

The Barefoot Road

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by

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Abstract

My novella is set in South Africa in a post-apocalyptic world. The drone technology theorised for the near future is widespread and scattered survivors live under the constant threat of drone strikes. The protagonist tries to negotiate these dangers and the looming threat of a slave empire to reconnect with his friends and family. He encounters bizarre hallucinations and flashbacks as a result of exposure to an unidentified gas.

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When you walk barefoot, you trust the earth not to hurt you. It's the man-made things more often than not that pierce your feet.

I remember driving. Not so much the car or the road, not so much the passengers and pedestrians, but the act of it. I remember that control, behind the wheel, the master of those four tires. Some days I'd rest my feet flat on the floor and let the car glide out of gear. I wanted my hands to leave the steering wheel. If I can tell you what happened, in the simplest way, it was like those hands had been plucked from that wheel and the floor fell out beneath me. The tar speeding beneath my feet was a blur of angry gravel turning quickly into potholes, dirt and mud. And the pedestrians on the sidewalks, they grew thinner as the buildings fell one by one. Clutching at this ghost of the past, I was screaming, muscles on my hands strained taut and were aching as my throat grew hoarse. That was second birth, a second welcome into this mess, this shit heap of waste. I can't tell you how it all went down; it was a collage of blurred images and names. It took a long time before I woke up from that haze, long after gunshots, bombs and family and those things of a world which seemed to have died on the way here. This wasn't the world I'd seen in nightmares, but it was one I had wished for. I'd played this game many times, watched it carefully on my screen, but this time I could smell it. This time was real.

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Scratching at my eyes and wiping dust from my mouth, face, ears and clothes, I stood up wobbly - uncertain. I let my eyes adjust slowly to the sunlight. It reflected off the tiles at my feet, some of them cracked. The mirrors to each side of me were roaring with it. It was so loud it caused my head to ache. There was a person standing to my left, naked. My eyes darted around in my head, but suspended the impulse to look, which I knew would have been impolite. Perhaps they were impolite. There were three of them now in the periphery, just standing, naked and staring. They bit back the need to talk, to ask questions, to cover themselves.

Okay I'm turning around now. If you don't want me to see something, put some clothes on or cover up or whatever.

I hesitated and seconds passed. I offered a final warning and faced them. The cluster of female shapes stood hands to hips, piercing me with fixed stares. The poles running from

their legs to the ground and the long rows of clothes racks behind them gave them away. I laughed awkwardly in their presence. In front of me a smashed-in window, leading off to nothing but fresh air. Where was the exit, where was I, who was I?

A backpack and bedroll lay beside the smouldering remains of what must have last night been a fire. The backpack contained things I remembered and didn't, all at the same time. I felt a beard on my face – hair I didn't know. There was this thinness, my body shrunken, a foreign feel. My clothes were brown, not by design. I imagined their stink, but couldn't smell the proof of it. I watched the mannequins again. I wanted them to be real, to ask them my name. I wanted to ask them everything. They'd never helped anyone and in the ruins of this building they weren't about to.

One of them answered as if to spite my judgment, pointing out as she was designed, to the broken window. There was a car park below. I could see the shells of several cars, many of them with windows smashed and wheels missing. There at the entrance to the car park a signboard read:

The RID E shop g cent e

It was telling half-truths and mocking the gaps in between. I sat in the window, my feet hanging there as I waited. I didn't know what to think, so I turned to the before. I remembered a room, a computer, fragments of news, a car. There were no faces. Nothing really stuck, it was all messy and grey.

There wasn't anybody around. Just a dog or something like it, but it was far away and I couldn't be sure. The smell of the sea was everywhere. I remembered hating that smell, but I climbed down through the window and followed it nonetheless. It was further than I expected, but I could feel it crawling closer.

There was no shock on my face. There was no surprises from the ruins that greeted me; even the bodies, unsettling as they were, asked me nothing. They were all along the pavements, in overturned vehicles, in doorways and windows. A smell of things long passed, wearing weeks of rot and slow decay. Some changing colours, going green, some were swollen, some had burst, others were leathery from the sun. And here and there a crow perched and pecked.

