one or two steps is alongside her.

"I was thinking you, yesterday. Morning."

"Well, you saw me, didn't you? When you came to ask about the groceries. Just leave them on my stoep. Tell me how much and I'll leave the money for you. I don't have any on me now."

"Don't need money," he shrugs, "I ended not going. Doc went."

They walk and he talks, asking her how she is, what's she's been doing, what she'll do after lockdown, and other trivialities. She responds in monosyllables, short, guarded answers, unsure about what to do, but sure she needs to get away from him.

"Who that in the house now?" he asks.

“A friend,” replies Lily, hoping her voice sounds non-committal enough to mask her concern about his question.

“Is work finished?”

“For now, yes.”

Even through her mask, she can smell alcohol on his breath. She is alert to their illegal walk and the possibility of getting caught, though who would be checking is unclear. And that’s just the point. Like the proverbial tree in the forest, if a woman screams in an empty village, does anyone hear? She picks up the pace, and he easily keeps up.

“Hey, you quick for me,” he says, with a grin and an airburst laugh of stale beer. He leans in towards her, “I like a woman moves fast.”

Not fast enough, she thinks, as she opens the door to her home and locks it behind her as the light is fading outside.

“I didn’t hear you knock,” says Annabel.

“I didn’t. I wanted to check the lock in the back gate. It was sticking before,” says Lily. She holds out the key to Annabel, who takes it with rather too much haste.

“I finished the inventory and brought the lease to sign,” says Lily. She shakes the sheaf of papers in her hand.

They move inside, awkwardly, like sitcom characters trying to go through a doorway together with grudging politeness, waving the other through while the other defers to the first.

Inside, Lily feels the house is tainted with Annabel’s occupation. As if the manifestation of Jonathan’s betrayal will block the healing, restorative energy she wants her clients to feel. When Annabel leaves in 19 days’ time, she will fling open the doors and windows and smudge every corner with sage smoke to cleanse the house of Annabel’s energy.

Lily scans the open-plan lounge and dining room. A laptop is on the couch, with a video on pause, showing a complex flowchart with arrows and numbers. The coffee table is strewn with papers, notebooks and textbooks with titles like *Economics: global and Southern African perspectives*, *Understanding Macro-Economics* and *Development of Economic Analysis*. Clearly, she’s taking a different path from her doctor father. An iPhone is propped up against the screen of the laptop, with a WhatsApp chat open and earphones trailing from the port.

Lily sits in an armchair and reaches over the coffee table to shift some of the papers aside to make way for the lease document. Annabel seems startled at Lily’s movements and quickly gathers up the sheets, holding them to her chest as if protecting a secret inner world.

“Sorry about the mess,” she says, making work of tidying up the books and papers on the table. She seems nervous, skittish. Lily says nothing but watches Annabel closely, trying to shake off the sensation that she is seeing her own daughter. Annabel’s hair, frame, movements, are mimicking Rosie’s. This imposter in front of her, taking Rosie’s place in this house.

Annabel is dressed for the late summer, in denim shorts, tank top and a longer-sleeved denim shirt over. She is barefoot. Her toenails are painted a dark plum colour. Her legs are slim and strong with athletic youth and bronzed from the Joburg sun. Lily takes mental stock of her own outfit, cast into drab relief against Annabel's effortless casualness. A plain loose-fitting khaki dress, with three-quarter length sleeves and modest knee-length hemline. Bare toes in Birkenstock sandals. She runs her hand through her hair, which she remembers hasn't been washed for a couple of days.

They sit at right angles to each other, Lily on the armchair facing the window, Annabel on the couch facing into the room. Lily runs through the lease document, summarising each clause. Annabel nods and listens attentively. They each sign in silence. It is a strangely formal ceremony, as if Annabel is signing her way into Lily's life and Lily is signing acceptance of that fact. Given what Lily knows about Jonathan's Will, that notion isn't far off the mark. The thought makes her feel constrained, restricted, without breath. She wonders what Annabel knows about that.

They greet each other at the door, politely. "Mrs Cottle, I am grateful to you for helping me."

As Lily opens the garden gate, she hears Annabel clear her throat. "Mrs Cottle, I need to ask you something. Please don't get upset."

Lily turns but stays where she is. "Yes?"

"Mrs Cottle, I have no food." Her voice is edged with desperation.

"Well, go get some. The store is two blocks away." Lily gestures with movements that reflect the irritation in her voice. "Go down here and turn right. It's opposite the police station."

"I went this morning but it was closed. The sign says they're closed for a week to replenish supplies for lockdown."

When did she go? Lily didn't see her leave.

"I have no internet, nor any data so I can't order anything. I haven't eaten since yesterday."

Fuck.

Lily sighs loudly. "I barely have enough for myself, but I will bring some over."

Rosie would have thought of this before haring all the way up to Nieu Bethesda before lockdown happened. Rosie wouldn't have gotten herself into this predicament. Rosie would have stopped at the store along the way and bought enough food to last her 21 days. But Annabel isn't Rosie. Annabel is Annabel, who turned up on Lily's doorstep, demanding accommodation and is now begging for food. Then again, would Rosie have asked Lily for help? Not likely. As she grew out of her Disney princess phase, she became more of an emo teenager, prone to sullen silences and furious outbursts like the one unleashed on Lily the night she died.

Lily goes into her house and starts decanting ingredients with more force than necessary into recycled shopping bags. The reminder of Rosie's death brings her to the brink of tears again. Is this how life will be with Annabel in it? Constant reminders of the last words spoken in anger? Demands for help an ever-present spectre of Lily's inability to help Rosie? She shakes her head and focuses on the mundanity of packing food into bags for Annabel's pantry.

In truth, she always has enough. In this place you quickly learn to be a bulk buyer. She portions out some butter, flour, sugar, coffee, tea bags, lemons. Small bottles of olive oil, ketchup, chutney, mayonnaise. Packets of spaghetti, rice, lentils, chick peas. Cans of tomatoes, sweetcorn, baked beans. Single portions of beef, chicken, lamb, pork. Slices of cheese, ham. A box of corn flakes, long-life milk. Broccoli, frozen peas. And so on. She finishes off with a small bag of washing powder and fabric softener. The last thing she wants is to be doing laundry for the daughter of her now-dead ex-husband.

Minutes later, Lily bustles past Annabel from the front door, through the lounge into the kitchen and starts unpacking the bags on to the kitchen table, handing ingredients to Annabel who packs them into cupboards and fridge. There is a comforting domesticity about the simple actions. For a moment, Lily feels like things are as they should be. A mother and daughter together. She suppresses the thought, for fear of betraying Rosie.

"Thank you Mrs Cottle. I don't know what to say. You've been so kind to me."

Lily thinks about Paul, wonders whether he got back to Addo in time. Wonders if she should call him. Wonders if he's right. He would have an opinion on the current scene. Maybe Lily does subconsciously need Annabel as a strange, almost macabre connection to her own lost daughter. A way to assuage her maternal obligations, left incomplete when Rosie died.

Lily doesn't respond. She keeps moving until everything is out of the bags and she has nothing else to do. No further excuse to be there.

"Mrs Cottle, I wondered about something else, too."

"Mm?"

"There's a guy who came round earlier today."

"A guy?" Lily looks up from what she's doing and wipes her hands with a dishtowel. She's nearly done.

"Yes. He's about this tall," says Annabel, gesturing about twenty centimetres above her head.

"Long blonde hair, with acne scars. Speaks funny."

"Oh, that's Trevor. He's just someone who was doing work here. What did he want?" Lily tries to quell the stomach flip she feels.

"He was asking for work and for money. He's really creepy."

"Just ignore him. He's a bit odd but harmless," says Lily, trying to keep her voice light. She moves towards the door and hands Annabel a small post-it note.

Annabel looks at it before taking it from Lily. "What's this?"

"The wifi details. Now you can order as much as you like."



Early evening. Lily has spent the day on the couch, fighting inertia and exhaustion and trying to process the events of the past few days. Jonathan is dead. He has another daughter. That daughter is in Rosie's house across the road. Jonathan's Will and all it demands. She feels fixated on what is happening in the house opposite. Though Lily has seen some movement inside, Annabel hasn't made an appearance outside at all. What does she do all day?

Her laptop pings and, without getting up, she reaches over and clicks Accept on the Skype call. She'd forgotten about the date with her sisters. She has three. Liz, the eldest, an engineer in London, married to Garry with two kids; next, Isobel, a school head in Gauteng and divorced mother to a daughter, in a long-term relationship with Douglas; and Sarah, a full-time mum in Melbourne, married to Patrick with a pigeon pair, as she describes their son and daughter.

"Hey Lil, are you lying down? You're sideways," says Isobel.

She slides off the couch onto the floor in a kind of rebellion against social etiquette. She shifts a cushion under her butt and sits with legs crossed at eye level with the screen.

Interrupted periodically by cameos from the kids and partners in their respective homes, each sister offers the headlines of the latest developments in their lives. Lockdown has changed the tempo. Kids are home-schooling, parents are working from home. Liz is less concerned with masks and more concerned with what Brexit will mean for Garry's logistics business. Isobel is griping about the alcohol ban. Sarah isn't in lockdown yet but it's imminent. As their faces appear on screen, Lily realises how much she misses being with them. Though they are all cast across the world, they've always made a point of getting together every year. This call is their annual ritual of negotiating who will host the next gathering at Christmas this year after lockdown is over.

They talk generally for a while, doodling around their respective lives. Sarah shares a recipe for banana bread and a link to a great jigsaw puzzle stockist. Liz and Isobel argue over which home-schooling app works best and how much screen time kids should have now they're home all day. They agree that lockdown is a bit of a novelty, and they're all trying to keep their chins up, faces brave and heads above water until it's all over, life gets back to normal again.

“What about you, Lil?” asks Liz. “You’re very quiet.”

Where does she even start? She looks at her face in the screen, almost seeing herself for the first time. Her shoulder-length mousey-brown bob is flecked with strands of grey. Her skin is still tanned from the summer, but there are lines she hasn’t seen before around her mouth and eyes. Behind her round black-rimmed glasses, her green eyes have dark grey rings under them. She looks like she feels: worn out. Empty.

“Jonathan has another daughter.” No preamble, no break it to them gently, just blurt it all out and land it on the table like a lost dumpling landing in the gravy boat and splashing shit-coloured liquid all over the crystal glasses.

Silence first, but their faces say it all. Incredulous, confused, shocked. They find their words and explode into a cacophony of perplexed responses. “What?,” they ask, in multiple different ways. “What do you mean, Lil? Another daughter? Who? From where? How old? I don’t understand.”

“I said, Jonathan has another daughter.” She shifts a little to lean back against the couch, adjusts her glasses, takes a sip of wine. There is no movement from the house opposite. No sign of any occupation. Where is Annabel? What is she doing?

Looking out the window to avoid eye contact, or perhaps hold back the tears, Lily starts to pour out the story. Everything, from the day Jonathan died, to the Will, to his furniture arriving, to the letter, to his confession, to the condition, to her rejection, to Annabel turning up on her doorstep the day that lockdown started, to the fact that she is now living in Rosie’s house across the road. She talks about it all until her throat is dry and her voice hoarse. This is the most she has spoken to anyone since Paul was here.

Paul. She doesn’t mention him.

Lily stretches to reach a tissue, blows her nose and dries her eyes.

“She’s just like Rosie,” chimes Isobel. “I looked her up on Instagram while you were talking.”

“Stop, Is. Please shut it down,” says Liz. Sarah agrees.

“Why?” challenges Isobel. They argue again, Liz suggesting that it’s creepy to stalk a young woman, Isobel resisting on the grounds of know thy enemy and all that, and anyway if Annabel Martin wants to put her life out there like that, then she should know that people will be looking for her.

“I don’t mind,” interrupts Lily. “I did the same thing. She does look like Rosie. She’s a lot like her, in fact.”

Lily sips her wine, looking out the window again. The light is dipping now. She reaches over to switch on a lamp. She feels spotlighted in a pool of darkness in the room. Quite the metaphor for her life right now.

Another chorus of questions brings her back to the conversation with her sisters. “What are you going to do?” they ask.

“I don’t know. I can’t chuck her out. Where would she go? I can’t just send her away. Everything here is shut, and with lockdown...”

Liz, again, angry: “You know, I just knew Jonathan was up to something. The way he just dropped and left after Rosie died.”

The conversation erupts again, each weighing in on what Lily should do. Keep her, leave her, drop it all, go through it because the benefits are worth it. Take the money and run. Go through the pain barrier, keep up appearances. They voice their opinions over what Lily should say to the lawyers, to Annabel, to their parents. Their parents. She hasn’t told them yet. The thought knots her stomach.

The discussion rolls on, but Lily can’t pay attention any more. She feels like that character in the science fiction movie who’s accidentally found a portal and is being sucked through a time-space continuum with the history and future of the world rushing by in a conduit of seamless images. Only, in Lily’s case, the continuum is the real history of her past life with Jonathan and her future life with Annabel, and the images are the all-too-brief years she had with Rosie. When she gets to the end, the point at which she has to look to the future, she sees nothing. It is blank. The

conversation is as confused as Lily feels. None of her sisters have any answers because the only answer is the one Lily came to herself a couple of days ago. The only option she has is to let Annabel stay in the house until lockdown is over and her life, their life, the world, returns to normal again.

“If it is ever over. What if they extend lockdown? Lots of people have been saying it might. I’ve been hearing rumours,” says Isobel. It’s a fair question. Infections have been rising and people are dying around the country. Lily’s had the same thought over the past few days, but dared not voice it.

Before, the noisy chatter would lift Lily’s spirits and she’d give as much voice to her own opinions as the others are doing now. But the sound of their views on what she should do with her life is drawing out of her whatever energy reserves she has left, almost into the screen, sucking her in, rolling her around in the matrix and spitting her out again.

“Stop, please. Just stop,” she says, loudly enough to be heard over the din. “I’ve done what I think is right and really is the only option. She has no-one and nowhere else to go.”

Is she defending Annabel?

“Do you have to give it all back?” asks Isobel.

“If I reject the beneficiary status, then I do.” She explains the need to sign papers in person, the High Court in lockdown, the inability to find a removals company. While she talks, she feels like she’s on the outside of her life looking in, as if she’s relaying a story she read in a book or saw in a movie. It’s an intriguing plot, to be sure, but she wished more than anything that she wasn’t the main character in the sorry tale. “Until then, I remain the beneficiary and Annabel remains the problem on my doorstep. It’s a shitshow.”

Her sisters are all quiet. Like her, they have no answers, no solution that could serve as a shovel for Lily to dig herself out of the hole Jonathan has dragged her into.

“I just wish I could see you all in person.” she says, changing the subject and breaking the silence that comes with people who’ve heard bad news, but don’t yet know the most appropriate

response. With a brave face and some ceremony, she pulls a coin from her purse and flips it, landing on heads for Christmas in Nieu Bethesda. There is glass-clinking on screen, and happy smiles with effusive expressions of love you and missing you, and stay safe, and stay healthy and see you in December, before the call ends.

Lily shuts the call and stretches up to standing. Daylight has given way to dusk. She's stiff from sitting, but probably also from the tension she feels almost continually these days. She pours more wine and looks out the window. Across the road, the stoep light is on and she can see Annabel silhouetted against it. She is doing a yoga routine, seemingly oblivious of Lily's voyeurism. She moves slowly, with smooth meditative movements, reaching her arms high above her head before bending into a forward fold, stepping back into a plank, holding for a few beats, dropping into a cobra pose and arching her upper body, head back, picking up into a tall downward dog and walking back up to a forward bend, before starting the sequence again and a third time again. There is a sensuality, a confidence, in her movements.

Lily watches, feeling like she's intruding into an intimate moment. She reaches up to close the curtains. Just then, she catches a movement just outside the glow of light from Annabel's house. A tall form emerges from the shadows, Lily makes out Trevor's height, hair and stooped shoulders. How long has he been there? He raises his hand and nods towards Lily, before turning and walking away towards the street corner.

The municipal waste removal crew is roving through the village, masks on, gloves on. Lily is glad to see them. Lockdown and steaming piles of garbage on the streets would be a bad, bad combination. Still, at least the crew is working. God knows, the workers in the country need whatever jobs they can hold on to. Worse than garbage on the streets would be the predicted catastrophe of the majority of the population pushed further into poverty by the economy frozen in time by lockdown. Gotta love this country. It breaks your heart every day.

Lily knocks and waits a few moments before Annabel answers. Annabel is dressed in a light green summer dress covered with a red cardigan. It's still early and the heat of the sun hasn't taken hold yet. Again, Lily sees herself against the younger woman. She feels awkward, overdressed, in her funereal outfit of black leggings with black tunic, accessorised with a black mask and black Converse trainers. Annabel is not wearing a mask. She is wearing lip-gloss.

They speak for a few minutes, Annabel standing inside the house and Lily on the doorstep. Lily gesturing to the arriving garbage truck and describing the process. Recycling to be cleaned and sorted into the transparent bags. General waste in black bags. Food waste in the bucket alongside the house. The recycling system is new, introduced by well-meaning local residents wanting to be more environmentally conscious about protecting the village's unique character. This is why she likes Nieu Bethesda. You can feel part of a place, with a part to play in making the place.

Lily remembers Rosie and her willingness to always please people before the phase when Rosie didn't want to. She would look up at Lily, her strawberry blonde curls bouncing with each minuscule movement of her head. She'd listen intently, head cocked to one side, silent, while taking the instruction, as if holding on to Lily's every word. Annabel is still and silent in the same way. She listens and nods in earnest, before wishing Lily a good day. Channelling Rosie.

Back home, despite Lily's feeling of goodwill after the recycling conversation, she reads a strange atmosphere in the village's online village. In ordinary times, it's always a logistical challenge to access supplies here, unless you grow or rear your own food, but people generally share the burden. Lize, who runs the bookshop, will offer to collect something when next she's in Graaff Reinet, the nearest big town, a 100km round-trip away. Boetie, who runs the pub, is willing to part with some beers or wine if you run out, outside of trading hours. Wynand, the guy

who makes the goats cheese, sells it at a price even locals can afford. And so on.

But now, this week, it's clear these times are not ordinary. Reading the news and accompanying commentary is depressing. Word has spread on the local WhatsApp and Facebook groups about panic-buying in Graaff. Stores are running out of everything and police are called in to limit people moving around who have to make a compromise between the possibility of becoming infected with trying to put food on the table with ever-dwindling financial reserves. The majority of the population is damned if they do and damned if they don't. Confirming what Annabel told Lily, Nieu Bethesda's only store is closed and residents are worried about their own food security. Anger and fear are palpable and, typical of a digital 'community' — a word used with caution in this context because at times like these communities are more like fragmented groups of self-serving individuals, all of them angry — the platforms are ablaze with accusations, recriminations, bullying, with a force equal to the calls for compassion, kindness, collaboration.

Lily reads through the various posts and messages, which range from outright racism to sentimental commiserations and everything in between. She refreshes the feed and freezes when she reads the most recent post.

@AnnabelMartin

*Hello Nieu Bethesda. I'm new here. I need insulin. Is there a doctor? Where is the nearest chemist?*

@LilyCottle

*There is no doctor here. There is a chemist called Merino Pharmacy in Graaff Reinet.*

She adds a phone number and website link. Should she call Annabel? She looks to the house opposite. *I need insulin.* Jonathan was diabetic. Clearly his health genes were strong too, though he hadn't passed it down to Rosie. Through the window, she can see Annabel in the lounge. She is sitting cross-legged on the couch, with her laptop on her lap. She has earphones in, and her nodding head tells Lily she's listening to music. Her mouth is moving, as if singing along or enunciating whatever words she's reading on screen.

Lily feels a chill, as if someone walked over her grave. She gets up and retrieves a cardigan from her cupboard; her favourite red comfort-blanket cashmere vintage, thrifted from Oxfam in

central London. She makes a cup of tea and brings it back to the lounge. She sinks into the couch, crosses her legs and leans back against the cushions with eyes closed.

She slips into a reverie, thinking of the times when Rosie was sick. Sick with gastro-enteritis, mumps, chicken pox, tonsillitis; all the childhood maladies. A condition a year, she and Jonathan used to joke. At times it felt like she was on first name terms with the pharmacy staff, even without their name tags. By contrast, sickness in Nieu Bethesda is complicated. The clinic is only open at certain times. There is no chemist, no doctor, no hospital. She realises then that she is it if Annabel gets ill. The young woman knows no-one in the village, well, not to her knowledge anyway.

Lily shakes her head to shift the thoughts of Annabel. She reaches for her laptop and starts flicking through the albums in her photo directory, paging through Rosie's digital life in colour, getting lost in the chronology of memories. During the walk down her family's virtual road, she finds a video of Rosie singing Christmas carols in a school choir the year before she died. She reaches for her headphones and cranks up the sound. With eyes closed, head nodding, she sings out loud. *Jingle Bells jingle bells jingle all the way*, sings Rosie in the front row of the choir and Lily on a couch in Nieu Bethesda, moving through *We wish you a merry Christmas* and ending off with an acapella version of *Silent Night*.

The video ends and Lily opens her eyes, wiping the tears from her face and adjusting the cardigan around her shoulders. She looks up. Annabel is standing at the window, glaring at Lily. Lily surveys the scene in her mind. She and Annabel, dressed almost alike with matching red cardigans, sitting cross-legged on opposite couches, singing with headphones. Does Annabel think Lily is trying to make a point, trying to mimic her? No wonder she's angry. Private thoughts, public worlds.

She is too close, Lily thinks. Too visible. Too...here. It's too much.



“No, I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s not possible at all. The regulations forbid any kind of non-essential movement.”

“But what defines essential? Shouldn’t a personal emergency constitute essential travel?”

“Well, in this case, the individual would be travelling across provincial lines which is not allowed. Because of that, he or she would need to apply for permission from the office of the premiers of both provinces, as well as the police and traffic authorities.”

“Okay.” A glimmer of hope.

“How would one go about obtaining that permission?”

Sergeant Japhta sighs into the phone, as if to regret his choice to ‘actively build effective and positive relationships with all registered stakeholders and residents in Nieu Bethesda,’ which he announced on the flyer distributed throughout the town when he took up post as local police chief two months ago, bravely including his mobile number. It had landed on Lily’s doorstep at the time and she’d kept it pinned to the fridge in case she might need it someday. Someday has come.

“Well, Mrs Cottle, they would have to send a written motivation, with relevant medical documentation to confirm their reasons for needing to travel. It would need to go to the officials of both provinces.”

“Medical documentation?”

“Yes ma’am. You can only travel for medical emergencies.”

“She is diabetic. She needs insulin,” says Lily quickly, seeing the opportunity.

“Is it an emergency?”

“She is diabetic,” repeats Lily. “She needs insulin and there is none in Nieu-Bethesda. I think she may need to go back to her doctor in Cape Town to refill her prescription.” Even she knows that’s a bit over-dramatic.

Lily’s front door is open. She is standing in the frame. The rain is turning the gravel road into a strip of mud splashing up the garden wall. Opposite, Annabel is pacing the stoep at Rosie’s house. She is on the phone, too, gesticulating into the air and glaring at Lily. Not exactly a medical emergency. Not unless you count Lily’s broken heart beating too fast, her head that hurts from thinking too much, the constant knot of anxiety in her stomach, her dry mouth and her eyes that sting from too many tears. That would constitute a medical emergency. Requesting urgent evacuation of the insurgent currently occupying her land.

“She can go to the hospital in Graaff Reinet,” says Sergeant Japhta.

Rain is falling in big fat drops, beating a percussive symphony on the corrugated iron roof of the house. Lily listens to the police officer talking. Droplets streak down the windowpane, falling to the floor like Lily’s hopes of getting Annabel out of Nieu Bethesda.