I walked a while before I saw the dog again - there were many dogs and none of them were starving, none of them were hungry. With the birds and cats they ate side by side. I kept my distance, but the smell of it hugged, clinging like an orphan to the last vestige of love. I didn't remember what had happened, but I had some idea of how it got here. It filled me with a feeling like... relief, like this was normal, this wasn't so bad.

The memory of coming home to a surprise party echoed through the signs stamped into the sidewalk that told me I was on Cape Road. I didn't recognise this place or the name, but I recognised the smell and soft grey sound of the sea. I passed a *Monsanto* billboard, the name had been vandalised to *Monsatan* with horns above the 'M'. The smiling faces on the sign now twisted into manic demons in the peeling paint. Someone had cable tied a ladder to the poles beneath it and above it a plastic chair melted on a makeshift platform.

There were no people moving around in streets, no faces peering out of windows, no washing hanging on lines, no stereos blasting music into the street. I don't think I remember quiet, but this must have been it. This was the kind of quiet that isn't peaceful - the unnerving kind. Not even the dogs barked, some followed me at a distance, I suppose they were curious, but I wasn't.

I wanted to see the ocean. Wouldn't it feel safer with nowhere left to go or would I feel trapped? That water stretching on and on, I'd pretend this was the end of the world. I passed underneath a sign hanging high across the harbour entrance, *Port Elizabeth: Port Authority*. I'd been here before, but there was that sick feeling like I'd done something wrong and would soon be punished. It came in waves like panic, like the ocean. I waded through it, until it blunted away in streams, leaving me to myself. It wasn't the buildings or the lack of people, but the place. The place scared me. How did I get here? My last memories were of other places, places without names, just pictures, places that were but not here.

The harbour was deserted too. Rows of big mesh wire cages with tin roofs were all over the place. All of them empty. Piles of bags and clothes littered the area, reminding me of something from films in black and white. I shivered. History was all over the walls and floors; it bled out into the sea and asked me to forget it.

I sat on warm concrete and watched the waves. My head throbbed somewhere outside of me. I ignored it. The big ships in the harbour lay lurching, half sunken and abandoned by barnacles. They looked lonely, even as they pressed up against one another, rusting into the entropy of oneness. Nothing moved on board. Even the seagulls perched in subdued shadows, so still. That feeling was getting worse and wasn't done favours by the sight of the concrete bunker drenched with red down one side and several yellow stars stamped into the wall. I remembered that flag and immediately vomited off the pier. The water came alive with splashes, a feeding frenzy. My head ached – I needed air or at least a different kind of it. It was beating with a stampede of feet, thoughts tossing around like caged animals awaiting the abattoir. Their pleas fell on the deaf ears of men sharpening knives, dripping blood from toxic plastic aprons. I could hear the cries blur into a solid trail of blood, soaked beyond washing into the floor. Those thoughts stretched thin until there was just the feeling of air flowing through my head, flying in fact – angry and fast.

Ey... sir get up. Wake up, please.

The voice whispered through a dream. I couldn't chase it down, it wasn't there. It was outside the dream and everything was with it.

Now!

The whisper became insistent and the stick brought me back, back to the harbour with the sun missing and the face of a teenage boy over me. He jabbed me repeatedly.

Seriously man, please. You can't be here! Get up or they'll find you.

Shocked awake and confused, I re-entered consciousness staring up at the dirty face of a boy with a stick. There was only one thing to read in his eyes. I knew what urgency looked like.

Okay, okay! Wait...who will find me?

He stopped poking and gave me an astonished glare.

Just come with me, or they'll be here any minute, please!

I listened. His face carried soft eyes and instinctively I got up and followed.

Did you want to get yourself caged?

Caged?

What are you doing out here? We are very blessed they did not see us!

I was tired, he looked to me for a response, and I offered nothing more than a confused thank you and let him continue.

I know there aren't many of them here at the moment, but you've seen what happens!

No... I don't know what *happens*. Kid, I don't even know where *this* is... Many of who?

He made a sound like laughing, but, at the speed we were moving, there wasn't time for that.

Eish, what's wrong with you? Don't answer. Just follow me.

He was quiet for a while and I started thinking of the things I should be asking him. I didn't get very far before he started up again. When he spoke he looked as if he knew me, there was something pretentious about his words, something forced.

So, how have you managed to stay alive this long then?

I don't know how long *this* is. I seriously have no clue what I'm doing here kid.

He looked blankly at me for a bit and I guessed at how crazy he thought I was. I felt crazy. Who the hell is this child?

Just keep talking. I'll pick it up as we go along.

I don't think that you will.

We had been travelling up a small side street, away from the harbour and between some factories. It was darker here.

Where are you taking me, anyway?

He was telling me some or other story from the before, but I was drifting and my interruption threw him. He stuttered and mumbled, until I repeated the question.

Kid, I asked you where are we going?

I'm taking you someplace safe okay... and I'm not a kid!

I didn't really agree with him, but perhaps he was right, 15 years was old in a place where the wrecks of buildings poured into the streets and corpses littered the pavements. There were no children in a place like this.

Okay kid... I mean buddy... Ag, what's your name?

He stopped walking and turned around.

I'm Max or Kenny, you can choose, I like them both.

I paused for a moment - maybe I wasn't the only crazy one? Motioning in the direction we had been heading, I indicated my desire to move on.

So... You never told me your name.

I squinted at him and frowned; the question caused a headache. It scratched me in unwelcome places. My brain bled frustration, sweating it out of my forehead.

I don't know Max, I don't remember. Call me what you want.

Max stopped dead, worried. He wore the kind of face that was asking itself: Have I made a big mistake? He led me into the front of a corner store pharmacy. The shelves looked like they had seen better days. What was left behind surprised me; tons of toothpaste and fitness supplements still scattered the shelves – evidently people didn't care about looking good at the end of the world. Max led me up some stairs into the apartments above the store. The entrance was carefully disguised with cardboard and an empty shelf which we moved with a little effort.

It was pitch black in the passage we entered, but I could hear Max fumbling with what sounded like matches. It was a while before he lit a fat candle on the floor and picked up the mug it was in. We moved down the passage and passed other doors with planks nailed across them. We went up two more flights of stairs and came to a steel gate, which barred access to the next floor. Max picked up a broomstick and reached his arm through the gate, tapping twice on the door across from the gate. The dust was everywhere; it carved with tiny fingers on the inside of my throat.

We waited. Still in the musty air that told of a place with no ventilation; I could taste the dirt on my tongue like a dark Eucharist. Who would I meet behind this door? Traps and children didn't belong in the same sentence, I felt safe and uneasy all at once. This was a new world though, with new rules. Maybe this was a trap? Max was silent and I took my cues from him. After another set of taps with the stick, there was a slow scratching of bolts and padlocks which issued from behind the door. It opened slowly and standing in the half-light of the candle I could just make out the shape of a little girl. She must have been no more than six years old. I could feel parts of me disintegrate, staring into her eyes and the crushed smile that met me. She'd had to use a small step ladder to get to the locks. We walked past it and into a dark and humid apartment. She trailed me like a ghost.

Several candles illumined the kitchen and bathroom. There were some metal boards at the windows which had been peeled back to let slivers of moonlight in. Max led me into the living room. I sat down on an old plastic-clad sofa as they emerged from all around the room. This unexpected invasion terrified me. In the half-light it took more than a few seconds to discover they were just children. Five of them in all, they'd been hiding behind couches and curtains and had gathered to sit silently in a group before me as if I came bearing tales of some magical world. I watched them with silent confusion and they returned the favour. I had

no stories, I had no memories, and I couldn't give them yesterday if I couldn't even have today.

Max had disappeared into one of the bedrooms and I grew nervous again. What had I gotten myself into? This couldn't be a trap, they wouldn't kill me in front of children... surely? The little girl who had opened the door walked over to me. In her hands, a packet of chips, she passed them to me, motioning for me to eat them. Something too white about her eyes shook me.