“But her doctor is in Cape Town—”

Her doctor, what? What does Lily know about Annabel’s medical situation? Lily knows what she’s doing and feels a knot rising in her stomach, suppressing a sense of guilt in the face of thinly-veiled connivance.

“Is it an emergency?”

“Well no, but—”

“If it’s not an emergency, they can’t go. Because of lockdown rules, you know. If she needs medication, she can go to the hospital.”

It was Lily’s turn to sigh. Graaff Reinet is too close. “Can you give me the details of where this person must apply to travel out of the province?”

“You can find the details on the government website.”

She thanks the officer with another sigh and dials the local municipal councillor — another number saved on her phone for some day. She hears the same story. If it’s not a medical emergency, there’s no way she’d be able to legally get Annabel back to Cape Town.

Still in the doorway, head bent over the phone, Lily finds the place on the government’s website but gives up after the first three paragraphs of impenetrable instructions written in Government Gazette-speak. Section (C), paragraph (16), sub-section (a), sub-sub section (vii) yada yada no persons may travel for non-essential purposes other than, inter-alia, sub-sub-section (j) medical emergencies, defined as yada yada yada, notwithstanding the following exceptions sub-sub-sub section (d) and so on.

Jonathan’s daughter is here to stay. Lily’s hand drops to her side and she gazes outwards to the scene directly opposite.

Annabel is still pacing, talking, gesticulating. Despite the rain, she is wearing a light summer dress, white with big yellow flowers and a long green cardigan. She’s barefoot. She stops moving and turns to face Lily. Another standoff between bounty hunters. Digital pistols drawn. All the scene needs is tumbleweed and a trumpeting sound-effect before a gunshot rings out and a horse bolts through the town. Annabel laughs at something in her conversation, not taking her eyes off Lily. She ends the call, turns and walks back into the house.

The moment has unnerved Lily. She needs to do something productive, something to lift her out of the sense of inertia. Tomorrow she will finally tackle the now scattered stuff that’s been sitting on the floor for days, like a Memory Altar of her own. It’s unlike her to leave tasks unfinished but finishing this feels so final.

It's taken a few hours to file away Jonathan's life. The piles in the lounge have gradually reduced in size since last night. All the papers filed away. All the mementos packed up in a box. All the photographs and certificates packed into other boxes.

She lingers over his notebooks and diaries. He was doing his PhD when they met. Even back then he had a column of notebooks, notepads and diaries stacked in a cupboard. The column had grown and moved with every move they made as a couple and he'd taken them with him when he moved away from the marital home.

Jonathan had harboured an image of himself as some kind of rolling stone that gathered no moss. In reality he was a pebble in a stream of domestic mundanity cast against the stimulation of global recognition; a stalemate between invitations to school play dates and dates for school plays, against invites to deliver conference presentations and taking part in late night debates that could, given his profession, literally change the world. His name had come up recently, in local news reports about the coronavirus pandemic. Each time, she'd changed channels, scrolled forward, or muted the sound. She'd wanted no part of knowing his life.

She pages through the diaries from the nearly four years since he left. In the first year, he marked the date of the divorce hearing. After that, every year, Rosie's birthday was marked. Every year, her own birthday was marked. He hasn't marked the day of Rosie's death. Understandable, perhaps, given that it's one of those dates you want to forget but which is etched on your memory forever.

The day he arrived in Cape Town. Job interviews, social engagements with university friends, flights to conferences in Istanbul, in Toronto, in Mumbai, in Conakry. Bike races, theatre outings, live concerts. Dates to meet people whose names she recognises and others whose names are new to her. Meetings, press conferences, parliamentary hearings, summits and seminars. An expert rising to ever-greater heights.

On 6 January 2017, she notes an entry: *12.30. Meet A. The Creamery, Newlands. A? Annabel?* How appropriate. An ice cream date with his daughter. That's how happy families do it.

On the next page, a note, in his distinctive handwriting: *Diabetic-friendly ice cream for A.*

Lily flicks through more pages. Annabel's name features more regularly. Over time, the name Heather starts to appear too. *Voorkamerfest*, Darling. Flowers in Postberg. Knysna Oyster Festival. Theatre outings. Opera at Artscape. Fugard at the Fugard. Dance performances at the Baxter. Things to do. Places to go. People to see. Been there, done that, bought the snow dome.

When did Jonathan become such a culture vulture?

Seeing the dates, times, places, Lily thinks back to her own life during the same period. How had she spent her time? In grief counselling. In tears with her friends. In tears with her family. Doing yoga, doing meditation, doing art therapy. Looking for peace. Looking for answers. Looking for Rosie everywhere, but never, ever finding her. Looking for herself. Lily the divorcee. Lily the childless mother.

She realised how much she didn't know, how much she still had to learn. Learning who she was, where she was, what she could do. After so many years of raising Rosie, she'd forgotten all of that. She knew how to be a mother, a wife. But did she know how to be Lily?

Doing online courses, learning how to be a journalist. Learning how to work again. She learned how to teach English, to write copy, to pitch herself to the world as a scribe for hire, editing words for aspirant writers looking to Lily to redeem their shitty little memoirs.

In the aftermath of losing her husband and daughter, Lily had lost those years. Sitting here, with Jonathan's new life laid bare in her hands, she tries to pinpoint specific moments in her own. Things she'd done. Places she'd been. People she'd seen. Of course, she's lived a life, but what is life if it feels so unlived?

In truth, she'd been so blinkered by her own grief, and trying to find a way through that, that she'd forgotten something Jonathan said to her in an argument shortly before he left their marriage and returned to Cape Town. He'd said: "I love you, Lil. But I need to do this for me. I need to take some time to figure things out. After Rosie, I need to work out what I want."

Pity Jonathan didn't have the balls to mention that his figuring out what his life needs to be after Rosie included building a life with Annabel.

Lily flicks through to her birthday in the 2019 diary - 4 April. Jonathan has marked the date. *L's birthday* - 49. Underneath the note is an email address: [rosieacottle@gmail.com](mailto:rosieacottle@gmail.com). Under that, another note: *PW – 4uL!ly<3*.

She feels compelled, almost instructed. She punches the combination into Gmail. It works. She finds hundreds of emails. Some spam, but there is only one other correspondent: [drjcottle@gmail.com](mailto:drjcottle@gmail.com). Dr. Jonathan Cottle. Without opening any of the messages, as if she'll disturb the dust in the mausoleum, Lily scrolls slowly through the pages, scanning the chronology of the list in reverse order. They are all in bold, marked unread. Some have been sent day after day. Others come more infrequently, with a week or more between missives.

The subject lines are playful:

26 April 2018: *I had an ice cream today*  
30 August 2017: *Eye spy with my little eye*  
6 May 2017: *Knock knock, who's there?*

Some are serious:

21 October 2018: *I miss you, my darling Rosie*  
5 January 2017: *I am leaving*  
21 December 2016: *Today is not a good day*

And then, sombre:

8 February 2020: *It's Cancer*  
25 March 2019: *Heather passed away today*  
26 October 2016: *Tomorrow is your funeral*

She scrolls until she finds the first email. It's dated 24 October 2016. Three days after Rosie died. The email's subject line: *I don't know what to do*.

Lily gets up, steps away from the laptop. She does a circuit of the house, through all the rooms, into the garden, to the edge of the plot, back through the house, on to the stoep where she stops,

trying to assimilate this new information. The inbox is Jonathan's journal, a private conversation between him and Rosie. He's been talking to her for all these years. Lily feels like a peeping tom peering through cracks in a garden fence, a keyhole in a door, a gap in a curtain. This is a private world she has no part of, but he has drawn her into. Did he know her so well that he could anticipate she'd go through his diaries? She feels a chill up her arm, another ghost passing. He must have planned this, knowing she would page through these notebooks, knowing she'd find his most intimate thoughts on the screen.

She casts her mind back over the years since Rosie died and Jonathan left. She'd changed all her details and blocked him on all platforms, so if he'd tried to reach her, she wouldn't know. She'd wanted nothing to do with him after he left and betrayed her by walking away from her grief when she needed him to be the oxygen she couldn't access for herself.

Lily tries but can't bring herself to read the first email, so she scrolls through the pages and goes back to the most recent. She double clicks the subject line with her breath in her throat.

*10 March 2020*

*From: [drjcottle@gmail.com](mailto:drjcottle@gmail.com)*

*To: [rosieacottle@gmail.com](mailto:rosieacottle@gmail.com)*

*Subject: For Lily. Please read.*

*Dear Lily*

*We used to joke about how truth is stranger than fiction, or about how art imitates life. Well, Lil, here it is. My doc says I don't have long. I had no idea it was cancer until a couple of months ago. He says I should "get my affairs in order." So here goes.*

*If you're reading this, my time has come, though I don't know when that'll be. You'll have all my stuff. I'm expecting the journalist in you to get to work immediately and you'll have found this email address.*

*I've had plenty of time to think about what to say to you, but the prognosis has forced me to do things more quickly. I don't know how to contact you, so I've left that to the lawyers to figure out. I wrote you letters but didn't know where to send them. Sent emails but they bounced back. I think I maybe knew you'd blocked me out of your life, but I always hoped you'd reply one day. So this email is like the last great act of defiance. It's the only way I have left. Maybe it's too little too late, but I'm going to give it a shot.*

*The emails you see in this inbox contain everything I've thought in the last four years. Everything I would have said to you and Rosie had she still been alive and to you if you we'd been on better terms.*

*Speaking of getting my affairs in order... (a bad choice of words in this context, I know. Sorry, but I don't have time to agonise over semantics right now)... I hope you will give Annabel a chance. In these emails, I've told Rosie all about her. She is a great girl and reminds me so much of Rosie. Please consider my request. I know I'm asking a lot. I thought long and hard about whether to do it at all, but I couldn't see any reason why not to. It means a lot to me that Annabel will have you in her life, with your big heart and kind spirit. I know that's still who you are. Even if you don't want the world to know that.*

*I'm sorry we didn't part on good terms. I'm sorry we lost touch. I'm sorry we lost Rosie. I'm so very sorry.*

*Please be kind to yourself, Lil. I will love you until forever gets old.*

*J*



“I feel like I’m becoming a whinging privileged white woman who has everything but who is still miserable.”

Lily is revelling in having her parents, Bill and Jenny, to herself on the Zoom call, without her sisters crowding in, as was always the case when the family was growing. Theirs was a busy, noisy home, with friends and family rambling in and out of their double-storey home in Joburg. From childhood to adulthood, the family grew and the noise peaked, with boyfriends, then fiancés, then husbands, then grandchildren added to the mix. Eventually, as is the way for more affluent South Africans who have the privilege of choice, Lily, Liz and Sarah emigrated, their parents sold up and retired to their coastal hideaway, leaving only Isobel behind in Joburg.

It’s not yet eight o’clock in the morning. Lily has been talking for a long time, giving her parents the news of Jonathan and Annabel. They always were early callers. Bill’s face, like Jenny’s, is full of concern for her. Jenny is slightly hard of hearing, but it’s clear she’s heard every word. Her hand is covering her mouth and her brow is furrowed into a deep frown. Lily feels a little heartbroken at having to bring this news to them.

“I understand that, but your feelings are still valid, my girl. You’ve been through a lot. He’s put you in a helluva situation. Will you be alright?” asks Bill.

“It feels like it’s been April Fool’s Month for me, rather than just April Fool’s Day, with everything that’s happened. I really need to get a grip and focus on something different. God knows what, though, in this place. You won’t believe how dead it is.

“Deader than usual?” jokes Jenny. She was always sceptical about Lily’s move to the village.

“Mom!” Lily shoots back with a grin. “It’s just hard because she’s so close and that always reminds me of how much I miss Rosie. And lockdown doesn’t help either. Still, I must count my blessings. You’re all healthy and—”

Just then, there is a shout outside and a few moments later the doorbell chimes its ridiculous Christmas jingle. She really must change that.

“Mrs Cottle! Mrs Cottle! Please open. Please.” Annabel is banging on the door. The doorbell sings again.

“What the—?” Lily starts.

“What’s going on? Who’s that, Lil?” asks Bill.

“Annabel.”

“We’ll stay on the call.” He and Jenny look worried. Lily is comforted to know they are there.

Lily yanks the door open, trying to suppress the irritation in her voice. “What’s going on, Annabel?”

Annabel rushes past her into the house, stuttering and sobbing. “He ... he’s... that guy... that creepy guy—”

Lily pulls Annabel into a strong embrace, her instinct to protect directly cutting across her resistance to who she is holding. “Annabel, what happened? Tell me what’s going on.”

She can hear Bill in the background expressing concern but focuses her attention on Annabel whose breath is starting to calm.

“It’s him,” she says.

“Who, Annabel? Tell me who?”

“That guy, Trevor. I woke up. He was in my room. On my bed. He was—” Annabel shudders and sobs.

“What?”

“He was naked.”

Lily is horrified, clutching the young woman, feeling her shoulders juddering. She leads Annabel to the kitchen and pours a glass of water.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you? Touch you? Is he still there?”

“No. I’m fine. He stinks! I didn’t hear or feel him come in. I just woke up...”

Lily starts towards the door.

“Don’t go there, Lil. Call the police,” Bill shouts from the laptop.

Annabel looks shocked at the sound of Bill’s voice, looking over to the machine and dropping her head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ...” she says.

Lily interrupts her apology. “Annabel! How did he get in? Did you lock the doors last night?”

Annabel had fallen asleep early last night, leaving the kitchen door latched but slightly ajar to let some cool air circulate through the house, lulled by the sense of security offered by a sleepy village in lockdown.

“Where is he now?”

“Don’t go there, Lil. Lily! Call the police.” Bill only ever used Lily’s full name at times like these, when stressed, emotional or angry.

“I’ve got this dad,” she shouts to the machine, before apologising for her sharp tone. “Please stay on the line. It’s good to know you’re there.”

“Where is he, Annabel?” asks Lily.

“I— I don’t know. I woke up when he f-farted. It was disgusting. I left as quietly as I could. I came straight here, but he could have woken up.”

“Call the police, Lily.” Bill’s voice is taking a more strident tone now.

“Dad, please stay on the line. I’m going to see if he’s still there. I’ll call them on the way, but I doubt if anyone will answer. Annabel, give me the keys.”

Lily leaves Annabel in the lounge with her parents on Zoom, trying to ignore the possibilities of what could emerge from that conversation. She walks quickly towards Rosie’s house without any clear plan. She’s operating on instinct alone. Annabel left the door open in her haste to escape the house. As quietly as she can, trying to minimise the squeaks and creaks from the floorboards, Lily walks through the lounge and stops at the threshold of the bedroom. Trevor is lying on his back, legs spreadeagled across the bed. One hand is above his head, the other lying on his flaccid penis. His eyes are closed and he is breathing deeply. Even from where she is standing, Lily can smell his odour. Stale sweat, old beer.

She dials Sergeant Japhta’s number for the second time in a week. He doesn’t answer. Not taking her eyes off Trevor, she hits redial once more, and then again, and a third time. This time he picks up, greeting Lily by name. He must have saved her number after their last conversation. She tries to explain, quickly and in whispered tones, what is happening. He can’t hear her and asks her to repeat herself. She cuts the call, decides to text instead.

*Please come to no. 16 Church Street. A man has invaded the house. Hurry.* The phone pings confirmation that the message has been sent.

The sound wakes Trevor who opens his eyes with a start. He sees Lily, grins and stretches with extravagance. Not taking his eyes from hers, he rubs his penis with one hand and pats the bed with the other with a skewed grin. “Hello Miss Lily. Join.”

“You have to leave, Trevor.” Lily’s voice breaks up. She is shaking with adrenalin and fear but stands her ground.

“No,” he says, massaging himself. “I enjoy much.”

She turns away from him, disgusted at what she sees, smells, and hears. Thinking she would try to contain Trevor until the police arrive, she closes and locks all the doors and windows in the

house, including the bedroom door. She'll have to take her chances with the window in the bedroom, which she can't get to without walking into the room. She pockets the door key and calls Japhta again. He's on his way.

Lily talks through the door. "The police are coming, Trevor. Right now."

"Coming," he groans. She can hear his obscene climax.

She stands on the stoep, trying to ignore what is happening inside, eyes searching down the road for Japhta's van. Who is this Lily? So calm, so level-headed in the face of a man who is clearly unhinged, unpredictable. Annabel joins her, holding the laptop with Lily's parents still on the screen. Lily starts telling them what's happening, sanitising the version for the audience. Bill is very worried, insisting he will hold on until the police arrive. Annabel is shaking and Lily rubs her shoulder, trying to calm her.

Lily sees the van round the corner. Just then, she hears a crash from the window behind her. She feels a thud in her back. She stumbles, Annabel lurches forward and the laptop crashes to the ground. Trevor, still naked and screaming a long, blood-curdling cry, trips over Annabel and lands face first, pinning her in a prone position on the stoep and trying to yank the laptop out of Annabel's hands. Lily kicks the laptop out of his reach and grabs him by the hair, trying to wrestle him away from Annabel, who by now is screaming in terror, her shrieks joining his cacophony. Sergeant Japhta throws open the door to his van and lunges at Trevor, grabbing an arm and a leg and wrenching him up from Annabel.

Japhta loads Trevor into the van, throwing a grubby blanket at him to cover up. Trevor lets out the occasional scream while Japhta talks to Annabel and Lily, taking their statement and taking pictures of the bedroom and kitchen for evidence. Later, Annabel and Lily sit on the stoep waiting for him to finish, trying to ignore the banshee screams from the van. Lily is on the phone to Bill and Jenny, trying to reassure them with a steady commentary. Annabel rests her head on Lily's shoulder while she talks. Lily doesn't move away.

Once Japhta is done and Trevor's screams have subsided down the street, Lily helps Annabel clear up the bedroom, changing sheets, opening the windows and spraying toilet spray to try and expunge Trevor's odour from the house. While Annabel showers and straightens up the rest of

the house, Lily makes up a chicken salad, some soup and fruit salad for her to eat. Annabel is effusive in her thanks but Lily is more reserved. She can't shake the feeling of lingering guilt, trying to prevent herself from slipping into a sense that she could be a mother to Annabel after all. That would be the ultimate betrayal of Rosie. Instead, she slams down her internal guards and attends to the tasks at hand with ruthless and silent efficiency. Annabel's effusion cools to similar politeness.

Lily leaves Sergeant Japhta's number on Annabel's phone before departing to Annabel's assurances that she is going to be ok. The light goes out early in the evening, but Lily stays awake into the early hours, watching, waiting, listening for any movement or sound. Even though Trevor is in Sergeant Japhta's custody, she is hyper-alert.

Annabel's last Instagram post is of Lily's house at dusk, with Lily silhouetted in the window.

*@AnnabelMartin*

*This woman saved my life today. She will never know how grateful I am.*

Word is out of the attack and the drama that happened in this village where nothing happens is playing out on Facebook and WhatsApp. *Does anyone know what the sirens are? What's happening? Who died? @SergeantJaphta, can you update us?*

Japhta issues a curt statement: *Yesterday morning, we attended a disturbance at a house in Church Street. A male known to the police unlawfully entered a house while the female occupant was sleeping. The female occupant escaped and alerted her neighbour. We received an emergency call at approximately 8am and officers were on the scene a short while later. The suspect was apprehended and taken into custody. The victims were shaken but unhurt.*

Scrolling through the chatter on the social feeds and local WhatsApp group, Lily knows that they all know the disturbance happened at Rosie's house, the house owned by the lady with two houses. She knows they all know the female occupant is the unknown newcomer in village. She knows she will have to field questions for days now. Lily tries to ignore the chatter and instead focuses on the other news alert: the village supermarket has a delivery of goods and its shelves are full once again, after the pre-lockdown panic-buying rush. Toilet paper is back, they say.

Lockdown regulations forbid exercise, but they do permit people to leave their homes to shop for food. Lily needs to get out and this seems as good an excuse as any. To move away from the claustrophobia of the two houses at the end of the street, from the spotlight on her and Annabel. She needs to see different walls, to speak to real people, to breathe different air. More, she relishes the idea of doing something normal after yesterday's dramatic events.

Being in this nearly empty village during lockdown is surreal. The houses in her street are mainly guest houses, or second homes to people who live either abroad or in the big cities. The houses emptied out when lockdown was announced, and the guest houses shuttered their buildings. One, perhaps two, curtains twitch as she passes, but in the main, Lily is alone on the walk to the store. Two blocks down, one block up, and not a soul to see along the route.

This is what the apocalypse feels like. Dusty streets, absent of people and cars. The sun high in the sky turning the white-washed church into a shimmering silver monolith cast against the cloudless blue above. No wind moves the trees. Heat soaking into the sandy roadway. Singing

cicadas the only sound. It is a lonely desolate landscape.

It feels slightly illegal to be stepping anywhere beyond the garden gate, but it's unlikely that Sergeant Japhta or Constable Botha, the only other officer stationed in the village, will be out to challenge anyone. Nieu Bethesda is just that kind of place, playing by its own rules, hidden away from the rest of the world beyond the valley where the village nestles, to coin the favourite word of optimistic estate agents trying to justify their inflated property prices. It does also feel good to be out of the bounds of her own home and garden. She reaches her arms out and above her head, swinging them from side to side, and takes long stretchy strides.

In sight of the store, Lily starts to see people. They have the demeanour of survivors emerging from their bunkers and shelters. She joins the queue with three or four others waiting to enter, keeping her head down and eyes averted from eyes on her. There is fear behind their masks. The couple from the other day is ahead of her in the queue. They greet and ask her after her well-being with small-town curiosity dressed up as neighbourly concern. Their attention wanes when it comes their turn to go inside. They move through the store quickly, grabbing multiples of their groceries from the shelves and dropping the items in their basket. Typical bunker fare: cans of beans, tuna, corned beef, bottled water, soap, sanitiser, dried soups, milk powder, sugar, coffee, tea, and so on. Loo rolls, too. Three packs of nine (limited per customer). They offer perfunctory greetings and leave.

Lily doesn't have a list in mind. Sure, her contributions to Annabel's pantry have cleared her out of some provisions, but in truth, she doesn't need much. She's not hungry these days, anyway. Stress and uncertainty have always been an effective diet plan for her. Throw in a bit of criminal drama, some grief and gut-punching news that changes everything she ever knew about her life, and her appetite is sure to stay away. Still, she walks past the shelves and makes a good enough pretence at showing the trip was necessary. Eggs, tomatoes, bacon remind her of Paul and the delicious hours she spent with him. She feels a slight stirring at the thought of his body over and inside hers. Loo roll (one four pack is all that's needed), tampons, bread, shampoo, a couple of steaks, some cheese, chicken, sausages, green beans, frozen peas. Nothing out of the ordinary for her, except perhaps an Easter egg as a nod to the impending long weekend, which this year will feel stranger than any other.



Loading the items into her basket gives her a kind of comfort. A sense that nothing in life has changed. A much-needed certainty. Yesterday has shaken her more than she thought it would. As if responding physically to the thought, she starts to tremble, feels her heart racing and her breath coming in ragged intervals. She leans on a shelf until the sensation passes, pretending to have forgotten something.

She exchanges a few polite words with the cashier about how she is okay, thank you for asking, and reminding each other to stay safe in these unprecedented times. As she's packing the items into two shopping bags, Lily drops her purse, scattering cards and a few coins in a spread as it lands. She curses under her breath, bends down to collect it all and shoves the purse back into a bag. She is flustered and irritated, feeling hassled and burdened. She stands up too quickly. Blood rushes from her head, she loses her footing and she falls backwards, landing hard on the floor, crushing her shoulder and elbow underneath her. She feels the thud of her head on the concrete before passing out.

She comes to a few minutes later. She lies on the floor for a few moments, eyes closed, trying to breathe through the pain, but more trying to orient herself after the fall. She feels hands on her shoulder and arm, voices asking if she's ok. With her good arm she starts to lift herself slowly to her knees and lets the hands pull her upwards to standing. Her other arm is sore but movable. Not broken, then. No medical emergency evacuation required. Her head is pounding.

Lily opens her eyes to thank her rescuers. The cashier is leaning over her. Annabel's face is close to hers. She struggles to a seated position then tries to stand, pulling herself up using the counter to regain a stable footing.

"Mrs Cottle, please let me carry those for you. I will take them home." Annabel takes the bags off Lily's arm and puts her other hand around Lily's waist.

"I just had a headrush. Lost my balance."

"Yes. I saw you land. I just arrived when you fell. That floor is hard. Should I call the doctor?"

"No, I'm fine. It was just a turn. Please. Leave me. I'm fine. Thank you."

“You’re not, Mrs Cottle. I don’t think you should walk anywhere.”

Annabel is right. Lily is not fine. She is sore and shaken. She leans on the counter while Annabel explains to the cashier that she will run home, fetch her car and come back to collect Lily so she doesn’t have to walk. The cashier pulls a chair out from behind the counter and guides Lily into it. She is gushing in her care for Lily as the central character in the village drama yesterday.

“Your daughter is a lovely person. So caring and kind. You are lucky to have her.”

“She’s not my daughter,” says Lily. She leans back in the chair and closes her eyes, wincing and willing away the throbbing pain pulsing up her arm.

Annabel comes back a few minutes later and guides Lily into the car. They drive the few short blocks home in silence. What is there to say? Lily is too sore to talk, anyway. She is very aware of being so close to Annabel, who is humming along with a tune playing on softly on the radio. She seems relaxed and comfortable in her own skin.

“I can’t find my keys,” says Lily, scratching in her handbag. Everything feels unfamiliar. She is woozy and tired. She must have fallen harder than she thought. Her arm is throbbing in metronome time with her head.

“Here, let me try. Do you mind?” Annabel takes the bag from Lily and finds the keys in a side pocket, where Lily always stashes them.

With quick, decisive movements, Annabel takes the shopping bags into the house before helping Lily out of the car.

“You should lie down. You fell hard.”

“Yes, I think I will. Thanks. You can—”

Lily tries to release herself from Annabel’s gentle hold, but the younger woman insists on guiding her through the house to the bedroom. It is mostly a mirror of Rosie’s house, so she moves with confidence that comes from familiarity. Lily undresses and climbs into bed and

Annabel brings her a glass of water. Lily is aware, again, of Annabel being so close, and in her space which was previously out of bounds. She feels a fool for falling, and more so now that she's being manipulated with Annabel's kindness. Tit for tat. I save your life you save mine.

“No, I want to make sure you're ok and you have everything you need. Here's your phone. Call me if you need anything.”

Annabel stands next to the bed for a moment. “Mrs Cottle, I —“

“Thank you. I will be fine. I just need to rest.” Lily closes her eyes. The conversation is over.

Annabel leaves the room. Lily hears her unpacking the groceries in the kitchen, opening and closing cupboards and the fridge. Then, silence, broken up by some rustling and creaking floorboards. Leaves in the trees, perhaps. There's a bit of a breeze outside. After about ten minutes, Lily hears the front door close.

Lily's birthday. The big Five Oh. Fifty years on this earth, and here she is. Alone, with a sore head, sore arm and feeling like a sore loser against the fragrant young one who picked her up and packed her away yesterday. Time was when Lily would have grasped this day, making the best of what she had, taking time to express an Attitude of Gratitude. To Count her Blessings. To Pause and Reflect on times good, times bad and times yet to come. But here, now, what she wants is to roll over, turn herself into a duvet cocoon and wake up when it's tomorrow. As if time is a construct that we can all ignore because it's a matter of mind over matter and if you don't mind it doesn't matter, but it matters and Lily minds. She minds a lot.

She does roll over, shifting her weight off the arm she fell onto, which, inconveniently, is the same arm she prefers to sleep on. The pain shoots up like a vein of heroin, travelling from fingers to elbows, to shoulder, up her neck to her temple, and landing with an insistent thud just behind her eye. She keeps her eyes closed. The light hurts.

Where was she on this day five years ago? Jonathan was still living in the family home. He, she and Rosie had joined Liz and Garry and the kids for a typically suburban London day out. Lunch at Gabriel's Wharf, a walk along the Thames before catching the last performance of Billy Elliott on stage. They caught the last train out and Jonathan had spent the night in the spare room, as had happened more frequently of late.

Where was she on this day ten years ago? She was travelling first class on the Eurostar from London to Paris and back for a surprise lunch with 9-year-old Rosie and 42-year-old Jonathan. Her marriage was intact, her child was still alive, she still had a life, with money and travels and friends and options and possibilities all available to her.

One decade, one hit-and-run, one divorce, two funerals later, and here she is, in a one-horse town, managing two houses, one of which is occupied by her daughter's imposter, in the grip of a global pandemic, with nothing to do but lie in bed, nowhere to go but to the dark spaces in her mind and nothing to see but a disappearing vision for a pipe dream that seems increasingly like a distant fantasy, scudding on a whisper of horsetail clouds evaporating on a hot summer's day. She is without a job, without a family, and without any sense of the joyful future her mindfulness app reminds her to manifest every day. She is without. Period.

What kind of fuckery is this, life?

What kind of fuckery is this life?

She resolves to let this day, month, year, pass. She will revisit it next year. A kind of birthday redux, when everything in the world is back to normal, with her family around her and perhaps even some friends if she can dredge them up from a past life. Truth be told, though, that past life was entirely focused on Jonathan. His ambition, his career, his colleagues, his trajectory. A significant irony, though, that he, as a renowned infectious diseases specialist, is dead now, not from an infectious disease, but at the hands of a rather boring, common-or-garden pancreatic cancer that took him out of this life at a time when he could have been doing his life's work.

It's too much. Lily closes her eyes. She is soon asleep.

A few hours later, Lily is in the kitchen. It's still her birthday. She is still 50 years old. The curtains in the front rooms are still closed, despite the heat and brightness of the day. Her phone is off, the house is dark, and that suits her just fine. She is still naked, not out of any sense of sensuality but simply because she can't be arsed to get dressed. What's the point? She is making tea to drink, toast to eat.

There isn't even any wine in the house, thanks to President Cyril Ramaphosa's complete alcohol ban to reserve bed spaces in South Africa's creaking health system in the face of the expected coronavirus onslaught. Uncle Cyril hath spoken. Thou shalt be henceforth sober until otherwise decreed. She stands in front of the fridge, trying to coax her tastebuds to life. Lost for inspiration, she layers the last slice of ciabatta with tomato, cheese and ham. She'll make more bread tomorrow, just to pass the interminable time.

She passes by the lounge on her way back to the bedroom. Jonathan's stuff has taken a familiar form, as if she recognises the Jenga shapes of their construction. She glances at the stacks of papers, notebooks and diaries. She sees the change immediately. The corners of a few documents are at more prominent angles than before. A photo album has worked its way to the top of a pile. And then, there it is: the order of service from Rosie's funeral is missing.

Annabel. The only other person in the house. The minutes between closing the fridge and closing the door. Annabel.

Happy birthday to me. Happy fucking birthday to me.

“She’s a thief. She stole my daughter.”

“Hey, I think that’s a little extreme—“ Liz. The voice of reason of the three sisters.

“It’s not at all,” chimes Sarah. ‘That order of service was yours. It may be a piece of—“

Lily’s voice is ice. Their birthday cheer has evaporated. “It’s not just a piece of paper. It’s a symbol of the worst thing that has happened in my life. Do not minimise its significance. Why? What does it matter to her?”

The three sisters argue the point, their voices tangling around each other. Lily is watching her own face on the screen. It’s red with rage and wet with tears and confusion. She’s sitting on the floor of the lounge with the laptop, to show the family the stacks collecting emotional and physical dust. They laughed gently at her description of the Memory Altar, remembering Jonathan’s collection on view. She’s made an effort for the occasion, dressing in indigo jeans, white tank top and lightweight linen collared shirt over. On another day, she’d feel good in that look. Casually stylish, as the articles that help you to *Dress Stylishly for your Age* would describe. She feels like shit, though. Physically sore, emotionally raw, and mentally tired.

“You guys. You guys.” Isabel cuts in, her voice frantic. “Check out her Instagram post.”

Lily scrolls to Annabel’s page on the social media platform. Rosie is staring up at her from Annabel’s last post, framed in the too-familiar layout of the order of service. *Rosie Amelia Cottle. 11 February 2001-21 October 2016. Rest in peace. Always loved, always remembered. Taken too soon.*

She reads, re-reads, the caption below the image. The other pictures in the post are of Annabel with Jonathan and Annabel and Heather. Shiny happy people. This is how happy families do it.

*#ihavenews. I was raised by a single mother. In 2016 I found my biological dad. He had another daughter. This is her. I always felt like something was missing in my life. She died before I could meet her, but here she is for you to see. My sister, Rosie.*

The family is silent.

Something in Lily starts to shift. An awareness that she is both an invited guest and a voyeur. Today's private worlds are public. You have breakfast, you tell the world. You have a hangover, you tell the world. You make dinner, you tell the world. The world knows when you're in love, out of love, up, down, when you're coming in and going out. When you're working, relaxing, sleeping, driving, talking, walking, dancing, fucking. Who you're with, who you miss, who you love, who grinds your gears. Where you've been, where you're going, where you want to go, where you wouldn't be caught dead. Your dreams, your nightmares, fantasies, ambitions, goals, desires, regrets. The world knows what you agree with, disagree with, and of course the algorithm will tell you both of those things. The algorithm will tell you what and who you're allowed to have in your filter bubble, because anything else is out of bounds, deemed irrelevant by the matrix. And because the algorithm deems it necessary, Lily now knows how a stranger feels about having a sister who is her dead daughter.

Trainspotting again: *Human interaction reduced to nothing more than data.*

"I have to go," she says, "I'll call you guys tomorrow."

Lily slams the laptop cover, her shoulders heaving as she tries to breathe. She feels like a hydraulic press is squeezing the air from her lungs. She stands up, kicks over the stacks of photos and papers and flicks the debris into the air with her foot. She rushes to unlock the security gate and stands on the stoep, glaring into the darkness at the house opposite.

The curtains are open, and the house is ablaze, with all lights on. She hears music. Annabel is dancing. A sensuous, peaceful, ethereal dance, with her arms floating up and over her head, then back down again. She twirls slowly around, her head arcing from side to side, hands flowing, hips swaying to the music.

Watching her, not on a screen, but in 3D, Lily follows Annabel's silhouette in the bright light coming from Rosie's room. She moves with a loose ease that tells Lily she is oblivious of being seen. Or perhaps she does know. Maybe she does see Lily standing on the stoep, clenched fists wet with tears held up to her mouth, body rigid, forehead creased into a deep frown, immobile.



With every move, Annabel is taunting Lily with her youth, her self, her aliveness. With memories of the past couple of days in which Lily had saved her from Trevor. She is there, occupying the life that was bookmarked for Rosie. She is there. Rosie is not. And Rosie is not because of the same desperate emotion Lily is feeling now. In the car on the night Rosie died, yet another argument had erupted between mother and daughter. The impossible, emotional teenager clashing horns with the exhausted married-single mother. A typical scene in any household around the world, but with uniquely devastating consequences that have led Lily to this village, this stoep, this moment.

How dare Annabel be so light when she is the source of the weight in Lily's world? How dare she expose Rosie so publicly? Like Lady Godiva, Annabel is parading her pretend grief around the town square, naked public mourning for the three people she has lost in the world, except she didn't have three, because only two belong to her. Annabel does not own Rosie. Rosie is no part of Annabel.

What to do? If Lily lets on that she's been stalking Annabel's digital life, it will show that she is invested in this young woman's world. That she cares enough about Annabel to consider her. If she creates a scene, it will only draw them into a tighter knot. They are alone on this street, in this town that has been left to the ghosts. Despite the space around them, there is no space for conflict, and there are still many days to go before Annabel can leave. Inexplicably, Lily can't bring herself to evict her. Where would she go? How would she get there?

She searches, but in the murky depths of her emotion, Lily finds no answers. She turns, walks back into the house. She slams the security gate. It clangs loudly in the dark silence. She turns the key in the lock, looks up and sees Annabel stop dancing. Lily slams the door behind her, as if to make the point. Thinking back to the pact that Jonathan is forcing her to make, Lily is more convinced than ever that she wants nothing more to do with Annabel. It's too painful. Jonathan wins again and Lily is left to pick up the pieces of his life on her own.

Behind her, she hears a quiet knock on the door. She cocks her head, listening, but doesn't move from her seat. Trevor? He is still under lock and key. The knock comes again, and a third time.

"Who's there?"

Knock knock. Who's there? The rest of. The rest of who? The rest of your life. Like TS Eliot says: 'And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock...'

There is no answer, but a slip of paper shuffles under the door. It is the order of service from Rosie's funeral. The post-it note she gave to Annabel with the wi-fi code is attached. It reads:

*Happy birthday Mrs Cottle. From, Annabel.*

A note slips out from inside the service leaflet. It reads:

*Dear Mrs Cottle,*

*I saw this leaflet in your house and I wanted to read it but I didn't want you to think I was interfering with your stuff. I came back into your room to ask but it looked like you were sleeping. Please don't be angry.*

*I wish I could explain why I chose to come to Nieu Bethesda. I just did it because I didn't know where else to go. I was desperate. None of this is my fault. I don't want to complicate your life. I have found somewhere to stay in Cape Town until I can get a flight back to Joburg after lockdown is over. I'll leave here as soon as I can.*

*Annabel*

It's 2am and Lily is awake, woken by the soundtrack of gusting wind rattling sash windows. She rolls on to her back, pulls the duvet up to her chin and lies awake for a long time, unblinking in the darkness. Outside, air is cutting through tree branches and the gaps between the eaves and the corrugated iron roof. The spinning vanes of a windmill in the empty plot of land next door are offering a creaking metallic harmony to the blustery soundtrack. It feels like a metaphor for the thoughts billowing around her head, swirling and clattering into dead ends.

Maybe she is over-reacting, but these are uncomfortable truths presented in a world constrained by regulations and disease? Lockdown is an unnatural blip on the world's timeline, which is creating unexpected and uncomfortable ripples for everyone. In 11 days, it'll all be over and life will return to normal. She has 10 days to make a definitive decision about whether or not she wants to keep Annabel in her life, or, more specifically, to acquiesce to Jonathan's demand in exchange for the lion's share of his estate. If she's honest, the money and stuff in Jonathan's estate will help to make the retreat happen. She makes a mental list. Pros in the column on the left-hand side of the page, cons on the right.

Pros:

Money

The retreat

Financial stability

Regular income

She's managed her divorce payout well enough to survive for a few years without having a substantial income. But money is money and it's finite. Without a reliable source, it will soon dry up. Jonathan's estate will help to keep the dam full. He'd been savvy with his investments, earned well and had been squirrelling cash into savings accounts for as long as she'd known him. An only child, he'd inherited a reasonable pot of gold from his civil servant grandparents, but his own family had been fractured by the grind of alcoholism and financial instability, spurred on by the monotony of small-town life in King William's Town. Despite it all, Jonathan was driven and motivated to change the patterns he'd learned from his parents who'd drowned their sorrows and, ultimately, themselves, in bottles of gin and vodka. Whisky on a good day, when his mother was able to eke out a meagre salary from her job as a receptionist in a small law firm. His

father's tendency to piss off everyone he worked with made his career path less of a path than a series of wobbly stones laid over a dried-up stream.

So there's that.

Cons:

Annabel

Annabel

Annabel

If she doesn't take Annabel in, she needs to let all of that go. She will need to start again, from scratch. And yet, agreeing to what he's asked forces Annabel into her world, which is exactly where she doesn't want Annabel to be, despite having a brief trial run of that in the last few days. Having Annabel in her life would mean replacing Rosie. It feels like a betrayal, even though Rosie isn't around anymore to see it. The guilt is just too much. And what does 'having Annabel in her life' mean anyway? Jonathan's letter is asking Lily to be Annabel's, what?, protector? guardian? carer? for another four years. Forty-eight phone calls, eight face to face meetings. It seems a small price to pay.

It's been just over a week since Annabel arrived and Lily still has no idea what her real motive is for being here. Does she even have a motive? Annabel's note was sweet, sincere. Her polite interactions of pleases and thank-yous seem authentic enough. She seems benign, even likeable. From what Lily has seen, she hasn't trashed the house, stolen the silver or keyed Lily's car. What difference would it make if she accepted Jonathan's condition? She'd inherit his whole estate and maybe even his daughter.

Maybe even his daughter. That's the hard part.

Five am. Lily can't bear it anymore. She needs to get out. It's still dark outside. She throws on a pair of leggings, a baggy jumper and trainers to leave the house. She makes a concession to the pandemic and shoves a mask into her pocket.

It's a relief to be out of the house. She walks slowly, feeling the air beyond the gate, as if parting new atoms while she walks. The village is silent and empty. She feels like a criminal, which is

technically accurate since she is breaking the law. The lockdown rules dictate that no one can leave the house unless for essential medical emergencies and to get food. Is it a medical emergency if you feel like your world is suffocating you and you need to breathe different air? In any event, who'll be looking for transgressors before dawn in a remote village in the middle of nowhere?

She immerses herself in the cool darkness and the silence. Still an hour and a half until sunrise. Not even the dogs are awake. For the most part, the village is built in a neat grid, with long wide untarred roads crisscrossing each other at the end of the block. Lily walks southwards, towards what would be loosely termed the centre, where the Fossil Museum, Owl House, trading store and restaurants are clustered.

She walks, turning left and right in a random pattern according to no particular direction. There are a few lights on in the houses along the streets, but no obvious signs of life at this time of the morning. The church looms like a grey shadow in the pre-dawn light. Her footsteps seem too loud, but she keeps going, like a burglar looking for an easy entry. It feels good to get her muscles moving again. She lengthens her stride and picks up the pace, spurred on by the adrenalin of illicit activity, enjoying the sensation of her body moving in wider increments than the few steps it takes from her bedroom to the lounge, to the kitchen, to the front door, to the back porch and back again.

Left into Immelman, left into Martin, right into Grave, along the ghostly white wall of the graveyard, back over the dry riverbed, right into Hill, left into Hudson, right into Murray, right into Pastorie, right into New. Pause for a moment to peer over the fence at the Owl House, with the sepulchral concrete sculptures of camels and pilgrims reaching out in the darkness. Right again into Hudson, left into Church, and back home again. She feels disconnected from this world, an outsider.

With the benefit of the short distance, she decides to get her shit together, without Jonathan's money and without Annabel. To acquiesce will feel like he has won, even from beyond the grave. More, it means she will always be beholden to the man who left her high and dry when she needed him the most. Even if the satisfaction of spending his hard-earned cash is appealing, it feels like an admission that she can't make life on her own — which is what she's been telling herself she is capable of since Rosie died and he left.

Once lockdown is over, she'll commit to getting more involved in the village. She'll stop whinging about having everything handed to her on a plate and find a new groove in her life. Pick up on the tentative relationships she built with some of the villagers when she first arrived three months ago. Book club, social events, perhaps even offering herself to whatever is needed in Pienaarsig, the informal settlement on the outskirts. A literacy programme, perhaps. She'll create a place for herself in the village while building Rosie's Retreat. It'll take longer, but she'll find a way to earn the money to make it happen. Once the tourists come back after lockdown, she could rent it out temporarily or as an Airbnb.

She sees the retreat as a place for women like her. Women who are displaced from their lives for whatever reason. Grief, divorce, the end of a career, the start of another chapter. It'll be a place for women to retreat to when they need space, time, perspective, distance. It'll be a place where her clients will be able to recover from life-changing catastrophes; like the guilt of driving her daughter away from her car onto the bonnet of an oncoming driver on country roads; like ex-husbands who betray them; like the heartache of infidelity and loss. That kind of place. The kind of place that Lily herself needs right now.

She gets home by around 6am, aware of the sense that others were melting into the shadows in the same way she did when she passed.

She turns her phone on for the first time since the last day in her forties. It pings alive with messages and missed calls from well-wishers. Lily scrolls down, flicking between text messages, Instant Messenger and WhatsApp. Friends from the UK, a couple of colleagues. The woman who runs the book club and the bookstore in Nieu Bethesda, which she was about to join before the global pandemic hit the dusty streets of the village. And then, a message request on Instant Messenger, sent yesterday. Paul Woods.

*Lily,*

*The sunset in Addo was incredible last night. I was at home, watching the sky turn from blue to orange to indigo to black. It reminded me of the sunset we watched from your back porch. Was that really ten days ago? It feels like 10 years. And then I remembered that it's your birthday. Happy birthday. Have an awesome day.*

*Call me if you want. I don't have your number. Here's mine in case you've lost my card. 082 — —.*

*Paul Woods (from the Ibis Lounge ☺)*

His formal closing and the unnecessary reminder of who he is makes her smile a little. She replies and sends, quickly, before changing her mind.

*Lovely to hear from you. It was indeed my birthday, for whatever milestones are worth at times like this. Here is my number. 072 — —.*

She can't help but feel slightly better at having seen Paul's name and number on screen. She re-reads his message a couple of times, as an excuse to check whether the small round icon of his face shows that it's been read.

Paul's message stirs her again, just as the thought of him did in the store a couple of days ago. An awakening. Long overdue.

Lily and Jonathan's sex life had been adequate, to put it politely. In, out, part A into part B, and off we go together, or rather, never together but her then him, and if she was lucky and if he was persistent, her again. Life had eroded their already mismatched libidos until they were friends with benefits, even if those benefits were fewer and further between in later years. Lily can't remember when they realised, without speaking, that there was no point in keeping up the pretence anymore.

After that, well, what was the point in anything? She felt nothing but a failure after the crash, tainted by the blood that pooled under Rosie's head onto the tarmac of a dark Devon lane while Lily waited for an ambulance to arrive. Scarlet letters, branded on her forehead: L for loser. I for inadequate. L for less. Y for You don't deserve to be happy.

Paul. Paul was different. Paul had found something. Found her. Seen her. After she accepted the shot from him at the table, they'd talked, politely at first. Small talk accompanied by small actions of mutual attraction. Pauses in speech punctuated by long moments of holding eye

contact. Gentle, sincere laughter. Leaning in towards each other while the crowd thinned as people started to leave. An unspoken understanding that he would walk her home. That he would come in for coffee. That they would move with each other, slowly, gently, but insistently. When he was, finally, deep inside her, he found her. She remembered what it was like to feel. They lay together afterwards, watching the evening sun making shadows on the wall until the light faded to night.

Lily is thinking these thoughts in the shower. Her skin tingles with the heat and rush of the water and the sensation of her soapy hands tracing the curve of her breasts, her hips, her belly, her neck. It is years since she has allowed this for herself. Her fingers linger where Paul's tongue once was. For the first time in days, she feels the whirlpool of thoughts about Jonathan, Annabel, Rosie, Wills, conditions, lawyers, lockdown, dissipate.

The walk and shower have energised Lily. She tidies and cleans and eats a healthy breakfast of fruit and yoghurt and makes a dough for the ciabatta and digs around in the veggie patch, clearing weeds and dead shoots, and grinds some coffee beans. By late morning she has opened up her email to write to Tendai formally instructing him to send the removals van to collect all of Jonathan's belongings so Annabel can refurnish the Rondebosch house when she follows the van back to Cape Town as soon as lockdown is over.

While she's writing, the phone rings. Paul. She picks up, almost too quickly.

"There you are," he says. "It's good to hear your voice again. I was worried."

"About?"

Had you interviewed her beforehand, asking how she'd feel if he called, she'd have said she'd be nervous, tongue-tied. But they have fallen into ease. She shuts the lid of the laptop, walks into the lounge, stretches out on the couch, remembering where he sat on the morning after their night before. She puts the call on speaker and rests the phone in her lap.