Thank you very much.

She was silent, but she smiled a small smile and spun back around and carried the hem of her dress in her hands and out of the room. The others were still sitting there with wide expectant eyes, I had nothing for them. I searched each face and turned my eyes to the ceiling to forget each one.

Max... Where are you?

I raised my voice, but it was unnecessary as Max had just returned from the bedroom pushing a wheelchair into the room. I went quiet again, frozen. In the wheelchair sat a very old man, perhaps in his eighties; his eyes were drooping and his beard hung over his shoulder like a scarf. His arthritis-riddled fingers clasped around stock of a shotgun. He wouldn't shoot in here I told myself, besides I could easily out-manoeuvre him. I told myself a lot of things in those few seconds before he spoke. I judged his eyes and that mouth locked open. He was a dog so drawn out he was again a pup. There was no danger in anything about him.

Welcome to our home.

He spoke slowly and I nodded in response, I could tell he was taking a long breath before his next sentence. I wanted to help him talk, to finish the sentences before he'd started them, but the words fell outside of reach and in a jumble. There was no saving them from garble.

I trust you are a peaceful man... I hope that cross around your neck... is true to your heart.

I looked down, noticing the small metal cross, for the first time. It confused me, I stared at it long enough to irritate the two of us and then nodded, trying to look unsurprised, but probably looking nervous. He looked at the empty chip packet beside me and asked:

Are you hungry?

Yes, I am a little.

Food is the one thing we have plenty of here... Please help yourself.

Thanks.

I looked around at the faces of the children in front of me. They began smiling and the reflections of my fear that hung around them were fading, along with their hopes for stories I did not possess.

How long have you been up here?

The old man looked at me for a while. His drooping eyes were sad and I got the impression I had stirred a memory that wasn't welcome.

Max.

Yes, grampa?

How long has it been since your father... left?

His pause was measured. His eyes didn't leave mine as he addressed his grandson. Max had that same look on his face now, but he answered immediately.

Six months... and a couple days.

The old man nodded at Max's words and we sat there staring through each other for the longest time. There were questions to be asked, but weren't. Each one of us converged in the

calm of some storm long outside ourselves. The silence was paralysing, the wheelchair creaked forward an inch and broke it, saving us.

What's your name, son?

He looked at me and knew he'd returned the pain of the question I'd asked him. I wanted to answer. I wanted there to be an answer. There was silence and searching, all evidence I could muster in support of one led to nothing. I let my eyes stray away from him and the question and into the blank stale grey, into the great empty unknown, into the echoes of some past living behind the curtain.

I don't remember. I don't remember a lot of things.

He nodded a few times, my failure to answer seemed to set up an ache in him. He stared at me, trying to find words written in between the frown and my eyes, but my confusion was no story.

There are many like you ... I understand it comes back eventually... I'm Benjamin in any case.

I got up and shook his hand, baby soft and spotted, I could feel the bones. He was a weak man, his body couldn't lie to anyone with eyes. He pointed at the children on the mat.

These are my grandchildren...

He spoke their names so quickly I only caught the last one, the little girl who opened the door.

And this is Amy.

I wondered what happened to their parents. Better not to ask – not in front of them at least.

Max will take you to your room - there's no room in here with us...but you'll be in the apartment next door. There are keys and locks... you'll be safe, don't worry...

We'll call you back for dinner... and you can tell us the story of what you *do* remember.

Max led me out of the apartment and into the passage; we moved three doors down, not quite next door, but I didn't say anything about it.

So that's our family... or what is left of them.

Max went quiet after that. He unlocked the door. He looked up at me with stray eyes. I didn't speak the language carved into the faces of this orphanage. I knew what sadness looked like and it was a living thing, swimming in those eyes.

Are those all your brothers and sisters?

Amy is my sister, the rest are cousins. Our families stayed here in this building since before the war.

He spoke as if rehearsing lines. The door opened, creaking to the same script. It was pitch black and the air tasted stale. He handed me a torch. I searched his face before accepting it. Our eyes met in mutual confusion.