"That you wouldn't take my call."

"Why?"



“Well,” he clears his throat. Is he nervous as she thought she might be?

“It’s not often you have nearly 24 perfect hours with a perfect stranger in a little dorp in the middle of the Karoo, before the country gets locked up because someone in China ate a bat one day. I figured there’d be a fifty-fifty chance that the person I spent those hours with might not feel the same and might be regretting her life choices.”

“There are many things I regret in my life but accepting a Jägermeister from a perfect stranger in a little dorp in the Karoo on a Thursday afternoon is definitely not one of them.”

They laugh together. Then, he, more serious: “But also, I thought I’d blown it after our last conversation which ended rather abruptly.”

“No. Not fully.”

“Cool cool. That’s good. And so, otherwise, how are you? How’s it all?”

She tells him of the events of the past few days. How Annabel arrived seven hours before lockdown started. How Annabel is now staying in Rosie’s house. The Trevor incident. Her fall. The order of service, the Instagram post, right up until her final decision this morning to get shot of the situation once lockdown is all over.

“Shit, Lily. Hectic. I didn’t expect she’d turn up.”

“*You* didn’t expect it? Imagine *my* surprise.” Why does she feel so comfortable with him? So open? It’s an unusual feeling for her.

“How are you feeling?”

“I had a long illegal walk this morning and that helped to clear my head. I’m just going to send it all back, with her, and start again. It’s time to get my shit together, to stop wafting around and to get this retreat started.”

“Huh? Retreat? What? I don’t remember you mentioning it. Must’ve been distracted by your utterly gorgeous body.” Is it possible to hear someone smile on the phone? If so, she does.

She feels her face get hot. That stirring again, where her fingers were.

“Yes, we did...distract each other. But now you’re distracting me.”

“You’re welcome.”

They laugh, then are silent for a few moments. She smiles broadly.

“You were saying?” he says. His voice is deep and smooth, like velvet.

She goes on to describe the kernel of her business idea, linking it to Rosie’s house, and outlining what the whole experience would be. While Lily talks, she is aware of him listening to her speak, not interrupting, responding only with the occasional “Mmhm. Uh huh. Ok.” To be seen and heard is the way to a woman’s heart.

“See? I was right.”

“Hm?”

“You need Annabel.”

“Yes,” she sighs, “You’ve said that before, but I still don’t agree with you.” She clenches her fist and feels a flush on her face. You know, that feeling when you know you’re lying.

“Told you.”

“It’s too much for me, Paul. What Jonathan is asking for—”

“C’mon. He’s handing you a fortune on plate. All that cash in exchange for, what? Fifty-six hours in your life, less, if you don’t talk much. Imagine what you could do with it all. I think you’d be nuts, stupid, not to go with it.”

“Paul, please stop. You just don’t get it. I can’t—”

“Okay, I’ll shut up. When you come for dinner at Addo, I’ll tell you how much I was right.”

“There’s little chance of that if you keep telling me I’m being ridiculous. This is my life. You know little about it. My mind is made up.”

“Okay. I’ll back off. I really want to see you. I don’t want to blow my chances. I’ve been thinking of you.”

There is a pause.

He speaks again: “I mean it. I do want to see you again.

“Listen,” he clears his throat, “I know you’re... I know the last weeks have been a fuck up, not just with your situation, but with lockdown and everything. I want to get to know you. I’m here if you want to talk. Even if we don’t know each other well and haven’t spent much time together yet, I want to say...just...you can...talk...call me. That’s all.”

That’s not all. That’s not enough. Lily wants more of that, but she’s conflicted. Turned off by his assumption that he knows what’s best for her but turned on, awakened again, by his attention. Is that possible? She changes the subject, asking him about lockdown at Addo. They doodle around the conversation for a while until Paul interrupts.

There is some background noise. “Shit, sorry,” he says. “I have to go. Sorry. I have a— I’ve just gotta sort something. The lodge...”

“Oh. Ok. It was good to talk.”

They say goodbye, agree to talk again, say goodbye a couple more times.

Lily tries not to overthink his sudden departure. Did she bore him into making an excuse to leave? Seems like everyone she wants in her life leaves. She shakes her head, as if to dissolve the

rabbit hole she recognises she's about to go down. She needs to move the needle from the groove. Its relentless clicking is starting to grind.

A WhatsApp message pings just as Paul cuts the call.

*Good day Mrs Cottle*

*Trevor Capper was detained on various charges, including indecent exposure in public and breaking and entering. He cannot afford bail. We are keeping him in custody in Graaff Reinet until his court appearance. I don't know when that will be. I will let you know what happens.*  
*Sgt. William Japhta.*

How is it possible that one person can cry so much? Lily is utterly spent. She has nothing left. No more tears.

It is dawn on what is looking like one of those exquisite Karoo days. Clear sky, warm air, bright sun. Despite the promise of such beauty, Lily feels shit. Worse than she's ever felt. She's been up all night, reading the emails from Jonathan to Rosie.

Some are long missives, describing his thoughts and feelings in intimate detail, while others are cute and playful, telling her about something he's seen, a person he's met, a place he's been. He had built a good life in Cape Town. It was full and substantial, with satisfying work and a group of friends who he played with and who supported him.

He is honest about the conflict he feels in building the relationship with Annabel.

*30 October 2016: You have a sister, Rosie. Finally. Her name is Annabel. Annabel Martin. If you were alive, I would print this and give it to you so you can see her own words. I didn't know she existed until yesterday. It might be too soon to say, but I think this could open a new chapter in my life. A significant chapter. Please know that you will always be my one and only girl. I wish I could hear what you think about it. What would you say or do? I'm not sure I know myself.*

*6 January 2017: Today I am meeting Annabel. I am nervous as hell. I'll let you know how it goes when I get back.*

*10 March 2017: I think of you every moment when I'm with her, Rosie. She looks so much like you. She knows this and doesn't mind. I tell her about you and she says she wishes she'd met you. So do I.*

*25 August 2017: I feel like I'm betraying you, but I have grown very fond of Annabel.*

And so on.

But the parts that hit Lily most deeply in the gut is when he talks to Rosie about her — Lily.

24 October 2016: *Your absence fills our world. Your mum is so sad. I don't know what to do. How to make her feel better. How to help her see light again. I feel the same way but I know somehow I have to keep moving.*

11 February 2017: *It's your birthday today. I tried to contact Lily but I think she's changed all her numbers. She's blocked me. She was always so stubborn, only ever saw it all in black and white. I always joked she would hold expert grudges. I knew she would cut me dead, and she has. It was a risk I didn't want to take but had to make my own decisions. I miss her. I miss you. She was my best friend for a long time. Losing her is one of my biggest regrets. Losing you hurts. It hurts so much.*

4 April 2018: *Today is your mum's birthday. I found this picture of us on our trip to Paris that one day. Remember? It was your mum's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. I remember lying with you both in the Eiffel Tower gardens, after we'd been up the tower for lunch. We were stuffed! It was such a fun day. I went to Paris for a conference with the EU health people last year. I had a day off after the meeting and went to the gardens. I lay on the grass looking up at the sky, eating an ice cream and thinking about you and Lily. I miss you both so much.*

Lily clicks the picture open. She remembers. A stranger asked her if they could take it for the family. Lily is lying with her head on Jonathan's chest, perpendicular to his body. Rosie is lying the same way, on the other side. They make up a smiling cross of family joy. They are all wearing sunglasses, eating ice creams, grinning up at the camera. She remembers how she was happy that day.

8 February 2020: *I sent mum an email to tell her about the diagnosis. It bounced back to me, like all the others. For as long as I have left, I will always hope she will talk to me. But I admit I'm scared, Rosie. You are gone, Lily won't reply, Heather has gone, and Annabel is in Joburg. Still, I always feel your presence. I know you are with me all the time.*

*Even so, more than anything, I don't want to die alone.*

In the aftermath of reading the emails, Lily has been moving around the house in a dream state, her head like cotton wool from the reading and crying, waking, reading, sleeping, reading, crying. She has read, re-read and read again every one of the emails. Paged through the diaries. Seen herself through Jonathan's eyes.

He wrote:

*Dear Rosie*

*Do you remember how your mum was always singing? She stopped after the last miscarriage. She stopped laughing. I could never tell her. She changed...*

And

*I've been reading some of the articles Lily wrote before you were born. I kept them all. She always loved her work. I didn't want her to give up, but I am grateful to her that she did, so she could take you through your life. Even though it was cut so short. I know I should say this to her but I don't know where to find her...*

And

*I remember feeling so proud of you and your mum after you won the Mother and Daughter talent show. Do you remember? You sang and danced your hearts out. I was bursting! She was radiant. That night, we watched you sleeping and we danced in the lounge in our socks. That is the Lily I remember, that I wanted back so badly...*

And

*Why did you leave us so soon, Rosie? Your mum and I need you both so much. The hole you left will never be filled...*

And

*Today I told Lily I am leaving. Maybe I'm justifying myself but I feel this decision is the best for both of us. I have finally admitted to myself that we are standing opposite each other staring past ourselves. Sometimes it seems like she will never recover. It's like she's paralysed and I don't know how to make her muscles work again. I know she put her life aside to be your mother and*

*my wife. In a strange way, I think that if I am gone, she will be free to start a new life for herself, without me dictating how it should be. A new canvas for her own picture. Do you think she'll ever understand, Rosie? ...*

And. And. And. ...

How do you face yourself when you are faced with yourself like that? When do you stop seeing what others see? When do you stop seeing you for you?

It's evening and Lily is cocooned in the house, with a small fire in the grate and lamps casting a soft glow over the lounge. She is on the couch with her laptop. She has Skype open and this time the whole family is on screen — all four sisters and Bill and Jenny. A scheduled call that's turned into a counselling session for Lily. The curtains are closed. She has shut herself off from the world. From Annabel.

She's been reading some of the emails she feels are more for public viewing. Her sisters and parents are speaking quietly, as if not to wake the sleeping beast of Lily's grief. But Lily feels very much awake. Alert to every new moment that could bring something more than what the past few days have thrown at her.

"I wish I could see you guys. It's so hard to do this on my own here. Sometimes I feel like I can't breathe because of the pressure, and lockdown hasn't helped either. Nieu Bethesda is a ghost town. The army were called in in Graaff Reinet. People are only just surviving on food parcels and donations. It's a very weird time."

Lily is right. The village is in crisis. With tourism at a standstill, there are no visitors. With no visitors, there is no work. With no work, there is no money. The *BethesdaBevok* WhatsApp group has been active almost from day one, with offers of help and support. People who need help have been invited to send private requests for aid and the messages of gratitude to anonymous benefactors and donors soon flow afterwards. Donations of food and care packages are directed where needed in the village or up the hill to Pienaarsig, where the workers who earn the least have been hit the hardest. Care comes from crisis.



She laughs wryly. “Maybe I should accept Jonathan’s estate and donate it all to the village restoration fund.”

“That’s one way to get in with the villagers. You can be the rich benefactor.” says Isobel, with a grin and typical gentle mockery.

Maybe the suggestion is worth thinking about. Maybe meeting Jonathan’s obligations is a sacrifice to be made in favour of being able to find some real meaning in her life. Like Paul said, *imagine what you could do with it all.*

Jenny cuts into Lily’s thoughts. “So, Lil, what are you going to do about this young woman? Have you decided yet?”

Why does it always come back to Annabel? The thoughts of philanthropy are noble, but the crisis in Lily’s own world always come back to that: to Annabel. Is she being selfish, when there’s so much more to give?

“Paul says that maybe I need her.”

As she says his name, she realises the slip. And realises how easily it slips off her tongue.

They all chime in, almost in unison.

“Who?”

“Paul?”

“Who’s that?”

She sees the flush rising in her reflected image on the screen. Shit. Now she has to explain the other complicating factor in her life. She describes in light, polite detail, how she met him, how they talked, how he was the guide on the family’s walk last year.

Isobel cries out: “Oh my god! I remember him. He was cute!”.

Her comment brings up howls of defensiveness from Lily and the other sisters who joke that Lily

saw him first and that means he's out of bounds. Lily, mortified by her slip, feels relieved at the switch in banter from the heaviness of Nieu Bethesda's pandemic demise and her own drama. It all dies down and Lily explains what Paul said. That she was being ridiculous. That she needed Annabel. She counters with her side of the argument. That he was wrong. That Jonathan was asking her to replace Rosie. That she didn't know him and he didn't know her and that gave him no right to have a view on her life.

The group shuffles on their screens. She can see what they're all thinking.

"Oh come on! You don't agree with him, do you?"

She doesn't say it out loud, but Jonathan's emails have made her think differently about what life would be like with Annabel around. His descriptions of Annabel as a funny, intelligent, quirky, caring young woman make her think about her Rosie, who was all of those things. And what would it hurt to have a funny, quirky young presence in her world? A world that for four years — and perhaps longer, if his emails are to be believed — has been dark, humourless and lifeless.

Annabel could be the colour she needs.

And yet...and yet...

Annabel's origin story repels Lily. Having Jonathan's other daughter in her life would be tantamount to admitting her failure as a wife and mother. Especially as a mother. Annabel would be the manifestation of everything that goes with the inadequate achievement of society's determination of what makes a woman a Woman. Woman = Wife and Mother, capital W, capital M. Another scarlet letter. How to explain her presence, their relationship?

"This is Annabel, my..." Step-daughter? Daughter? Friend? God-daughter?

"This is Annabel, my late-ex-husband's other daughter. My late daughter's half-sister."

Snappy titles. So in that parallel universe where Lily suddenly becomes Mother to Jonathan's Daughter, she will be ascribed those labels without having worked for them, except she has, because she is a Mother to her own Daughter, but that Daughter is dead.

She flashes back in her mind to the night of her last moments with Rosie. The argument in the car. What was it this time? She is horrified that she can't remember. But she is clear about what followed.

"Lil. Lil. Are you alright?" says Bill, concern lacing his voice.

Lily opens her eyes and sniffs her tears back and simply nods.

“What happened?”

“I— I don’t know. The car just stopped.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m near some fields next to a rundown farmhouse, before you go up the hill. Where that round kopje is.”

“The muffin?” The rocky landmark just on the edge of town, colloquially named by the villagers. The sight that says “you’re here.” to every weary traveller.

“Yes, I think so.”

“I didn’t know who else to call,” Annabel had said, which is an obvious statement for someone new to Nieu Bethesda.

Annabel has broken down just outside the village, which is the best place to get stuck in that area. There, the road is wide enough for other cars to see you before the pass. You get a great view of the mountain range into the bargain. And there are still the remnants of cell phone reception. Beyond this line, there be dragons with no signal. Beyond where she is, the road starts with a tricky winding pass over a small mountain before giving way to wide open plains painted sandy-gold in the autumn light.

Lily is silent. She looks at her watch, though she doesn’t know why. It’s not like she has plans to be anywhere. A couple of minutes later, she’s in her car, driving to rescue Annabel. She’s getting used to this unpredictable world. Perhaps the events of the last couple of days — Paul’s opinion, the family’s agreement, Jonathan’s emails, the lockdown crisis of need in the village — have softened Lily to her place in the world. Maybe they’re starting to cut a more flexible groove in her mind.

As if in acknowledgement, she, Lily, has made an effort this morning, which is beautiful and clear and bright, with the never-ending blue Karoo sky expanding to all edges of the horizon and the sun hot and high, bleaching warmth into every surface. She's feeling brighter herself, in a long red dress and Converse trainers. Still, she feels her shoulders tightening when she sees Annabel's car.

Annabel climbs out of the RAV4 when Lily approaches. She's in simple jeans and white t-shirt, with her strawberry blonde curls piled in a casual bun on her head and flip flops on her feet. They talk for a few minutes, trying to decide what to do. Because it's Jonathan's car, Annabel doesn't have the details of his roadside assistance service and Lily's won't help any vehicle other than her own. Annabel needs to get to Graaff Reinet to collect her insulin prescription. Lily remembers the Facebook post from a few days ago. The prescription must be filled today. She's organised all the paperwork from her doctor and the pharmacist at Merino Pharmacy is waiting for her. He is closing at 2.30pm for the Easter weekend.

"Ok, you can take my car. Drop me off at home." says Lily.

Annabel hesitates.

"Mrs Cottle, please can you come with me? I heard they are putting up roadblocks and I'm nervous. I've only had my licence for a few months."

The logic is sound, of course, despite the fact that Annabel has made it from Cape Town to Nieu Bethesda on her own. If there's a block and Annabel is driving a car that doesn't belong to her and the police are feeling particularly obstreperous, it could get complicated, though South African law doesn't prohibit people from driving other people's cars and Lily has never heard of anyone being penalised for doing that. But Annabel is an inexperienced driver and if there's an accident on the mountain pass... At least Lily would be with her and able to help. And in any event, Lily scans her agenda for the day and comes up wanting. First, stew in her own misery. Second, waft around the house in her own swirling emotions. Third, lie around wallowing in self-pity. A drive to Graaff Reinet is a more appealing option.

Lily makes a couple of calls to her new friends in the village. She finds a farmer who is able to move around under lockdown rules. He'll tow the car back to his garage and he'll get his

workers to look at it. They arrange to leave the keys under the wheel arch and Lily and Annabel head off in awkward silence. It's going to be a long 90 kilometres.

They make polite, tiny talk to fill the silence, with long pauses in between. It's a lovely view. The landscape colours are like a painting. A beautiful day. It's strange to see no cars on the road. I wonder if there will be a roadblock. That kind of stuff. Lily starts to relax into the journey, focusing on the drive. The meditation of controlling her car, seeing the road pass under the wheels, concentrating on what's ahead.

About 15 kilometres off from their destination, Lily notices that Annabel is starting to fidget in her seat. It's almost imperceptible, but she hears a slight slur in the young woman's speech. As the minutes and kilometres pass, Annabel stumbles over her words. She is sweating slightly. Lily cranks up the aircon. It's a hot day.

"Are you alright, Annabel?" It's strange hearing the young woman's name on her lips.

"I think I'm having a hypo."

"A what?"

"Sugar is low. I need sugar."

"Sugar?"

Shit. There is none of that in the car. Lily drops the car into fourth gear, accelerates to pick up speed. She rams it back into fifth and watches the needle climb five, 10, 15 kilometres over the speed limit.

The township at the edge of Graaff Reinet is in sight, at the end of the long sweeping curve with the big cross on the roadside. If Lily believed in God, she'd call on him now. As she slows to enter the curve, a policeman steps into the road, his hand held up in the universal instruction to Stop and Obey. Lily does so, trying to ignore the anxiety knot forming in her stomach.

The officer greets her and his questions start. Good afternoon ma'am. May I see your driver's licence. Do you know you are not allowed to be out? Where are you going? Why are you going there? Do you have a permit? Can I see the letter from the doctor? Why are you travelling together? Where is your mask?

His actions and speech are languid. Lily must be his first customer of the day. He has nowhere to go but here. Nothing to do but this.

"Sir, my daughter is not well. You can see." She gestures to Annabel, who is visibly sweating, breathing with shallow breaths, eyes closed, head to the side. "May we please go now? I give you my word that we will go straight home after we have her medication."

My daughter. A label of convenience, used to grease the wheels of bureaucracy in an inconvenient emergency

The officer leans into the car. "Are you ok, miss?"

Lily replies for Annabel. "She's diabetic. She's having a hypo. I need to get her to help. Please can I go?"

He hands her back her paperwork with infuriating languidness and waves her off. Lily floors the accelerator and thanks the lockdown gods for the streets empty of cars and people. Into the town, around the church square, and a dramatic U-turn to park in front of the chemist's door. It's like a car chase in the movies, except the only thing she's chasing is the need to not let another young woman die on her watch. She doesn't know anything about diabetes, but this thing called a hypo does not look good.

The pharmacist kicks into action. He hands Lily a roll of Super C glucose sweets and flicks open a can of Coke, barking instructions that Annabel must take both immediately. Annabel gulps the Coke while Lily scratches open the roll of sweets. Annabel's head lolls back into the headrest, her cheeks bulging as she sucks four sweets at once.

Inside the chemist, Lily breaks. The pharmacist guides her to a chair and hands her a box of tissues. He leaves her to compose herself while fetching the insulin and ringing it all up.

“I think your daughter’s going to be ok. Just let her rest,” he says to Lily.

My Daughter.

Later, they are back home again, at Rosie’s house, after a silent drive. Annabel is resting and Lily is packing insulin and groceries into the fridge and cupboards. The house is spotless. Annabel’s books and laptop are stacked in a neat pile on the dining table. Everything is in its place. There is a picture of Heather and Jonathan with Annabel next to the laptop.

“Will you be alright, Annabel?”

“Thank you, Mrs Cottle. I don’t have words to say how I —“

“You don’t need to.”

“Thank you again Mrs Cottle.”

“Please. Call me Lily.”

\*\*\*

8pm

The chyron across the screen: President Cyril Ramaphosa.

*My Fellow South Africans. At midnight tonight, it will be exactly two weeks since our country entered into an unprecedented nation-wide lockdown to contain the spread of the coronavirus.*

...

*This evening, I stand before you to ask you to endure even longer. I have to ask you to make even greater sacrifices so that our country may survive this crisis and so that tens of thousands of lives may be saved. After careful consideration of the available evidence, the National Coronavirus Command Council has decided to extend the nation-wide lockdown by a further two weeks beyond the initial 21 days. This means that most of the existing lockdown measures will remain in force until the end of April.*

THE END



**Part B: Portfolio**

**The Memory Altar**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

**Hilary Alexander**

November 2021

## **Preamble: how it started**

Words have always been the golden thread in my life.

Aged 4, after my first day at school, I told my mother I was very upset because I hadn't yet learned to read. Aged around 11, I read Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and was entranced by the storytelling, the language, the drama of it all. Aged 13, in high school, I met *Beowulf* for the first time in a new world of epic poems. Aged 15, I was mesmerised by the tapestry of Karen Blixen's 'farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills' in *Out of Africa*. Aged 17, in matric, I won the school's academic prize for literature.

After matriculating, journalism was my first career choice, until I job-shadowed a journalist for two days. Inexplicably, I changed my mind and for months was all out of ideas for an alternative.

Even without knowing what path of study to follow, for various reasons — lack of money, lack of parental support, lack of career guidance — going to university was out of the question.

"University is too academic. You won't learn anything," said my mechanic-draughtsman father, "you should do a course that will equip you to do a job from day one after you graduate."

And so it was decreed. In 1990, aged 17.5, I enrolled at what was then called Technikon Witwatersrand (now University of Johannesburg) to follow a more vocational path of study. I graduated five years later (I failed second and third years, thanks to a period of deep unhappiness and correspondingly flawed decisions) with a National Diploma in Public Relations (NDPR). The qualification itself was irrelevant, in my mind. To me, it wasn't good enough and far below what I knew I could achieve, but it was the proverbial "piece of paper you can fall back on if you decide to do something else," as my mother described.

Aged 20, I started my career as a public relations professional.

A memory: it was around March 1993, my first day on the job as a fresh-faced intern in a small PR agency, going through the motions of in-service training as a condition of graduation. My boss, a man named Paul, briefed me to write a media release about something or other. I took meticulous notes, gulped back my nerves, sat down at the big beige computer with a green cursor

blinking on the black screen. I started to write.

When it was done, I handed him the two-page article and got on with being the fresh-faced intern again. Shortly afterwards, he came out of his office holding the article up between his thumb and fore-finger.

“Marry me,” he said.

For the moment, let’s step over the question about the appropriateness of that comment coming from a married man in an office setting, and go back to the scene. I had no response but to blush from my chest to my hairline and giggle.

He went on to explain that he’d been working in the agency for around seven years and had never once seen a piece of work from any intern written so well in such a short space of time. It was a revelation to me. It was the first time I’d considered that I could write something more than a prescribed school essay to pass an exam. More, that I could write well. In that moment, the vocational training I’d been stumbling through coalesced into the notion that I could use words to make money.

Over the next few years, I built a career as a business communications specialist, with writing always at the heart of everything I did. Words were ever-present in each role I took on.

Fast forward to October 2019.

I was 47-years old, on holiday with my husband in a rustic beach town in Tanzania. By then, I’d been a commercial writer for 26 years, first in various roles for a series of employers, and later as a business owner, running a small copywriting agency for clients in South Africa and abroad.

Like anyone facing down the next zero-milestone birthday, I was starting to think about the goals I’d had in my life which I’d never achieved. Having a university degree was one of them. I’d been carrying around my vaguely useful National Diploma as a signal of my own inadequacy for years. I’d always wanted to go to university, but time, money and life always seemed to get in the way.

Up to that point, for a few years I'd been dabbling in more creative writing as a personal outlet and as a way to explore a different side of my writing brain. I'd started a blog, then enrolled in some writing workshops. The workshops gave way to a few more structured creative writing courses which in turn gave way to being accepted into a writing mentoring programme. I could see that my writing ability was evolving as the scaffolding for my innate writing talent. I was loving the process of learning to tell stories with more technical skill; understanding the hero's journey, showing not telling, writing it slant. The feedback I was receiving was encouraging and I felt a call to take this new skill further.

I decided to pursue a Master's Degree in Creative Writing, which would feed my lingering desire to earn a university degree, while also challenging me as a writer through more disciplined academic rigour.

In 2018, I made some tentative enquiries into registering as an *Ad Eundem Gradum* (AEG) candidate on the Master's in Creative Writing Programme at a well-known university in my city. I knew that without the minimum academic requirement of an honours degree, I'd have to jump through some hoops to convince the convenors to accept me on to the programme, but I decided to try.

I attached some samples of my work which, in hindsight, weren't the best representation of my writing abilities. However, I'd hoped that perhaps the selectors would see some kernels of talent that could be panel beaten into shape once I'd been accepted onto the programme.

Sometime later, the course convenor wrote back to me. His response, paraphrased, was: "I have reviewed your work and perhaps you should apply to another institution that has similar tastes."

I was crushed, but the rejection made me more determined in my quest to find a university that would accept my application. I knew I could write, and was determined to work hard to succeed. I just needed to find a home for the words I knew were buried deep inside me waiting to emerge. I wiped my face of tears and talked to my writing mentor about the application. We decided to look at how to improve the work and my mentor agreed to offer guidance along the way.

Throughout the next year, I explored course offerings at different universities while also concentrating on building a portfolio that would be strong enough to convince an institution that I could be a worthy candidate.

On 30 October 2019, under the shade of a rustling palm tree in rural Tanzania, I hit ‘send’ on an email to Rhodes University, attaching my portfolio and references as an AEG candidate application to the Master’s Degree in Creative Writing.

It has taken me just over 1 200 words to get to this point in my story, but I was left without words when, a few weeks later, I received confirmation that my application was successful. I’d been accepted on to the programme.

This is where my story – in the form of a research portfolio – begins.

## Introduction

This research portfolio represents an overview of what I have learned, read and written throughout the course of the two-year part time programme in pursuit of a Master's Degree in Creative Writing, commencing in January 2020. The portfolio follows a chronological review of the seminars and assignments delivered during the first year of study. That said, I have not offered a week-by-week account, but rather have highlighted particular learnings, revelations or discussion points during the period in which they arose. The dates of the journal entries, therefore, do not follow a precise calendar.

My intention in this portfolio is to chart my journey as a scholar, a reader, and most importantly, a writer, to elaborate on the thinking behind the construction of the creative thesis.

Additional required components of this submission include a reflection on the feedback received from the anonymous reader who reviewed my creative thesis, titled *The Memory Altar*; the Poetics Essay, produced as a requirement of the Poetics Seminar; and four book reviews. These are all included at the end of the research portfolio.

The portfolio is written in an informal style, revealing my own voice and includes some personal observations which have been included to add some context and texture to the academic process.

## Week 1: 30 January 2020

When I arrived on campus on my first day of orientation week in January 2020, the first person I talked to was Jeff Moloi, who I learned was to be a classmate. I came to be very fond of Jeff over the following months. In his distinctive deep voice, he admitted that he shared my trepidation about the adventure we were about to embark on. Little did I know that that week would be the only time during the entire course that we would lay physical eyes on each other. Being a student during the time of Covid fundamentally changed how we would experience academic life.

We stood outside the closed door, wondering how to access the hallowed halls of creative learning, before lecturer and poet Mangaliso Buzani let us in. And just like that, one of the most life-changing decisions of my life became a reality.

During the week, we immersed ourselves in reading and writing extracts to be read aloud and discussed among groups. In just a few short sessions, I realised how much I had to learn. I needed to get out of my comfort zone and to let writers in whose work I don't know.

Before setting foot on campus, we were issued with a short reading list and a holiday assignment to research the titles on the list and prepare some commentary on each title. Later, we were also issued a much longer one containing about 300 titles of recommended reading. This was the door which opened my literary mind as an opportunity to expand my reading repertoire. I was daunted by the volume, but delighted at the prospect of working through it.

As the readings and discussions progressed during the orientation week, I realised how much I needed to expand my reading, not only of prose but of poetry too. An avid reader of prose all my life, I'd only dabbled in some poetry, mainly as a lovelorn teenager while at school. I was aware this was not a form I knew a lot about. Then, and now, I considered myself to be a prose writer, preferring the longer form that exploits the luxury of large word counts over the short, concise descriptive form of poetry. I do, however, appreciate the beauty of the genre, and the way that poets can turn just a few words into evocative pictures.

In one example, while doing research for the holiday reading assignment, I was mesmerised by Ghassan Zaqtan's *You're Not Alone in the Wilderness*, included in the collection *Like a Straw Bird it Follows Me*, a title in the short reading list.

In just a few short lines, he draws the reader into a world that is laden with stories and legends, using rich imagery and fluid musicality. This is a learning for me: less is more. Big pictures can be created with few words.

Despite the beauty and musicality of the genre, I had no illusions about my preference. I was very clear about one thing: I'm a prose writer. A non-fiction prose writer. That was my preferred niche and I meant to continue as I began.

During the orientation week: a theme began to emerge in what I wrote and read. That is, the relationship that women have with the world. This has become a topic I've thought about a lot in recent years, both in respect of myself but also in respect of the world outside my own. I realised during that week that I wanted to explore it in more detail in my writing and reading.

That, to me, felt like a good starting point for the writing I was required to produce, and so I carried that in my mind when I returned to my real life after the week in Makhanda.



## **Week 9 & 10: 8 March 2020**

I mentioned earlier that I considered that non-fiction would be my niche. As a commercial copywriter, I do it every day and I do it well. And yet, paradoxically, while my preference for writing was directed towards non-fiction, my reading repertoire has been dominated by fiction. I've developed reading habits that have stayed in a very safe lane, reading authors who write in genres I'm comfortable with and that I know well. For example, I've always told myself I'm not a fan of science fiction or surrealism, though I have been known to dip into the odd popular fantasy novel by, say, JRR Tolkien or Terry Pratchett. I like my characters to be familiar, their worlds to be places I can relate to, and the events that affect them to be the same kinds of events that could affect me in real life.

The programme opened up a world far beyond that limited repertoire and I committed to exploring as many different writers as possible. This was in relation not only to the works that we were reading but more specifically to the work that my colleagues were producing.

That said, as we were preparing for writing our creative thesis, I became mesmerised by some writers in particular. Otessa Moshfegh, Kate Zambreno, Lidia Yuknavitch, Ivan Vladislavić, Margeurite Duras were some, among others. There were writers I'd never heard of before but whose work left a distinct impression on my approach to creative writing. I write in more detail about this later in the portfolio.

To support our readings, I was very conscious of teacher Paul Wessels's advice. He reminded us that we should be looking at a piece to understand how it makes us feel, what techniques were used, and what we could learn from those techniques. In our reading group, I believed I was beginning to find the right balance but realised with some frustration that I still had work to do to concentrate my mind fully in this respect: unlearning a lifetime of conditioning in reading the 'what' of a piece in favour of the 'how'.

In a way, perhaps this is the difference between learning how to read books and learning how to read literature. Looking at form over substance. Hearing a piece rather than simply seeing it as a collection of words on a page. Feeling the work deeply and noticing how we feel. Reading the words as a form of meditation.

This advice held true for one of the first assignments we delivered, the *Writing the Body* seminar, under guidance from teacher Stacy Hardy. The assignment asked us to look at the body as a blank canvas on to which we can project our own infinite writings; the body's history is a map to be navigated through words and imagery. As women, we have complex relationships with our bodies. To examine it so closely, to map out all the lumps and bumps, bruises, curves and scars both seen and unseen, meant to confront myself with the evidence of how I've treated this vessel over the years.

The piece I wrote was very personal — as were those written by my colleagues. I grappled with this in the first draft, but in later drafts forced myself to give myself over to the writing. This was another key learning for me.

The piece I wrote for that seminar was raw, emotional and touched on a topic that most people don't discuss even with their friends. It was liberating, in a way, to be able to present the work as just that: a piece of writing, words on a page. Creating distance between the piece and the author gives the work space to breathe. Doing so presents a much richer work made more substantial with the weight of personal revelation.

Writing is an exercise in self-exposure. The writer casts herself across the page, even if the story isn't about her. Any work is influenced by what the writer knows, has experienced, where she has been, who she has met, what she has learned. She writes, motivated by her need for authenticity and to discover, and reveal, her own truth, while being protected by the idea that, at least in the context of this programme, the work is about the work and not about the writer.

This would be especially true for a non-fiction writer relaying real events or presenting the lives of real people.

And yet, the work *is* about the writer — a real person with desires and dreams. Without the writer's own voice, a piece can be bland and insubstantial. Infusing herself into the work humanises the piece and offers readers something that they can relate to, even if they are strangers to her. This notion is particularly relevant to work that focuses on the writer's relationship with her body. How can she remove herself from text that is so intimately connected to her very being?

## Week 11 & 12: 22 March 2020

In *Heroines*, by Kate Zambreno, one of the heroines is Vivien Eliot, wife of TS. On page 97, Zambreno writes: ‘Cannot a piece of writing also be a personal exorcism? ...’

I was once advised by a mentor that “when emotion runs hot, write cool.” So I understood the principle of toning down high emotion, but I was struck by what Zambreno said — that such personal writing can be an exorcism of sorts. Writing non-fiction in the first person, ‘I’ rather than the second person ‘you’ or third person ‘she’ sets up the reader’s expectation that the writer is drawing from her own well of memory and experience. The question then, is how ‘hot’ the water is in that well.

By this time in the programme, my personal life was becoming more complex. I was juggling multiple demands from my day-job, managing complicated developments on the home front, and with the rest of the world was grappling with the intensity of life in the age of the coronavirus crisis. For me, too, as an avid follower of politics, the Trumpian and Brexit era news cycles were relentless and exhausting.

The complicated domestic developments I refer to played a significant role in the shape and content of my response to the third assignment, set by Mxolisi Nyezwa. Nyezwa started his assignment with this line: ‘All my seminars aim to show that writing comes from our frustrations with the world.’

Writing to this brief was again an intensely personal experience for me. My piece, *The Girl Child*, reflected on the emotional distance between a girl child and her fractured family.

Nyezwa’s feedback to the assignment could be summarised as “Don’t over-write.” He highlighted the need to lighten the touch on the piece, putting some distance between me, as the writer, and the work that the reader would read, reinforcing what I’d begun to peel back in Hardy’s assignment a few weeks before.

By placing distance between the work and the writer, it’s possible to add a layer of, say, mystery, or inference into the story, rather than flagellating the reader with the writer’s own dramatic

response to the circumstances being written about. That distance moderates the temperature of the work's emotional presence and gives the reader a chance to draw her own conclusions.

How, then, would a non-fiction memoir or autobiography deliver the same intention? What does the writer do if she is, say, writing about true events that affected her deeply, whether physically, mentally or emotionally? How do you write anger with a cool pen?

I considered this when editing my assignment, lifting the overburdened emotion from the piece and treating it with a lighter touch.

### Week 13 & 14: 5 April 2020

By this point, we were well into the first hard covid lockdown. Life was constrained, mundane and, for some, heart-breaking. And yet, I found the course requirements to be a comforting routine during a discomfoting time. It was a relief to rely on the unchanging cycle of assignments, reflective journals and reading groups, and a much-needed grounding force.

Shortly before lockdown, I selected an anthology from the long reader: *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*, edited by Jeremy Noel-Tod. It arrived during the week that the lockdown was announced, and it was an ideal tome to escape into during the long dreary days and nights. I could savour each piece and explore more about what makes prose poetry — a genre I'd become increasingly enamoured by. Prose poetry carries the same lyrical opportunities as poetry but it has the greater flexibility of prose.

In looking forward to the process of producing the creative thesis, I considered whether this form could be viable in producing a work of non-fiction. There would be considerations in this, of course. Most notably: how long could the form sustain itself in a work of 30 000 words or more, without tiring the reader, or exhausting the form itself in a work of that length? Would the reader tire of the poetry and seek more 'grounded' prose? And the flip side of that would be: how would the writer enliven the prose to sufficiently engage the reader's attention in the work, without obscuring its factual credibility?

Bearing in mind my predisposition towards writing non-fiction, I was really struck by some of the pieces in the anthology, including: *Reclaiming a Beloved City*, by Clifton Gachagua (2014) (pg. 27-28) and *Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)*, by Warsaw Shire (2011) (pg. 63-64). Both relay real experiences of the sights, scenes and senses that have influenced each writer's description. And yet they are both rich with poetry, lyricism and musicality.

As examples:

'When I meet others like me I recognise the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces. No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.' (Shire (2011), pg. 63, *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*)

And:

‘And in the eyes of people are azaleas blooming and popping like bubblegum carried up to perch in the branches of a blue I&M tree...’ (Gachagua (2014), pg. 27, *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*)

These and other excerpts from the anthology serve as good examples of how a non-fiction piece can be enriched with descriptive imagery and poetic language.

## Week 15 & 16: 19 April 2020

The fourth week of lockdown. What a strange time. It was an intellectually challenging time. I struggled to focus on reading, able to concentrate only for small blocks of time. My own family's emotional landscape was becoming more complex, too. My mother was living with me in Cape Town while her partner, my step-father, was living in the UK. Before lockdown, my mother had been planning to return to the UK to join him, but found herself grounded in Cape Town when lockdown was announced.

In early April my step-father was admitted to hospital with advanced cancer, and given a prognosis of weeks or just a few months. With lockdown in place, it was impossible for my mother to fly out to see him. Our life began to be ruled not only by lockdown regulations but by the cycle of four daily phone calls from her bedroom in South Africa to his hospital bed in south-west England. It was heart-breaking to watch and required more emotional resilience than I thought I had.

Again, however, the routine of learning, reading and writing gave me space to breathe on my own while all others around me were losing their heads.

In our second seminar, teacher Stacy Hardy told the story of a friend of hers in Egypt. Here is an extract from Hardy's seminar: 'In 2016 Egyptian novelist and journalist Ahmed Naji along with his editor, Tarek al-Taher were put on trial for the publication of an excerpt of his novel, because it allegedly made a reader feel things. The honourable citizen...complained that his "heartbeat fluctuated and blood pressure dropped" while reading the chapter.

The writer wasn't put on trial for what he wrote but how it made the reader feel in his body. What was dangerous that the writing had a physical effect on the body of the reader.'

I thought of this while reading a story in Rian Malan's book *My Traitor's Heart*, which I re-read during this time. The story tells of the sickening, brutal murder of a man called Denis Moshweshwe in 1985. The white racist instigator of the torturous event was sentenced to just seven years in prison. Around the same time an ANC activist was sentenced to ten years for distributing political pamphlets.

I was reading this story at around 6am on a weekday morning, trying to get in some reading time before my work day started. With each word, each page turn, I felt a rage rising in my belly. By the end of it, I was in tears and railing against every white person who bought into the apartheid lie and used it as a shield against their own evil.

The incident reminded me of the importance of making that direct, heart-connection with the reader. Perhaps it is easier to do that in a non-fiction book, dealing with a subject that is as harrowing as the evil of apartheid South Africa. What, then, is needed from a piece of fiction? How does a writer find the words, scenes, characters, plot, so deep as to move someone to tears — or to advocate for the writer to be incarcerated?

That's where the power of a piece lies. *That's* the power of writing.

However, does a piece of visceral writing need a graphic, blow-by-blow account to be effective? In a work of fiction, these scenes could easily descend into gratuitous gore. They need to be played with a light touch.

In *Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)*, by Warsan Shire (2011), included in the *Penguin Book of the Prose Poem* (pg. 63-64), Shire writes: 'But Alhamdulillah all of this is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire, or a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails, or fourteen men between my legs, or a gun, or a promise or a lie, or his name, or his manhood in my mouth.'

The scenes in this multi-layered sentence imprint on the reader's mind. It is effective in its simplicity. An example of how less is more. This was also a fine example of the difference between a book of prose and a prose poem, and how a writer can wield words to compelling effect. In the former, the novel-length word count gives Malan the latitude to create painstaking word pictures of apartheid's murderous injustices. In the latter, in just 56 words, Shire has talked of patriarchy, gender-based violence, weaponised sex, broken relationships and conflict.



## **Week 21 & 22: 31 May 2020**

I consider myself to be progressive, open-minded and liberal and wear those badges with pride. During the year, I followed the news of the killing of George Floyd in America, and see every day the inequality in our own country. I began to think about how I — a middle-class, educated white woman — would, should or could write about race or about the experience of others.

What is a writer's duty in writing characters that don't look, sound or pray like she does?

This was a conversation that arose during one of the seminar feedback sessions, in which a colleague had written a story from the point of view of a woman of colour. His character was a Coloured female sex worker. He is a white man with very particular views on the world, which often reveal his narrow-mindedness.

The classmate in question represents everything I dislike in a person. He is self-centred, narcissistic and arrogant with a racist, sexist tendency that is thinly veiled in careful language that purports to be something other than what it really is. We are different people, different writers. In my opinion, his scenes are clumsy and full of unnecessary action that bludgeons the reader into boredom. I write this judgement as a means to contextualise the discussion that gave rise to this thought.

In the story, the classmate had written his character's experience in accordance with every stereotype that has been applied to a Coloured woman on the streets. She was disempowered, suffering addictions, on the street selling her body for money. She had no agency at all.

I considered how best to respond to this.

Later in this portfolio, in the Poetics Essay, I describe the sensation of 'knowing from an unknown source', when I was asked to write a video script raising awareness of gender-based violence. In this context of this seminar, my initial reaction was that if you haven't walked a mile in the character's shoes, you have no right to write about their journey. However, that directly contradicts my earlier position, relating to my experience of writing the script focused on GBV. Following my own logic, if I haven't been raped, how can I write about the experience?

In the first instance, I could reference what I *have* experienced. I may not have been raped, but I have had experiences along the GBV spectrum that I could draw on to understand something of what it feels like to be violated.

But even that argument is flawed, inferring that every writer should have some first-hand experience of what their characters are going through. JK Rowling certainly hadn't experienced a game of Quidditch before writing the Harry Potter series.

More disturbing would be the state of the literary world if those were the conditions under which every writer produces work. Writing exclusively what you know would lead to a bland, homogenous, uninteresting body of literature in which nothing new is offered beyond what the writers know themselves.

I realised the position is much more nuanced than my first black and white knee-jerk reaction.

A writer's treatment of a character's experience is influenced by two factors: origin and intent.

Origin, because we are all wired to impose our own biases, judgments, assumptions and prejudices on the actions a character takes. If, for example, I am a narcissistic, racist white man, I am more likely to portray a Coloured female sex worker as an object without agency consumed by addiction and need, because that is how I am most likely to see the world. Similarly, I, as a middle-class white woman might make incorrect assumptions about the education or intelligence of a farmer's wife, based on my own prejudices that suggest the rural woman is uneducated.

Doing research is one obvious way to counter that. A wonderful example of this is South African author, Claire Robertson, whose work *The Spiral House* represents the story of a freed slave girl in the Cape in 1794. The book is meticulously researched which adds weight and credibility to the story.

Another way to circumvent that tendency is for writers to develop a self-awareness about their own worlds. A writer who sees and acknowledges her own prejudicial landscape is more likely to apply that conscious knowledge to the story she is crafting, adding nuance, empathy and dimension to the character's world.

In terms of intent, I believe that writers are driven by the need to articulate their own viewpoint through their work — whether the work is a piece of fiction or non-fiction. They have something to say and by god they will use their words to say it. Writers have inherent influence just by possessing the gift of being able to use words to voice ideas. Words, then, have the power to influence thought and behaviour.

A non-fiction writer might have a particular political point of view which she wants to espouse. She will craft her story accordingly. Witness the differences in headlines about the same story that would appear in conservative versus more liberal media. A conservative author would add her own slant while a more liberal writer would present the same story entirely differently.

Again, if a writer is sufficiently self-aware, and if she cares enough about the story, she would write a more balanced piece. I have dealt with this elsewhere in this document, referring to conversations I had with teacher Jo-Anne Bekker during the *Write it Slant* seminar.

My final thought on this is focused on stereotypes, and more specifically on the danger of falling back on stereotypes in describing characters, scenes or action. A gay man is camp; a person from Nigeria is a scamster; a woman who is drunk is ‘asking for it’; a Trump supporter is a gun-toting redneck, and so on. It’s an easy fallback which at best alienates the reader and at worst reveals the writer for one who doesn’t care enough about the character to add a more complex dimension to their make-up. And if the writer doesn’t care enough, why should the reader?

### Week 23 & 24: 14 June 2020

It was at this point in the year that I discovered Ivan Vladislavić, one of the writers whose work has influenced my own. His novel *The Restless Supermarket* resonated with me deeply, reminding me of a particular period in my life. In 1993, I was 21-years old, living in Johannesburg, rebounding from shattering heartbreak by landing in a new relationship. The book is set in Hillbrow in that year, against the backdrop of the Congress for a Democratic South Africa, the political negotiations that would change the trajectory of South African history.

Vladislavić's writing is precise, intentional and full of substance. Every word has a function, every character plays a role, every scene pushes the story forward. There is no wastage in his storytelling. I realised he was certainly a writer I'd like to emulate.

The book is a wonderful example of how to write about history with colour, life and humanity, rather than writing about history in dry statistics or bland reportage. The primary narrative offers little hints about the historically momentous background events. They are fed to us in little droplets through a news report, references to violent events, foreign accents heard in the cafe, the nationalities of the fast-food landscape in Hillbrow. These are revealed in a drip-feed of clues, rather than all at once in dramatic scenes or monologues full of rhetoric.

With a light touch Vladislavić has been able to reveal the fears and prejudices of white people in the country at the time. He gives his characters vocabularies and idiosyncrasies that are so disconnected from the reality of a changing South Africa in 1993. But he has achieved this without judgement or pretension, through humour and a light, easy style. We are laughing at the characters, aghast at their attitudes, but they are oblivious.

The book represented so much of what I was planning to write about in my creative thesis. It is an elegant example of how to write about current affairs and heavy social issues with a light but thought-provoking touch. I soon began to devour more of Vladislavić's books.

While I was still set on writing non-fiction, I was taking cues from fiction writers on how best to write about politics and current affairs and real events with creativity, humour and flair.

## Week 30 & 31: 12 July 2020

When I was little, I used to play the kids' game pick-up-sticks. A player throws a sheaf of multi-coloured sticks up into the air. When they land, the players must sort through the sticks, moving them aside one-by-one into colour-coordinated piles without disturbing any of the others.

Writing is a bit like that. The writer sorts through multiple ideas that represent what she wants to say, and sorts those ideas into sentences made up of words that are linked together by a golden thread. A single thought (or perhaps more) that encapsulates what the work is trying to say. Once that's found comes the task of stitching together the disparate thoughts in a flow that engages and moves the reader.

We tell stories, whether our own or those of others. Those same stories are overlaid with our memories, which, again, could be our own or others', which leave traces in our psyche and are expressed in what we write. We impose meaning on those memories and draw from a deep source of knowing while we elaborate our ideas, experiences and insights. And finally, we present ourselves to the world with all of the complex emotion that makes us human. In my Poetics Essay, presented later, I elaborate these five components that I consider to be essential in a piece of writing: stories, emergence, memory, source and emotions.

As writers, our tools are our hands on the keyboard or the pen on paper. The raw material we work with is our imagination, our knowledge, memories, experiences, and the words we shape into sentences, paragraphs or stanzas. Our job is to mould that material with our tools, to create a product that is beautiful, eye-catching, unique and hopefully, one day, in demand from readers willing to part with good money for that product.

During the July contact week, a classmate's throwaway comment made me consider one point: Is there ever any *wrong* writing?

At this point in the programme, I embraced the idea that I am a writer who performs best within the more traditional norms of prose-writing. The form makes most sense to me. The structure of the hero's journey. The clarity in well-crafted scenes and dialogue. The simplicity of showing, not telling.

It took me some time to feel comfortable with that position, not least because my inner critic was shouting that taking a more traditional approach is a cop-out that doesn't allow for more experimentalism in my work.

This thinking gave rise to some questions which I tried to answer.

As writers, we *should* be breaking rules, experimenting, pushing boundaries. Since words can be written and re-written in infinite combinations, we have the latitude to do that. But what does that mean for the traditional structure, form and formula of a piece of prose? Does it matter if the hero never completes her journey? Does it matter if we never intend to use the proverbial gun on Chekov's stage? What if we bring it on anyway, just for show, letting the characters brandish it with abandon without any real discernible purpose?

There is joy and relief in playing with new forms, working with words and turning them into literary structures that are as malleable as we want them to be. If the piece is cut loose from what are set as the 'rules' of 'traditional' technical best practices in prose writing, does that make the piece experimental? Who or what determines whether the experiment has worked? What rules are still standing in this age of experimentalism and playful rule-breaking?

And when does a piece of work stop being experimental and becomes instead, simply, flawed, meaningless posturing? A writer's vanity project?

Perhaps I am being a purist when I write about this, but I believe it is important to achieve exactly the right balance.

My answer here is: if we lose the reader in the reading, then the work has not worked, regardless of form. Of course, reader and writer can and will have entirely opposed opinions, so a reader isn't ever obligated to accept, like or agree with what a writer has written. However, the work needs to work hard enough to keep the reader motivated to keep reading. A writer, generally, doesn't have the luxury of receiving feedback from her readers, so she will never know if they read from beginning to end, and if they don't, why they stop. Putting the work out to trusted 'beta' readers will offer a clear indication of whether the work works well or not. I talk about this process in a later journal entry that deals with reader responses to my draft manuscript.

If we alienate the reader in the process, is it sufficient (or even, to revert to a more constrained notion, allowable) for the writer to dismiss the reader with a wave of their hand, saying ‘you’re not my target audience’ or ‘this is my genre/style/voice/personal preference/attempts at experimental writing’? Where does that leave the reader? And how does that impact the definition of what is quality writing? If writing is such a subjective craft, how much can a writer get away with in the name of experimentation?

I acknowledge that every writer has their style. That’s what makes literature so fascinating. In the same way, every reader will respond in one way, while another may react entirely differently to the same piece of work. I believe that as writers, even if we are pushing boundaries as far as they will go, and beyond, we shouldn’t ever waste the reader’s time. Therein lies our challenge.

I would argue that in prose, elements of the basic ‘traditional’ form are necessary to guide the reader. If we are asking for the reader’s time, attention and mental agility, we should at least take the time to pay attention to every detail. To plot, to character, to scenes, dialogue, movement, story. If the syntax doesn’t help the reader along, then punctuation is an effective signpost. If the plot is sagging, then darlings should be killed to get it back on track. The gun should always have a purpose.

This is not to say that the work itself — the flesh on the bones of the skeleton — shouldn’t be something quite extraordinary.

During the year, I encountered many pieces of literature whose shape and form is beyond what could be defined as traditional. Selah Saterstrom’s *Pink Institution*, with words dotted across the page like this, and

sometimes even

like this. or

combinations thereof.

Or Lidia Yuknavitch's relentless stream of consciousness, in *The Chronology of Water*, which pummels and pushes the reader and drags them through the living hell of the author's addiction and we feel every single high and low and the high higher highest highs and the low lower lowest lows of that period in her life when she lived through a helter skelter destructive relationship before eventually coming up for air to breathe once again and the reader exhales at the same time too.

Or Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* which

1

Features numbered snippets of narrative.

2

That hold the reader and leads her through a meandering thread.

3

That starts at point A.

4

And leads to point Z.

5

Via points Q and S and J and E.

6

Along the way.

And yet, through each of these examples and so many others, the writer holds the reader strong, with plot, with dialogue, with punctuation, with scenes, with characters that help the reader to navigate through the restless waters of their prose.



All this leads to my own golden thread. Like a piece of the most outrageously flamboyant piece of architecture, outrageously flamboyant prose, whether in structure, story or verbiage, still needs a strong foundation. Stories, memory, source, emotions, emergence.

As we present our stories, the reader's understanding emerges from under the blanket of words with which we cover them. The reader gives what cannot ever be returned: their time, energy, attention, understanding and emotion. In exchange, the writer's promise must be to respect and acknowledge that, giving the reader a piece of who we are, like a missing piece of the reader's puzzle. To do less is to disrespect the reader and to disqualify our own craft.

## Week 32 & 33: 16 August 2020

This period was perhaps the most difficult in the year. I found that an old friend committed suicide, and in the UK, my step-father's prognosis was shortened to a life of weeks rather than months and my mother's corresponding grief in Cape Town was amplified. Tensions in my home were high, and so the programme was a grounding anchor in my life. Thinking about fiction offered welcome relief against the real-life drama playing out in my home. As Ray Bradbury said: "*You must stay drunk on writing so reality doesn't destroy you.*"

For comfort, escapism and possibly some internal therapy, I turned to reading Vladislavić, and writing about sex and death in the seminars delivered by teachers Chwayita Ngamlana and Carol Leff respectively.

For the purpose of this portfolio, I am talking about the more traditional forms of prose which became my chosen genre at about this point in the programme. I began to think extensively what good prose could look, feel and sound like. I started this discussion in my earlier reflections about experimentalism.

As writing styles change over time, the author has much more flexibility to play with form, language and technique. That's a good thing. Writers are "allowed" to break the "rules". Indeed, they should, to keep the energy and evolution of language and literature flowing.

I believe that a defining characteristic in my own writing — and what I seek in others — is beauty. Finding beauty not only in the imagery, but also in the way it is written. With lyricism, rhyme, evocative images. A sense of place, clearly defined characters, a story that moves effortlessly from scene to scene with beautiful imagery that can draw readers in as if they were there. Even within the trends towards more stark styles, I believe writers should use the gifts they are given to do that — the gift of being able to weave pictures into being with words. It is possible to do this and it is a joy to read when it's done well, even if a genre is more experimental and characterised by sparseness.

I recognise that a particular signifier in my work is my ability to write detail in a scene. Writers I've read who do this really well are JM Coetzee, Ivan Vladislavić and Otessa Moshfegh. They each describe the worlds their characters inhabit with a clear, unambiguous viewpoint. You can

smell their perfume and body odours, you can taste their food, you can feel the rough blanket on their skin. You know how they're feeling, what they're seeing and the thoughts that influence their actions. It's very real and a technique that absorbs the reader into the character's world.

They are skilled writers who embody what it means when I say that writing is a skill, a craft, an art, that relies on a delicate balance between too much and not enough.

Use too many adjectives, focus on too many details, and the piece becomes overwhelmed with unnecessary minutiae. Use too few, and it is a lost opportunity for both reader and writer. I believe it is important to use language in the same way. Too verbose or flowery and the reader gets lost in long, diversionary tongue twisters. Too sparse and the reader is left having to construct too much of what they have to perceive might be missing.

Similarly, the same "rules" would apply when writing about characters. A piece should tell the reader exactly what they need to know – no more, no less. For example, if a character is wearing a red dress with white polka dots and blue flowers, that dress gives a hint to the reader of the kind of person the character is. But if the author goes on to describe in intricate detail the swirls and curlicues that exist on the vintage lace sewn with 100% cotton fuchsia thread on to the edges of the sleeves and hem of the dress, the reader will assume that the lace has a job to do in the story. This sets up the expectation that the lace is crucial to the story's progression. That may well be, but it may also simply be that the author wanted to describe the lace. Why make the lace the hero in the image if it has no specific purpose?

If that lace has no other function other than to manifest the writer's imagination, then the writer has taken the reader down an unnecessary garden path that will divert from the action/plot/story. The writer has wasted the reader's time.

## **Week 42 & 43: 25 October 2020**

By this point in the year, my step-father had died in hospital, six weeks earlier. My grieving mother was doing battle with unexpected events. She found that my step-father's 'friend' had defrauded him, even while he was dying, and my step-father's family were rejecting her presence in their lives, after 26 years. Angry email exchanges were happening almost daily.

So Stacy Hardy's seminar on the epistolary form was an apposite assignment that stands out as a highlight of the course. In today's fast-moving world, letter-writing is a fading art form. Contemporary correspondence has been reduced to snippets of 280 characters, delivered in a public social media thread that billions of people could potentially read, or to short voice notes recorded while moving from one task to the next.

I'm a terrible correspondent myself, but I am a dedicated fan of receiving letters, and of writing them, on the rare occasions that I do. As a literary form, I believe they add a different dimension to written work. There is a direct and personal connection with the reader – who in this case is the recipient of a letter. An intimacy that almost demands confidences to be shared, for desires and fantasies to be spelled out, and emotional points of view to be delivered.

Hardy asked us to do three things: first, to read the various epistolary extracts she'd included into her seminar notes and deliver a five-minute free-write in response to each extract. Second, to write a letter to our favourite author. Third, to write a piece in the epistolary form. For the third, I wrote a letter not to a person but to a country — Zimbabwe. My husband was an activist in that country's opposition politics for many years and continues to be obsessed by her flawed and turbulent existence.

I found myself squirming in my chair as I wrote my response to the assignment, finding personal depths I was unsure I wanted to reach in the face of an audience of readers. While I felt initially uncomfortable with the exposure, I felt compelled to be as direct and as personal as I was. Without that, I felt the letters would ring hollow. The form offers an opportunity for a writer to truly reveal herself to the reader, and offer characters a moment of honest disclosure.

This is an advantage that brings characters more to life and brings them closer to the reader on a more personal level. It reveals them to the reader as more authentic.

However, there are limitations to the form. Inserted incorrectly or for no purpose, they could affect the effectiveness and movement of the plot. The letters need to be carefully constructed with revelations or inciting events to ensure they move the plot along. Intervening narrative woven into the text can also be effective in directing the reader back to the story's line again.

As a side note, but relevant to this narrative is this: on the weekend that we submitted our assignments for this seminar, I was visiting Nieu Bethesda, which is a small *dorp* at the end of a long road surrounded by mountains, in the Karoo. I'd first read about the place in a magazine while sitting in a hairdresser's chair in 1990. From that day I had always wanted to visit. When I finally made it there, thirty years later, I was captivated. It is a place that is physically empty (only 1500 residents live there) but is full of stories that have leached into its dusty streets. We were there for only a couple of days but it made a lasting impact on me. It sparked the story that would become my creative thesis.

## Week 44 & 45: 8 November 2020

Crunch time, in which we were instructed to prepare and submit the abstract for our creative thesis. My starting point was, as Ivan Vladislavić said in an interview<sup>1</sup> with Peter Beilharz in 2014: “*Difficult times makes for interesting writing.*”

These *are* difficult times and I believe that writers have the gift of being able to capture these experiences through our words.

To quote a phrase that so many contemporary journalists used throughout 2020, we are living in unprecedented times. It was the year in which we came face to face with a once in a generation cultural, social, political and environmental shift which would previously have only been conceived in dystopian literature. And yet the events shaping today’s global events are all too real. In short: life truly is stranger than fiction.

I initially planned my thesis to be a series of fragments and short stories that would reflect the absurdity and surreal nature of the times we are living in. A commentary on the culture and politics that shapes and influences our daily lives.

It seems like a straightforward task, to write what about how I see the world. However, our challenge as writers is to make what we write interesting enough to move a reader, to offer another perspective and perhaps even to change their minds. That’s less simple. Teacher Jo-Anne Bekker reminded me of doing this in her *Write it Slant* assignment earlier in the year. Teacher Paul Mason also referenced this concept in his Beckett seminar, saying: “The not there is as important as what is there.” Writing too much ‘on the nose’ will feel like a blunt instrument that could bore or repel the reader.

There is another consideration. In writing about these topics, there’s a balance to strike between telling what I as author see and think, and letting the reader draw their own conclusions. Leaving space for the reader to form their own opinions is, I believe, a mark of respect, even if the reader has opposing views. It’s possible to do this by interspersing the piece with divergent ideas to create a counter-balancing voice in the work.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vimeo.com/110101256>, retrieved 8 November 2020

And so, with that basic plan in place, I crafted my original abstract as follows:

*My thesis is a collection of non-fiction fragments and flash fiction that casts a sideways glance at the real world that at times seems stranger than fiction. I use a mode of narration that reflects the fragmentation of what I regard as our contemporary attention deficit disorder, wherein culture and politics shape our immediate and everyday experience. My work is strongly influenced by writers such as Ivan Vladislavić whose Portrait with Keys uses a slice of life narrative voice that observes overlays of public and private realities; Marguerite Duras' use of cinematic storytelling and deeply personal exposure in The Lover and Yann Andréa Steiner; Kate Zambreno's depiction of inner chaos against the chaos of an anonymous city in Green Girl; Otessa Moshfegh who makes the minutiae of the day-to-day seem significant in My Year of Rest and Relaxation; and Samuel Beckett's finely crafted streams of consciousness, in his works of prose and drama, revealing the intimate perspectives of insiders.*

## Week 17: 18 April 2021

The December holidays came and went. The year 2020 ended and melted into 2021's New Year, Valentine's Day, St Patrick's Day, Easter... Time felt strange — warped, in a way. Before I knew it, it was April and I was 3.5 drafts into my thesis, which by then had shape-shifted into a fictional novella.

A novella? Yes. A novella.

Allow me to explain.

While working on the creative work for my thesis, I had a revelation akin to a pivot in business, when an entrepreneur realises that her original idea isn't working. She takes the concept back to the drawing board and she emerges with a new plan, product or direction.

You'll recall that the thesis was to be a collection of fragments and short stories.

At the start of the year, I wrote the beginnings of a short story which would be folded into the broader collection of separate pieces. The story was inspired by three scenes.

First: On a steaming hot weekend in July many years ago, I visited Brighton with the man who later became my husband. We were full of bliss and romance, immersed in the first exciting phase of a new relationship. Our hotel was opposite a terraced building that contained small bedsits, or studio apartments. We were fascinated by a woman in one, wearing nothing but big grey pants and a bra, moving from one room to another, slowly and heavily, unconscious of our voyeurism. She was packing clothes into a suitcase and making dinner behind windows wet with steam and condensation.

Second: There is a sex worker in my current neighbourhood. I often see her walking her patch. She is thin, with dark brown skin that gets sunburnt during the summer. She always wears a *doek* and has a guarded, watchful look in her eyes. I recognise her. I sometimes think she sees and recognises me, a middle-class white woman driving to or from somewhere in her sensible suburban car.



Third: I was intrigued by the notion of a watcher in a scene watching someone who doesn't know they're being watched. How the watcher will impose their own thoughts, prejudices and experiences on the person opposite, who would have no way of defending themselves. How those projections could be skewed against the other person's reality. I considered a kind of balance of power between the person looking and the person being seen.

In addition, I was intrigued by the challenge of writing a story that was full of constraints: geographical, physical, social.

In about February, I submitted an early draft of the non-fiction collection to my supervisor, Paul Mason. The collection included the short story. He read the collection but honed in on the short story. His response was simple: "This story is the work. You need to write a novella."

You will also recall that I had placed my hat very firmly on a non-fiction hook from day one. That would be my niche and that's what I'd been focusing on throughout the year. And yet here was my supervisor suggesting that I pivot entirely towards writing a novella – a work of fiction, to boot.

I found this prospect to be daunting but when I considered the proposal it became a natural and more substantial alternative to a scattered collection of different pieces which, in hindsight, would be weak and thin at best. The ideas weren't fully formed, and while I tried to find a golden thread to weave through the collection, the results weren't convincing.

In truth, I was relieved when Mason suggested that I push all other works aside in favour of developing the kernel of the short story into a 40 000 word creative work. The decision to pivot to a work of fiction was the right one.

## Week 21: 26 May 2021

The moment that I typed *The End* on the first draft of the novella was huge. I felt elated, liberated, delighted. As I shut down the document, I felt a flood of triumph and achievement. I'd done it. Of course, *it* in this context means that I'd written the first draft of the novella. There was still an entire rewrite, and possibly more than one, to come, but I allowed myself a moment to luxuriate in the achievement of stitching together 26 characters into just under 36 000 words that formed the blueprint of the creative work that accompanies this portfolio.

After the contact week in April, I decided to send the final first draft out to a group of trusted friends and colleagues to gain their objective feedback. I knew I needed to see the work through different eyes. Doing that means exposing an organism the writer has been living with for, in my case, months, but for other writers (and potentially future me), years. For any writer, it's hard to do that. Sometimes it can feel like you're standing naked in a cold empty room with a spotlight shining overhead while an audience of strangers armed with clipboards scrutinise your body.

If I have any advice for any new writer, it would be: grow a thick skin.

Of twelve 'beta' readers who volunteered to read the work, I received feedback from six. Each had taken the time to read the entire piece. Each offered suggestions, input, questions, recommendations, observations. Each presented a different viewpoint on certain scenes or highlighted continuity issues. Some commented on the choice of name and one even rewrote half of an entire scene.

The experience gave me some key insights which I'd suggest are incontrovertible facts about a piece of writing:

1. There is always another way to say something.

This is one of the reasons I love working with words, and yet it is the one reason why a writer is never right. A reader, and even the writer herself, will look at a sentence, paragraph, chapter she's written, and will inevitably find a new way to construct it.

2. While every opinion is valid, not every suggestion needs to be used.

Every reader will offer an opinion, a suggestion or perspective on the work. Having asked the reader to give up their time and attention (two of the most precious commodities in today's world) to read the work, the writer is obliged to permit the reader the space to express their opinion. It is then up to the writer to choose what to do with that opinion. At this point it's imperative that the writer steps back from the work to see it through the reader's eye to ask: does this suggestion strengthen the work? If the answer is yes, the suggestion merits serious consideration, regardless of the writer's personal views on the reader, the suggestion or even the darlings the reader is suggesting they kill. This is perhaps the hardest thing about writing a piece of fiction, and even non-fiction, assuming that the edit doesn't fundamentally change the facts.

3. Every reader reads from their own world view.

And

4. The writer needs to know their characters as if they were the characters themselves.

I illustrate these two points by citing one example:

One of the inciting events in the novel is a scene in which one character, whose name is Annabel, has a car breakdown on a rural road. The main character, called Lily, drives out to meet Annabel after Annabel calls for her help.

One of my readers is a *super* fan of cars, bikes, trains, planes and all things mechanical. He is also a novelist.

My super fan reader rewrote part of that scene as a suggestion for how it should be treated more authentically. In the rewrite, he imposed on Lily a certain level of technical knowledge that felt so completely out of character. I knew Lily wouldn't know about cars at the same level my reader was suggesting she would. The reader even suggested that Lily had done a crash-course in vehicle maintenance after her divorce. I knew Lily would never do that. It just wasn't who she is.

While I took the time to consider the reader's suggestion with the same respect as I did all other suggestions from him and other writers, I had to gently but firmly advise him that no, Lily wouldn't immediately know that the piece of V-shaped rubber was missing from the engine

when she looked under the bonnet of Annabel's broken-down car.

Like I said, a writer needs to have a thick skin. And in the context of this programme, we writers needed to have rhino hide.

As part of the assessment process, the first drafts of our creative works are presented to external readers. We do not know who our readers are. Nor do we have full insight into the brief they receive. I only know that the reader is matched with the genre of our creative work.

So, on 20 August 2020, I submitted my thesis to an anonymous reader who was appointed by the coordinators of the creative writing programme. The thesis that was birthed as a selection of non-fiction fragments, which experienced growing pains that forced a much-needed change of direction, and which emerged as a fully-fledged fictional novella, was officially out of my hands and in the hands of a stranger who would determine my literary fate.

Or that's what it felt like, anyway.

## Reflections on the Reader's feedback

In their introduction, the Reader summarises the novella as: 'The novella is a compelling psychological portrait of a woman's journey from the isolation of grief to acceptance and connection. And a seamless portrayal of how social media and digital communication is integrated into our lives. Nieu Bethesda is vividly described, as are the emotional and physical landscapes of 2020's hard lockdown.'

While the Reader has suggested some edits to the work, these are largely cosmetic or points of consistency. I say that not to minimise the reader's feedback. I can see how the advice can improve the work. However, I felt fully validated and encouraged by the assessment.

There were several points of commentary, but two which I'll deal with directly, here.

First, the Reader recommended that the title be changed from *Lily Dreams of Water*, and suggested a possible alternative: *The Memory Altar*. In the novella, one character has constructed an altar to the memories of his life. He calls it the Memory Altar, as a capsule of everything dear to him.

One or two of my other readers landed on this point too. At certain points during the coursework, our reading groups discussed the importance of a title: it needs to be relevant to the work, generally, but also to hint at what the reader could expect. It needs to be intriguing and enticing.

The original title, *Lily Dreams of Water*, came to me fairly early in the process of developing the novella and I immediately loved it. It's lyrical and poetic, and referred to the three dream sequences I'd included. However, by draft five, it was clear that the dreams weren't working well as devices within the narrative, despite my attachment to them. This had the effect of decoupling the name from the narrative. I was disappointed but, again, realised that the work would be ultimately better off. By the final draft, version 6, I'd reconciled myself to the fact that the dreams weren't adding any value to the work and so I excised all but one of them. Accordingly, the name had to go. With much reluctance I killed the darling and switched to an alternative, *The Sand Jar*.

While I prepared to submit this portfolio and the thesis, I realised that *The Sand Jar* feels too close to Sylvia Plath's acclaimed novel *The Bell Jar*. I have therefore opted for the Reader's recommendation, *The Memory Altar*, which in any event offers a much closer link to the events that propel the novella's story forward.

Second, chapter numbers. The novella opens on the day that President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that South Africa would be restricted to a 21-day Level 5 lockdown during which not even basic exercise was permitted. It ends on the day that Ramaphosa announces the lockdown would be extended by a further two weeks. I had initially titled each chapter with the date and the number of the day of lockdown, to give a sense of a countdown, or an incremental passage of time. In some cases, the days were split into morning, afternoon and evening. The Reader suggested removing this information as it was distracting. At first, I wasn't convinced by the suggestion, feeling that it added to the sense of drag we all experienced during the lockdown. Nonetheless, I tested the idea and saw that it was correct. Removing the markers simplified the text, enabling the text itself to do the work of moving time along.

The fictional novella is a far cry from the collection of non-fiction fragments that I'd initially conceptualised for my thesis. Given the history of my ambition to earn this degree, I was absolutely delighted to read the last sentence of the reader's feedback on my novella, which reads: '*Lily Dreams of Water* is already a fully realised novella, I wish Alexander well with the final edits.'

I am proud of this work. Proud of the four-year old girl who wanted to read, of the young professional who built a career on words, and of the writer who is offering this reflection as a 49-year old woman pursuing a Master's Degree in Creative Writing from Rhodes University.

### **Concluding reflections**

As I've frequently mentioned, when I entered this course, my firm position was that I am a writer of non-fiction. Writing about real events that really happened, real places, and people who really exist. At the start of the thesis development process, my supervisor and I pivoted and a work of fiction began to evolve.

My day job as a commercial writer has entrenched certain habits that this course has helped to loosen. This requires a conscious effort. I don't begrudge my day job. It has given me a sense of

curiosity about the world we inhabit that I believe enriches my work. However, through this programme, I've been forced to engage a different side of my brain. To unshackle my instincts for fact, journalistic blandness and unemotive language in favour of texture, colour, complexity and imagination, but to still reflect the world as it exists around us. It has honed my skills as a writer to create fictional worlds that are as real as the real worlds I write about every day.

The chronology presented in this portfolio seeks to demonstrate how I reached this point, and made the leap from non-fiction to fiction; from collection to novella. The process of unshackling, loosening and expanding has directly influenced the work presented as my thesis. This process was stimulated by each assignment, each reading, each feedback session. It was reinforced by the considerations which I lay out in the Poetics Essay below and it was influenced by the readings I absorbed and the books I read. As required, I have included four book reviews in this portfolio. These books are the four I loved the most out of the reading repertoire, written by writers whose work inspires my own.

## Poetics essay

### Breaking down cold hearts

‘Take that old, material utensil, language, found all about you, blank with familiarity, smeared with daily use, and make it into something that means more than it says.’

Adrienne Rich, *Someone is Writing a Poem*

‘Why do any of us try so hard to bend the silence, to fashion a voice worthy of a listen?’

Tim Seibles, *Desperate and Beautiful Noise*

### Words and stories

‘You go into a performance space as you and come out as other.’

George Quasha, *Axial Drawing*

In June 1999, I landed at Heathrow Airport for the first time, with nothing but a backpack and a half-baked short-term plan to do something, go somewhere, meet some people, learn some stuff, see some places.

Not long after I arrived, I had a late-night encounter in a crowded pub, with a man called Doug. He was from Canada. We exchanged early pleasantries over the noise. The details aren’t important, but after talking for a few minutes, I revealed where I was from. Instantly, he turned his body away from me, saying “I don’t talk to racist South Africans,” or words to that effect. Then he walked away.

The encounter shook my pedestal.

In the aftermath of that event, perhaps for the first time, I started to think about what it meant to be South African. To actively question my own understanding of the country’s history. I started to seek and read anything I could about South Africa. Newspaper clippings stored on microfiche film in the national archives; books found in dusty stores with darkened aisles full of titles written by writers I’d never heard of. (This was in a time before Google, if you can imagine such a thing.)



One of the first titles I bought was *Country of My Skull* – Antjie Krog’s account of, and her personal experiences during, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I took it home and read it in my room, immersed in the horror of the truth. Page after page after page of oppression, violence, torture, grief, pain, death. In one chapter, Krog describes an exchange during the hearings. In a small room in the Queenstown City Hall, Krog meets Nozibele Madubedube, a witness at the hearings that day. Through her tears, Nozibele tells Krog about her sister Lungelwa.

Lungelwa was visiting Queenstown from Johannesburg. She’d been planning to celebrate her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday while there. But before the day came, she was dead, tortured and brutally murdered.

That story stayed with me; has done all these years. Lungelwa wasn’t much older than me when she died. In the book, the story itself is undated, but the period Krog was reporting on was from around 1985 to 1989. During those years, I was at boarding school in King William’s Town, a couple of hundred kilometres away from Queenstown. I was swooning over boys and passing notes to my friends in the prep room while Lungelwa and so many others were being necklaced in that dusty town,

Time and distance offer a unique perspective. That story, that book, took me into a long period of soul-searching; of understanding the country of my skull. It shifted my viewpoint, opened my eyes and, more importantly, made me think. I walked into the performance space as me and came out as other.

In the excerpt from his essay titled *Unincorporated Poetic Territories*, Craig Santos Perez says: ‘Stories are not told whole. Stories live and breathe and change with each telling. Stories are shaped, in the moment, by the audience, the setting, the season, the body and the voice and memory of the storyteller.’

What I learned on the pages of Krog’s book influenced me, shaped me, not only as a person but as a writer. What the writer knows from the experience of their past – the learnings, observations, experiences – will influence how they see and interact with the world today. They will be changed, and their writing will change with them. Their stories will live, breathe, change, in the moment and with each telling.

In *Someone is Writing a Poem*, Adrienne Rich writes: ‘...how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of the someone who comes along to read them? And in part the field is charged by the way images swim into the brain through written language: swan, kettle, icicle, ashes, scab, tamarack, tractor, veil, slime, teeth, freckle.’

Lungelwa’s story met the breath of me. I was that someone who came along to read it. The images of her crying out in pain swam into my brain and there they have stayed for more than two decades.

### **Emergence.**

When I write, I am creating a chain of words, creating links that can bind or break. They are made of iron or cast of gossamer thread.

Both conditions are desirable in any written work. If a piece of writing is successful, the chain binds me to the reader in an unbreakable bond. This is true even if the reader disagrees with what’s being said. The work should connect reader and writer to the degree that the reader cares enough to actively disagree.

And the gossamer silk, the golden thread, will ease the passage of the work through the reader’s mind. With it, the writer will want to persuade, to inspire, to encourage the reader to think more deeply or to see a different perspective. In turn, the reader will absorb and immerse themselves in the work deeply enough to enhance their understanding of the writer’s point of view.

In her essay *Narratives of Struggle*, bell hooks writes: ‘Consciously opposing the notion of literature as escapist entertainment, these fictions confront and challenge. Often language is the central field of contestation.’

Regardless of the writer’s aspiration, not every work will successfully convert the reader to the writer’s way of thinking, even if it credibly, convincingly, confronts and challenges their own beliefs. To some extent, it doesn’t need to. Sometimes all that’s required is to achieve greater understanding. Even if reader and writer have diametrically opposed opinions, if the work bridges the distance between the two, it will have achieved something.

When they emerge from that submersion, the reader will be changed somehow.

In the same essay, hooks says: ‘The way writers use language often determines whether or not oppositional critical approaches in fiction or theory subvert, decenter or challenge existing hegemonic discourses.’

The writer creates an intimate relationship with the reader, asking the reader to open their mind to the ideas, concepts, situations, scenes, facts, in a piece of work. Ultimately, the writer wants the reader to see, to believe, to do something. To donate, to buy, to invest, to give. To rise up, protest, challenge, think, feel, speak.

The reader may not necessarily agree with the writer’s ideas. Even in disagreement, if the reader has read and considered what the writer has written, even if they have rejected the ideas, debated the facts and dismissed the sentiment, they are still bound together. Words can, and should, provoke some kind of action – even if that action is simply that the reader closes the book and says: “Yes, I understand you now. I see you. I know you.” Even that subtle action is an opening, a clearing, a forging, of a path to greater understanding.

hooks again: ‘Readers must learn to “see” the world differently if they want to understand this work. ... Anyone can be an audience for a particular work if they engage willingly and empathetically. This may indeed require them to relinquish privilege and their acceptance of dominant ways of knowing as preparation for hearing different voices.’

In this vein, Aimé Césaire, in *Poetry and Knowledge* says: ‘Mankind, once bewildered by sheer facts, finally dominated them through reflection, observation, and experiment. Henceforth, mankind knows how to make its way through the forest of phenomena. It knows how to utilize the world. But it is not the lord of the world on that account.’

In some respects, writing is a transaction. The writer says: “I will teach you, entertain you, make you think. I give you my words, ideas, beliefs.” The writer promises to help the reader make their way through the forest of phenomena.

In return, the reader responds: “I will give you my time, my attention, and my willingness to learn.” The reader entrusts the writer with what cannot be earned back. As writers, then, we have

a responsibility to honour the exchange of value with meaning, with emotion, with stories and with authenticity.

### **Memory.**

When I was about eight years old, I fell off my bicycle. I skidded in a patch of gravel, launched off the bike and landed on my left side, sliding along the ground with the momentum of the fall. The contact of skin on stone caused a gaping wound on my cheek. Over time, as the wound healed, it congealed into a scab that at first covered the whole left side of my face from chin to cheekbone. Every morning I'd track the healing process, running my fingers over the dirty-red rough patch, feeling its diminishing edges until one day, weeks, or maybe months later, it was gone. There is no trace of it now. No evidence of that event, except my memory and the words I write about that time.

Rich writes: 'Words are being set down in a force field. It's as if the words themselves have magnetic charges; they veer together or in polarity, they swerve against each other. Part of the force field, the charge, is the working history of the words themselves, how someone has known them, used them, doubted and relied on them in a life.'

Can you see the small blonde child, looking at herself in the mirror, trailing her tiny fingertips over the crust of dry blood? I have known the child, the scab, the mirror. They form the force field of my story. In this way, writing creates a permanent record, a picture in the reader's mind of a moment in time that no longer exists. Through the story, the reader becomes part of the writer's life. A witness to the event that has dissolved in the mists of time.

Writing and reading makes us bear witness to our own lives and the lives of others. The story above, about the childhood bicycle accident, was a superficial one drawn out of my memory to make the point. You have seen eight-year old me. I have seen her, burning. Lungelwa's story, earlier, was a more profound example.

As writers, in my view, we have a responsibility to give voice to what we know, believe, feel, fear, demand. That's how words and stories hold power. We owe our readers the moment of insight that will enable them to see more of us through the words we write.

hooks deepens this notion of bearing witness. She says: ‘Remembering makes us subjects in history. It is dangerous to forget.’

As I write, the world is burning. Long-held social constructs are being taken down, as are the statues representing those constructs. It *is* dangerous to forget. To forget where we’ve come from is to be blind about where we are going. As writers, we are best placed to understand our role as subjects in history, and to reflect the world through eyes that we know will be changed by what we see.

In their essay titled *12 Theses on Fiction’s Present* RM Berry and Jeffrey R. Di Leo expand on this notion, relative to the intersection between fiction’s present, past and its future. In the 12th thesis, they write: ‘Fiction’s present is the acknowledgement of fiction’s past. ... Producing the present requires radicalizing the past, locating our freedom’s roots. This is how a revolution takes hold.’

In the 1<sup>st</sup>, Berry and Di Leo write: ‘Fiction’s present is the intersection of everything that fiction has been and everything that it will become. Forms of writing and reading are always already linked to their historical development and traditions, and yet they are being continuously pulled into a future replete with possibilities.’

### **Meaning.**

My family has deep roots in Zimbabwe. In the early 2000s, the country was burning. For the first time, a credible opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was rising. In 2003, I joined a writing group in London, set up by a couple of MDC activists. The group’s intention was to give Zimbabwean writers a platform to voice their opposition to the destructive authoritarian rule in that country.

We first met on a cool, sunny morning in February, at a ramshackle theatre between a few council estate housing blocks in South London. We were a motley bunch of activists, aid workers, writers, designers, artists, concerned citizens of the world, and me – a displaced South African with a Pollyanna disposition and a naïve understanding of the country’s history.

Over time, our work took shape. We wrote a play called *How to Be a Good Zimbabwean* – which is an essay in its own right – and our friendships deepened.

One day, I was talking to H\_\_\_\_, who was one of the founding members of both the UK MDC and the writing group. He was (and is) a proud Ndebele man, a brooding activist with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Zimbabwe's tortured past. We were talking about Gukurahundi, the Matabeleland massacres in which around 20 000 Ndebele people were killed by soldiers of Mugabe's Fifth Brigade.

In a moment of misplaced romanticism, I said, breathlessly: "I love that word, Gukurahundi."

H\_\_\_\_ was aghast. He said, in his typically dry and direct way: "I can't believe you said that. Gukurahundi describes the mass killing of my people."

I tried to explain my tone-deaf stupidity, by describing that I referred to the word itself, not its meaning. It was round and full and the G and K ricochet off your palate, I tried to say, until my words trailed off into mortified understanding.

Amiri Baraka references this in *Expressive Language*: '...after all, it is the actual importance, power, of the words that remains so finally crucial. Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world's realities.'

Words have power and meaning that can sometimes only be understood by a specific group or community. Baraka again: 'Context, in this instance, is most dramatically social. ... Perhaps, and this is a common occurrence, the reaction or interreaction of one culture on another can produce a social context that will extend or influence any culture in many strange directions.'

A writer can control everything about their work – the structure, form, the content, and, nowadays, even its route to publication. But the most important aspect is entirely out of their hands: *how* it is read. It's that how that will ultimately determine their audience's response. Different readers will derive different meanings from the same piece of work. Their context, lived experience, point of view, understanding of the world can all influence the way they interpret a writer's work. And that meaning will change over time, as language, culture, politics, economics, tolerances change. Meaning shifts with the shifting sands of culture.

If a writer is committed to shifting the reader's understanding, opening up their shared meaning, then the writer must find ways to translate that meaning. In this, context is everything. The writer needs to deconstruct the context, reveal what it means to them and share insights into how that context has influenced their worldview. Just as H\_\_\_\_\_ did for me. He swept aside my breathless enthusiasm for the rounded syllables and replaced it with the raw truth of what Gukurahundi means to him and his people.

That deconstruction becomes a revelation passed on to the reader as the tool the reader needs to expand their own understanding. H\_\_\_\_\_’s explanation was my revelation. It expanded my understanding and influenced my own context.

On this point, William Carlos Williams’ comment in his essay titled *The Practice* summarises the point: ‘But after we have run the gamut of the simple meanings that come to one over the years, a change gradually occurs. We have grown used to the range of communication which is likely to reach us. ... And then a new meaning begins to intervene. For under that language to which we have been listening all our lives a new, more profound language underlying all the dialectics offers itself.’

This process can shift, extend or influence culture. Consider the knee-jerk, myopic response to the phrase Black Lives Matter, of “all lives matter.” In the context of the global protests and the movement to eradicate racism from our society, we have seen how words matter; how context and meaning matters.

### **Source.**

I’m a writer for hire, which gives me an opportunity to delve into many different corners of the human condition. In most cases, the territory I’m asked to occupy is familiar, with paths my own feet have trodden. Sometimes, however, I have no direct frame of reference. In those instances, if facts aren’t available, I need to rely on something else entirely.

That is, source.

Here I recall the example of the video script for the GBV awareness campaign, referred to in my journal entry from weeks 19 and 20. Years ago, I was commissioned to write a script for a video designed to raise awareness about GBV, and specifically rape. The woman I worked with is a

GBV activist and survivor of her own horrific rape experience. The script was an emotional piece, about invasion and power, about objectification, and about men holding women as their possessions, their playthings. When she read the draft, the woman asked me if I was writing from my own personal experience. Thankfully, I could answer ‘no’ (though, admittedly, every woman, me included, would have experiences that may lie somewhere on the same continuum).

She asked how I *knew*; how I was able to access the inner world of a rape survivor so accurately. I couldn’t explain it. I just *knew*.

Robert Creeley writes, in *A Sense of Measure*: ‘I want to give witness not to the thought of myself — that specious concept of identity — but rather, to what I am as simple agency...What uses me is what I use...’

Elsewhere in the essay, Creeley says: ‘In this sense I am more interested, at present, in what is given to me to write apart from what I might intend. I have never explicitly known – before writing – what it was that I would say.’

I believe this is what happened to me when I was writing the script. I found a knowing somewhere inside...my soul, I suppose you could say. It was a channelling, an insight that comes from a deep collective experience but which I had never physically endured first-hand. In this way, as a writer, I am a mouthpiece, a voice, for other living things. I have been used, and I have used what has used me.

In a way, I relate to what Raymond Federman says in one of my favourite essays in this series, *A Voice Within a Voice*: ‘That, in fact, is what it means to have a **voice within a voice**. It means that you can never separate your linguistic self from its shadow.’

Federman is writing about being a bilingual writer, who works in French and English. There is also a certain bilingualism in the notion that a writer ‘channels’ an experience from a source, a linguistic shadow. Something akin to indigenous knowledge. It’s a place that the writer may never have been – in my example, I have never experienced the trauma of rape – but I could access a sentiment which I could infuse, authentically, into the piece I was writing.



As writers, we have an enormous responsibility towards our readers, but it is also a huge privilege, to be able to access something from our imagination, our experience, our world, and from that of others, too. Being conscious of that drives home the importance of getting it right. Finding the right words, putting them in the right order, with the right rhythm, metre and rhyme, in a way that announces the message the writer has received.

Listen for it, feel it, access it, write it.

In another of my favourite essays, *Theory and function of the Duende*, Federico García Lorca talks about *duende*, ‘a mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.’

He writes: “Seeking the duende, there is neither map nor discipline. We only know it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand, that it shatters styles and makes Goya, master of the greys, silvers and pinks of the finest English art, paint with his knees and fists in terrible bitumen blacks, or strips Mossèn Cinto Verdaguer stark naked in the cold of the Pyrenees, or sends Jorge Manrique to wait for death in the wastes of Ocaña, or clothes Rimbaud’s delicate body in a saltimbanque’s costume, or gives the Comte de Lautréamont the eyes of a dead fish, at dawn, on the boulevard.’

It burns the blood, this secret, hidden force. This *duende*. It finds in us the eyes that see the grey, silver and pink, it feels the cold of the Pyrenees. It is the deep knowledge, that we don’t know we know, that we must find when we write. It is that which reveals our voice, the truth in what we write; truth which is beyond simply a statement of fact. It is what readers feel when we write about a young girl who is savaged by a dog (more on that later), about a man’s abuse of a woman or mankind’s abuse of the earth.

Incidentally, that essay filled me with joy, with energy. To be able to name that feeling, that *duende*, and to know that I have felt it, was simply beautiful. A privilege.

### **Emotion.**

Some time back, in 2010, a friend and colleague invited me to visit the Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital in Cape Town. She took me on a tour of the wards, full of sick kids, focused doctors and worried parents. It was a moving insight into the daily life of the staff and patients there, and the Hospital has been in my heart ever since.

I was later commissioned to write a series of newsletters for the Children's Hospital Trust, which raises funds for the Hospital. These were planned as emotive, uplifting pieces that talk of hope, care and compassion.

When I wrote these pieces, I called to my heart the feeling I felt when I toured the hospital that day and I use that as the emotional impetus behind the piece. It was a real feeling, accessed from that place in memory titled "ordinary people doing extraordinary things."

In one, we wrote about a six-year old girl, N\_\_\_\_\_, who was attacked by the family dog in an unexpected, freak incident. She was rushed to hospital in critical condition but thankfully later fully recovered.

A few months after the story was published, someone donated R40 000 to the Trust. She was a regular donor who for years had been satisfied with her monthly R150 contribution. When the team thanked her personally, the donor explained that she'd read N\_\_\_\_\_ 's story and was so moved that she immediately set the donation in motion.

This is why I write.

When I talk about emotion, I don't mean only the picture of a woman's tears, a couple in love, or a child's joy. I am referring to that deep stirring, that force that makes the human condition. Nostalgia, triumph, desire, love, lust, terror, fear, delight, envy, confusion, craving. The emotions that make people uniquely people.

*Duende.*

This is particularly relevant to non-fiction. Not memoir, autobiography or biography. Here, I'm specifically referring to those texts full of facts. The reports, articles, dissertations, business communications and other works that are written to advance knowledge or to keep the world's commercial systems turning. I mention that here, specifically, because I'm particularly interested in thinking about, and writing about, how writers can infuse creativity and authenticity into works of non-fiction.

Césaire continues: ‘What presides over the [work] is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience: all the women loved, all the desires experienced, all the dreams dreamed, all the images received or grasped, the whole weight of the body, the whole weight of the mind. All lived experience. All the possibility. ... Mankind, distracted by its activities, delighted by what is useful, has lost the sense of that fraternity. ... But one man is the salvation of humanity, one man puts humanity back in the universal concert, one man unites the human flowering with universal flowering; that man is the poet. ’

The writer.

I can’t say it better than this, from Lidia Yuknavitch’s essay, *Daguerrotype of a Girl*: ‘In the first image from her head, there is pathos of such enormity that one almost cannot breathe. What I mean by that is that if you were to put yourself whole-heartedly into the narrative so that you were beyond story and into the imagined reality and you were not a cold-hearted motherfucker, you would break down.’

With all that we know, the knowledge we have gained, mankind has lost itself. It is the writer’s job to remind mankind of that. To give it the tools that will help to find itself again.

Let’s go and break down those cold hearts. With our stories, our emergence, memory and source. With our emotions and, more precisely, with our words.

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### **Portrait with Keys – Ivan Vladislavić. Umuzi, 2006.**

I grew up in a middle-class commuter town on the east rand of Johannesburg. My dad worked in the CBD – a mysterious place we would visit occasionally. As a student, my campus and residence were located in Eloff Street, right in the heart of the city and in Doornfontein, a suburb on the city's edge. I would roam the streets with friends and on my own, during the day and late at night. I would look up and around me, feeling a sense of wonder, like I'd been dropped into a life as an urban sophisticate. The lights, the sights, the buildings, the sounds, the people, the movement. They drew me in and held me. Certain routes and places have etched themselves in my heart.

Later, in my early twenties, I moved away and never returned. Though I know she is broken in many ways, Joburg remains the place where I imprinted my early self.

I write a lot about cities in my current job, so I was intrigued to see how a city could be the main character in a book. Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* is a masterclass in writing a place. The book is a kind of homage to Joburg. It's the perfect template for writers who want to create word pictures that imprint a city in a reader's imagination. Vladislavić's particular skill is showing the details of a scene, bringing it to life with colour, texture and angles. An example: 'Wood's Self Storage consists of five long salmon-coloured buildings, each comprising two rows of units, back to back, identified by a letter of the alphabet.' (p104).

The book is composed of 138 fragments selected from over 300 works that Vladislavić wrote for himself, or as contributions to projects spearheaded by others, over a 10 year period. According to the table of contents, the fragments moves the reader from

'Point A

...

Point B'

An index at the end offers the reader a map, or *Itineraries*, as the index is titled. The *Itineraries* help readers navigate through the themes and common threads that link the fragments together, if they need to orient themselves. And yet, like the chaos we find on urban streets and the haphazard nature of city living, a reader can equally dip in and out of the individual, seemingly disconnected, fragments. Vladislavić did that deliberately, understanding the need to mimic as

much as possible the randomness of city life.

Reading *Portrait with Keys* reminded me of the memory traces you experience when you hear a piece of music, or smell a fragrance. The sensory experience triggers a memory of a place, a person, an event or a physical sensation that occurred in the past. Vladislavić's fragments are vivid descriptions of what the character sees, feels, hears, thinks. They play out like the frames on a film reel, as in this extract: 'The sunshine on the tar, which is sugar-frosted with automotive glass from the smash-and-grabs, the Saturday morning bustle, the East Rand detail – the massive palm near the Plascon paint shop, the Solly Kramer's, a buckled bus shelter, dim-witted robots blinking into the glare...' (p87).

I see the places and people in my own mind, drawn from my memories of Joburg.

While living in London, I'd often encounter the South African ex-pat who'd be fiercely patriotic on rugby days but who'd use rising crime rates in the news as a moment to reinforce their own belief that the country's social decline started once the new regime came into power – and to justify their own reasons for departure. To them, this book could also be expressed as an "I told you so". Though the book stitches together multiple scenes, listed in *Itineraries*, such as *Art*, *Memorials* and *Walls*, there is a single prominent story that runs through it – that of safety, crime and security.

That story charts the changes in Joburg's urban landscape, the rise in crime and associated fears of personal security. Vladislavić describes the changing CBD with a focus on the once-plush Carlton Centre that is gradually boarded up from access. 'Every new building in Johannesburg has secure, controlled, vehicle friendly entrances and exits. The well-heeled – who naturally are also the well-wheeled – should be able to reach Point B without setting foot in the street.' (p166).

Crime rises, black people move into the neighbourhood, and barely-concealed attitudes begin to reveal themselves. Safety and security is an issue, seen through the changing texture of an increasingly insular cityscape and the conversations between characters.

Vladislavić writes these attitudes with an honesty that forces even a liberal-leaning white middle-class reader to question their own language. The talk of "they" is heavy with inference as a prejudicial catch-all for black people. In one scene, a character, Martin, spits out the racist insult

*kaffir* in a fit of rage against three men urinating against his garden wall. Later, he reflects: ‘In fact, he’s astonished at how easily it came to him, the repetitive, fixated language that has always sustained racism...He’s not a racist – at least, he’s no more of a racist than anyone else, as he always says.’ (p43)

A primary character in the book is the narrator’s brother, Branko, who Vladislavić uses as a funnel for the queasiness that white people felt when the demographics began to change in South African cities. In an interview with Johannesburg Review of Books, Vladislavić refers to Branko as “a composite figure when I was writing *Portrait with Keys*: I needed a character to act as a catch-all for attitudes and opinions I didn’t want to attach to anyone else.”<sup>2</sup>

In a 2014 interview, with reference to a question about the main character in his book *The Restless Supermarket*, Vladislavić says: “make the reader uncomfortable.”<sup>3</sup>

And that is what’s necessary. For a writer to take the risk of being a mirror to their audience by showing them their own truths, however deeply hidden. Not doing so would have turned the work into a travelogue, with romanticised cameos from quirky locals whose interactions would have been reduced to passing moments, rather than extracts from life in a city that purports to be the most integrated in the country but which at a granular level is still deeply divided.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://johannesburgreviewofbooks.com/2019/05/06/the-fallible-memory-is-surely-at-the-heart-of-writing-fiction-jennifer-malec-interviews-ivan-vladislavic-about-his-latest-novel-the-distance/>, retrieved 3 September 2021, 07:22

<sup>3</sup> <https://thesiseleven.com/2014/11/05/video-ivan-vladislavic-in-conversation-with-peter-beilharz-readers-feast-book-shop/>

### **Life and times of Michael K – JM Coetzee. Vintage, 1998.**

Set in Cape Town during a fictional civil war, JM Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* is a quintessential hero's journey.

He is called to adventure by his ill and aging mother, who asks to be taken back to the farm of her youth. At first, he refuses her suggestion, but when riots break out in the city, he crosses the threshold by building a cart to transport her to the farm. Along the journey, he faces several trials. The journey, which should take five hours by car, takes several days or weeks that become an ordeal of survival and hardship. En route, his mother dies, he is arrested, interred in a labour camp. He escapes the camp. He reaches the abyss when he nearly dies of hunger while hiding from roving groups of soldiers who capture K and send him back to a second refugee camp in Kenilworth, Cape Town. His return begins when he once again escapes, and he finds himself back in his mother's room in Sea Point where his journey started.

Michael, or K as he is referred to throughout the book, encounters several characters along the way who represent the challengers, mentors and helpers of a typical hero's journey. He encounters soldiers, policemen, bureaucrats and unhelpful nursing staff who each dismiss his existence with authoritarian control. Visagie, the young relative of the farm owners, treats him as a servant. He develops a friendship with Robert, who he meets at the first camp in Prince Albert, and the unnamed doctor at the second camp in Kenilworth urges K to live. When he returns to Sea Point, a ragtag band of men and women take him under their wing, ply him with food and drink and offer him shelter.

On one level, when the reader zooms out from the intricate details of the story, this hero's journey is plain to see. The hero is set a challenge which he at first refuses, but then later accepts. He faces trials and tribulations and meets mentors, helpers and obstacles. He faces his own dark night of the soul before finding redemption and return at the end.

However, the story is far more complex than a collection of events that thwart and stimulate K's progress through the world.

It is a political commentary. The book was published in 1983, at the height of the rebellion against South Africa's apartheid regime. White attitudes towards black people were influenced



by the policies of segregation, and government processes were designed to exclude and control black people. Black people were largely denied dignified work and were relegated to working menial jobs as domestic workers or gardeners. Their movements were restricted, and they were required to always carry a passbook.

These conditions are mirrored in the book. In the children's home where K grew up, he was given a very basic education, coupled with training in manual labour. He worked as a gardener before choosing to care for his mother full time. His mother was working as a domestic servant for a wealthy family in Sea Point.

When K agrees to take his mother back to the farm, he applies for permission to leave the city, but is told the permit would take two months before being issued. In Sea Point, riots ignite the neighbourhood and K fears for their lives, so he sets out, despite the restrictions and without a permit. Along the way he encounters policemen who warn him of the illegality of his travelling without permission. At the hospital where his mother dies, the nursing staff are unsympathetic and dismissive of his grief. They hand him her ashes in a plastic bag.

This discrimination continues throughout the book, reflected in the way the Visagie relative treats K as a servant, the oppressive control by the camp guards and the treatment of K at the hands of the soldiers.

The book is also about individual freedom.

Despite his characterisation as a simpleton deformed by his hare lip, it is clear that K has a strong will, driven by a clear understanding of what he wants. He acts despite the restrictions imposed by bureaucrats and military personnel. He builds the cart, starts walking, escapes twice from the camps. As his journey evolves, the reader understands that he is spurred on not by his mother's wishes, but his own quest for freedom and release from constraints. He is willing to risk his life and his health to get it, refusing to eat in the Kenilworth camp as a form of protest, before escaping to return to Sea Point.

The doctor in chapter three even expresses a certain envy at K's ability to shun the basic needs of food and shelter in the pursuit of that freedom.

In terms of form, *Life and Times* is written in Coetzee's characteristically stark prose. The style recalls the sensation of travelling across wide, empty, desolate landscapes. This is natural, perhaps, given that Prince Albert, where much of the story is set, is in the Karoo – a wide, empty, desolate landscape. However, Coetzee's simple treatment of language feels as arid as a hot summer's Karoo day. He draws vast pictures seen through K's eyes that create a rich canvas for the reader's imagination.

Added to this is the infinitely detailed internal narrative that Coetzee has crafted for K. While the external world, and even his own mother, casts K aside as a disfigured simpleton, we learn that he interprets his world with a sophisticated maturity expressed in his own way.

Going back to the hero's journey, in which we ask, 'what does the hero want?': through the internal narrative, we understand that K is driven less by delivering his mother's wishes, and more that he wants to access his own freedom. He finds it first while living on the Visagie's property and later while living in the wild where he is free to cultivate his little patch of heaven – his pumpkin patch. However, the idyll is broken when soldiers find him and accuse him of growing food for the rebels. Again, K loses his freedom, and we see him fighting for it again when he escapes from the labour camp and from the Kenilworth camp.

The quest for freedom is his primary motivation, every time.

A further theme is the resilience of individuals at a time of war. This review is being written while the US government is withdrawing its troops in a deadly evacuation from Afghanistan. The Taliban have replaced the government and military and the country is once again under its authoritarian fist. Women, children and men are being forced to make a run for their own freedom, seeking asylum as refugees, sometimes with fatal consequences; or they are being left behind to deal with the eradication of hard-won individual liberty. The images we see every day are of politicians defending their decisions or desperate people risking their lives trying to climb into departing airplanes.

While the war underway in *Life and Times* is not depicted in such graphic detail as we see on our TV screens, the military are roving the countryside, sweeping up homeless people and interring them in labour camps or suppressing individual movement. Coetzee's telling of the war is almost subliminal. We see the war through the eyes of individuals like K, the Visagie boy who has gone

AWOL from the army, or like Robert, K's friend in the camp who is trying to protect his family. The lives of these individuals are changed forever through the force of much higher unseen powers – just as the lives of the Afghans of 2021.

And yet, K and the others he meets, find a way to survive, even if their survival is forever compromised by the same powers manifested in the actions of soldiers and policemen.

Another noteworthy point on form is the switch in Chapter 2 from third person to first person.

Here, K has been taken to the camp in Kenilworth, emaciated and broken. The narrative switches to that of an unnamed doctor who has taken a keen interest in K's welfare. K slides into a deep depression and shuns any form of food. His health begins to wane, and the doctor writes him a letter, urging him to reconsider his dangerous choice.

Despite the doctor's entreaties, K finds enough strength to leave the camp, to return to Sea Point. When K leaves, we learn that the doctor is becoming increasingly concerned with the conditions in the country. He encourages his colleague to leave the camp with him. He expresses a kind of envy towards K, for his ability to take his life into his own hands. To shrug off the circumstances that hold him, especially with his view of a society that will soon be broken.

The switch from third person to first, and then third again in Chapter 3, was at first jarring to the reader, and particularly so given that we initially don't know who the narrator is. We learn of K's fate through the eyes of the doctor. On one hand, this makes sense because K is essentially in a form of a coma and therefore unable to answer for himself. But on the other, the switch is initially disorienting.

That said, the reader does begin to feel a form of empathy for the doctor. He is the first person in a position of authority throughout the book who has a sense of humanity in times of war. His kindness and vulnerability lead the reader to cheer him on, almost hoping that he does manage to escape with K in the way he wishes.

The final scenes, in Chapter 3, are a bizarre turn of events that even make the reader laugh at what seems to be absurdity. K meets a merry band of vagabonds who take him under their wing. Two drunken episodes and an unwanted blow job – which is surprising and slightly

uncomfortable, given the weight of the novel – remind the reader that even if K has exerted his own direction over his life to date, he is still a vulnerable disfigured man living in a chaotic, uncertain world.

The story rounds up neatly with K back at his mother's flat in Sea Point, reflecting on his own life, past, present and future. The hero returns.

**The Chronology of Water – Lidia Yuknavitch. Canongate Books, 2020.**

I once read a memoir by an Australian writer who told her life story through the prism of her sexual encounters. In chapter after chapter, we read about the people she shared her body with, often in graphic detail that brought to life the sometimes erotic, sometimes debased encounters. I am by no means close-minded. I like to read, write and to even experience erotic scenes. But two-thirds of the way into the memoir, I found myself thinking: “Oh, god, here we go again.” And not in a good way, either. Being a reader who will always read to the last word, I was relieved to reach the end. I felt sullied, bored and insulted by the demands the book had taken on my time. Time I will never get back.

The point is that writing about the body, and specifically about the intimacy of a body’s existence, should be handled with care. Tell too much and the text begins to read like a caricature of a bad porn movie. Too little and the reader is left craving authenticity, left asking ‘so what?’

In *The Chronology of Water*, Lidia Yuknavitch gets the balance right.

*The Chronology of Water* is Yuknavitch’s memoir of her life as an abused daughter, grieving mother, junkie, rough sleeper, ex-convict, thrice-wife, writer, student and competitive swimmer. She writes with honesty and openness about her experiences in a way that submerges the reader in her words and in her life in the same way that Yuknavitch submerges herself in her safe place – in water.

If Yuknavitch’s story was told as a work of fiction written by a less accomplished writer, it would lose all credibility.

The memoir is written in non-chronological fragments that chart a life of chaos and devastation brought about by the hands of others and by Yuknavitch’s own decisions. Throughout the text, Yuknavitch shows us scenes from her life that are stark in description and sometimes painful to read. She as a grieving mother, bleeding in the shower in the immediate aftermath of the stillbirth of her daughter. An anxious young girl navigating a childhood marked by her parents’ addictions and her father’s incestuous tendencies. A teenager and student, drinking, drugging and fucking away the pain she feels but failing to erase anything at all. A new writer, learning to find her voice – and understanding that she does, indeed, have a voice. A teacher and whole woman

who finds a form of peace and redemption as a wife and a mother of a living child.

The ride through Yuknavitch's life sometimes feels like a roller coaster of one damned thing after another, but her use of language eases the pressure off the reader. She writes with fluid honesty, sugar-coating nothing but at the same time drawing from Emily Dickinson's entreaty to 'write it slant.'

In one scene, when the family is looking for Christmas trees, Yuknavitch's father disappears with her sister. Lidia waits in the car with her mother. When the two come back, it is clear, without knowing, that Lidia's father has molested her sister. 'My father had hold of her arm. She looked like her legs didn't work right. My mother rolled the window down and I saw snot under my sister's nose. Was she crying? She did not make any sound. But she shivered. Then my sister looked straight at me. I bit my lip. Her eyes more cold than snow' (p67.)

This technique has the effect of distancing Yuknavitch from a life that can seem hellish. While she draws the reader into her world, she also stands aside as an impassive commentator, a narrator of a sequence of moments that make up her life. In doing so, she spares the reader from an over-burdened emotional response that could turn the text from a compelling memoir into an overwrought parody.

That said, it's impossible not to have an emotional reaction to Yuknavitch's world, which is filled with pain, heartbreak and brokenness, and equally joy and revelation. She writes with a rawness that reminds the reader of her own failings and questionable decisions. She uses wry humour to good effect, writing with a self-deprecation that draws the reader closer to her as a real person, distinct from Lidia, the central character of a wild-ride story.

'I was an undergraduate sort of trolling in English and sleeping with lots of humans and riding the drug train and drinking drinking drinking.... I wasn't an accomplished writer. I wasn't an accomplished anything. The only thing I was good at was being a drunk or high cock tease, as near as I could tell.' (p92).

Another technique that eases the journey for the reader is a switch in style, in places from traditional literary prose to streams of consciousness without punctuation; and in others from first person to second person. Yuknavitch uses this to good effect, particularly to speed up the

passage of time. In the fragment titled *Distilled*, she takes the reader on a relentless spiralling ride through her fraught 11-year relationship with her second husband with a blast of largely unpunctuated prose (p155-159).

It's a breathless journey of chaos. Yuknavitch ends the fragment with two short sentences, as if coming up for air: '...where is the man who would love a woman like me there are no men if not you there never were any men for me not even a father I stop eating lose twenty-five pounds everyone says everyone says you look so beautiful. Like a movie actress. Isn't she beautiful?

Am I beautiful?

Love is a lifedeath' (p159).

The feeling of breathlessness is a sensation carried throughout the book, not only because of the erratic, dangerous, destructive life she leads, but because of the emotions attached to those actions. The highs of love and success and finding herself contrasted by the lows of grief and addiction and rejection. Connected to this is a sense of submergence, of drowning, which links the work directly to the title and the water motif that runs through the book.

From the post-stillbirth shower in the first scene, to the swimming pool where Yuknavitch is playing with her son Miles towards the end of the book (p253), water is a constant presence. It is both hostile – as her father dies by drowning and she herself drowns in alcohol; and a safe-haven for her to escape her home life – through the swimming scholarship her mother accepts against her father's wishes. While water has carried her from childhood to motherhood, she exhales when she finally feels safe and grounded in her life.

'In this water with the two of them – the boy, the man, I almost can't breathe. I didn't know. It is a family. It is mine.

It's a small tender thing, the simplicity of loving.

I am learning to live on land.' (p254)

In the first line of the Acknowledgements, Yuknavitch writes 'If you have ever fucked up in your life, or if the great river of sadness that runs through us all has touched you, then this book is for you.' Despite the specific horrors and debaucheries, victories and achievements that fill Yuknavitch's own life, the events that run through the book are part of our shared humanity.

She falls in and out of love, feels crushing insecurity and soaring confidence. She has sex, falls pregnant, has abortions, gives birth, cremates a child, and successfully raises another. She feels pain and heartbreak, love and joy. She works and plays and meets people and says goodbye and moves onwards, downwards and sideways in a life that is as tangled and knotted as any other, though, to some readers, the knots in her world may seem far more elaborate than their own.

Whether the reader is able to relate to the scenes of threesomes, alcoholic hazes and explosions of fury or to the scenes of bliss, happiness and coming-home, *The Chronology of Water* is a very human story broken into component parts that any reader can access. But what makes the book unique is the way Yuknavitch writes the body. Using poetic yet simple language, the reader understands Yuknavitch's complicated relationship with her physical form. The reader is also left sharing her love for words – words that helped to show her another life beyond the drinking and drugging and fucking that she tried to use to obscure her pain.

I believe that the first person you meet at the start of any new life is you. Yuknavitch met herself when she joined the creative writing workshop with Ken Kesey at the University of Oregon. It was then that the haze began to clear and she walked through a new curtain that put her on to an entirely different stage.

In an interview added as a sort of epilogue to the edition of the book that I read, Yuknavitch says: 'I want you to hear how it feels to be me inside a sentence...I want the rhythm, the image, the cry to remain with your body.'

It does. I remember putting this book down when I'd finished reading, feeling like it has changed me as a writer and a reader, but most importantly, it has changed me as a woman. My relationship with the actions of my past, and with the body I inhabit, somehow became more permissible for the reading of how Yuknavitch has inhabited hers. All of the drinking, drugging, fucking, loving, screaming, crying, laughing, dancing, working, writing, and more, that I have done somehow feels normal and no longer like a collection of good, bad and ugly decisions that have made my life what it is. This book has shaped the chronology of my own water.



**My Year Of Rest And Relaxation – Otessa Moshfegh. Penguin Press, 2018.**

I visited New York with a friend in December 2000, less than a year before the Twin Towers fell in the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001.

My friend and I met when we were students. At the time, I was financially broke, emotionally lost, directionless and grappling with the impending breakdown of my parents' marriage. She, on the other hand, came from a stable, fairly affluent family and apparently had all the material tools she needed to embark on a successful study path and a career. We spent a lot of time drunk, me to forget, and her to keep up with the rest of us. She was shorter and rounder than my tall, netball-playing form. She was much more diligent than I, and she sailed through her diploma and into the workplace while I stumbled through my studies distracted and bored.

We lost touch after she graduated but then reconnected when she emerged from a spell at a rehabilitation centre, recovering from bulimia and a failed suicide attempt. I'd never understood that she was just as, or perhaps more, damaged than I, despite outward appearances.

In the ensuing years, we became what I suppose some would describe as best friends though I later came to accept that it was a toxic co-dependent relationship built on my need to be needed and her need for someone like me to make her feel better about herself. She followed me to London and at the time of the New York trip we were sharing a flat together. She arranged the entire trip, from where we'd stay to what we'd do to how much money we'd need. Typically, I had none, she had a stash saved in her bank account.

The main characters in Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* reminded me of me and my friend: two women locked in an unhealthy relationship which serves a purpose for each, which is ultimately one-sided on both sides, but from which neither can or is willing to escape.

The book is a good example of how to write with humour and honesty about how relationships can turn on themselves, and about the insularity of the modern world.

The main character is an unnamed 24-year old woman who is fired from her job in an art gallery and chooses to 'go into hibernation' in mid-June 2000 to 'be a whole new person', with 'cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories' and to be able to

‘start over without regrets, bolstered by...bliss and serenity...’.

Moshfegh writes with precision, describing the characters and their internal worlds with sharp observation. The main character is entirely unlikeable — a privileged narcissist prone to toxic relationships and an existential nihilism, though she is self-aware enough to recognise her physical and financial privilege, and has sufficient cynicism to make her more relatable.

I am almost embarrassed to admit that, despite or perhaps even because of her flaws, I found I could relate in some way to the main character. Let me explain: I wouldn’t consider myself to be a privileged narcissist, but the tendency towards toxic friendships was a feature in my life at one point, and the corresponding tendency to attract questionable individuals in the form of boyfriends, advisors and colleagues only heightened the toxicity. The cast of characters in *My Year* have the same effect, though I admit the main character embraces, rather than recoils from, the strange imbalances that these individuals bring to her life.

Her psychiatrist, Dr Tuttle, is one of a few other characters we meet through the book who are each equally unlikeable, but who give the story texture and humour.

With frizzy red hair and a food-stained neck brace, Dr Tuttle’s loose ethical practices of writing prescriptions on demand and playing into the narrator’s hands fuel the narrator’s opioid and barbiturate habit — by design. Her on-off lover, Trevor, treats her as a castaway secret, using her for sex on his own terms between his other relationships. Her friend, Reva, appears throughout the story as a neurotic, envious bulimic who clearly has affection for the narrator but which we discover is borne out of a jealousy for the main character’s beauty and wealth. The friendship is more a co-dependent habit rather than a true respectful bond between the two characters. I recognised the patterns immediately, and at one point I wondered whether the book was an autobiography. That it is a work of fiction that could ring so true is a testament to Moshfegh’s talent as a storyteller.

In the hands of a less skilled writer, the plot would sag and lose crucial support like a tired marital mattress. Rather, Moshfegh has crafted her character’s world, knowing with certainty every detail, which makes each scene rich and compelling. She holds up the main character’s progress through her year of rest, which in many respects doesn’t feel like rest at all. Thanks to the drugs, she blacks out and recalls nothing of her nights out on the town with a colourful cast

of New York's high society. She attends Reva's mother's funeral. She leaves her apartment only to refill her prescription and to shop at the bodega down the street. She falls into a messy routine entirely lacking in self-care, with dirty clothes piling up in the corner and slovenly hygiene. And when she does finally go to sleep, an artist contracts with her to document the process with little regard for her wellbeing.

Moshfegh's wry humour takes the edge off the darker themes in the book, which touches on heavy subjects such as death, addiction, toxic masculinity, co-dependency and grief. At times I felt these themes very deeply as an aspect of my own relationship with life's darkness.

The book is set in 2000 and 2001. Moshfegh drops hints of the politics and culture of the time, referring to the inauguration of George W. Bush, for example, while also showing an innocent pre-911 world of lavish parties and crass materialism. The book bears witness to the relative city life in the United States before the twin towers came down, and also to the immediate aftermath of the attacks.

I remember watching the towers fall with the friend I mentioned earlier in this review. We sat in our flat in London, aghast at the scenes, conscious that we'd stood looking out over the city from the viewing deck at the top of the World Trade Centre just nine months before.

I first read *My Year* in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and again in 2021, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11 and in the wake of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. It would be an interesting experiment to rewrite it with the overlay of the events two decades later. The events in the book are linked by several current cultural themes which have heightened since the book's setting in 2000/2001. At a political level, populism has risen, politics is rife with anti-immigration sentiment, anti-Muslim rhetoric pervades social media and the streets, and fear of the other is driving a global wave of nationalism, thanks to Trumpism and Brexit.

Today's society is in crisis and there are parallels between the book and real life. In the book, the main character has an almost casual addiction to opioids and barbiturates. In reality, the opioid crisis in the United States and across the world is a serious public health issue. The narrator and her friend Reva both experience the loss of parents and both are processing their deaths. Mental illness, especially depression and anxiety, has become one of the symptoms of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with grief and loss from hundreds of thousands of deaths from coronavirus. The

main character confines herself to her apartment, choosing only to venture out on rare occasions, and at one point not at all. During the pandemic, confinement to the home during lockdown has been enforced, sending millions to be cooped up in homes and apartments, sometimes for indefinite durations. Trevor, the narrator's on-off lover treats her with disdain and ultimate rejection. In the real world, women are objectified, sexualised and dismissed by men seeking sexual gratification on their own terms. And friendships are compromised by diminishing trust and decreasing direct social interaction as people retreat behind their screens, in the same way that Reva and the narrator's friendship trails off into non-existence.

The book was first published in 2018, in a world that was vastly different from the year in which it was set. My world was different too, by 2018, as it is now. My friend and I parted company painfully and dramatically, in 2008. She broke my trust and we hadn't spoken since then. In 2020, she committed suicide. I understand she died alone, though I don't know the circumstances of her death. She was very much in my mind while I was reading the scenes Moshfegh describes.

Moshfegh has created a vivid, lively world full of texture and colour in her descriptions of places and people which contrasts against the greyed-out internal world of the main character. And yet, the reader can't help but feel sad for the narrator who is, ultimately, just a woman addicted to drugs, manipulated and taken advantage of by others. When she emerges from her confinement, a form of rehab, perhaps, she does so into a world that – like her – is changed forever.

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