You can use this in there, you'll see they built walls in behind the windows.

He stepped in and led me past the kitchen and into the living room. It was full from floor to ceiling with tin cans, soda bottles and all manner of food and supplies. He smiled as he pointed to the treasure trove.

They got all this, our parents; they built this place up like a fortress.

He was right and I was visibly impressed. We could barely move through the living room and into the passage it was so packed. Down the passage, past two rooms similarly stocked, there was a room with a generator in the centre. Max smiled when I noticed it.

Yes, it works. Everything in here works. We still have a lot of fuel if you would like to use it.

I couldn't believe what was in the next room; there were several computers and a TV, seemingly intact.

We've got one in our house, but it isn't soundproof like this side. Grampa doesn't like us making noise, we only whisper. It's only good for DVDs; there are no broadcasts, but you know that.

How come you don't stay in here? Isn't it safer?

Max nodded:

Grampa can't breathe in here and there are no windows and no light. We can't run the generator for more than an hour a day... That's what my parents told us. We use it to heat the water and charge batteries.

I walked back into the room with the generator. Somewhere there was a memory of noise attached to the picture of it.

Surely they can hear this thing out there?

Max walked over to the walls and pointed to the blankets and cardboard that had been nailed to all the walls.

I see.

I didn't, but I guessed it must have helped somehow.

I'll turn it on for the water. You can charge whatever you have in the other room. I will come fetch you for supper later.

I looked at him confused. The questions took time to catch up to the present.

Wait, where do you get your water from?

I don't know how it all works. Our parents made something on the roof for the rain.

Max turned to leave. Nothing made sense. He spoke to me like I was a child, he gave his commands:

The gate on the landing stays locked. You can't leave this building without me. If you decide not to stay I will let you out, but for tonight you'll sleep here.

I nodded and sat down at the desk, imprisoned. Max was hiding something – too much about this was forced, rehearsed even. Above the bed there hung a framed photograph, Max and Amy stood in front of a man and woman. I studied the man, he looked familiar. There were three monitors in front of me. I could hear the generator purr in the other room. It was quiet with the door closed, almost silent. I opened my bag, digging around to see if indeed I had anything to charge. I found a cell phone, the remains of a laptop, gasmask, knives, a book, some cans of food and a large water bottle. I thought over the things in front of me and tried to grasp at any memories that surfaced, but nothing. The gasmask had the effigy of a white skull painted across its black filter, it meant nothing, it stirred nothing. I plugged the cell phone in and turned on the computer. I waited. The screen came to life and the phone's light showed a charge. These machines would be useless; there couldn't be any signal. There wasn't. I stared up at the photograph on the wall, the word orphan bounced off of every thought. How long would these people survive up here, with just an old man and a shotgun? No time to worry.

The last thing I remembered were the gas clouds, green like jade and stretching over the horizon, creeping closer and closer. I ran from them instinctively. Nothing unknown was friendly in this world. It came for everyone. There was nothing before the gas and nothing after, just smothering slowly under a heavy green blanket without a name, without a face. The when and where were questions. They were questions to ask other people; other people without faces and without names. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like mist.

The generator hummed in the next room and the lights and screens flickered as I sat there staring blankly into space. My hands reached into the bag of memories to find my name, but it wasn't there. That was fine.

There was a mirror in the bathroom. It wasn't cracked, and from the light in the passage I could see myself. There was a mess of long curly hair hanging off my chin, my cheeks were dirty. I opened my mouth to a scent that turned my stomach. Like the shelves downstairs in the chemists, the bathroom was not short on toothpaste. I stuffed some tubes into my backpack before squirting half of one into my mouth and plastering it around with my tongue and finger. It stung my mouth all over. I spat and turned the tap, half expecting nothing, even after what I'd been told. There was a trickle, nothing more. It cleaned my cheeks, it cleaned my body. I bathed like a bird in a brick cage; a bird who'd forgotten there were such things as flight or as freedom.

Sleep had caught up to me sitting down at the screens; this was exhaustion. I found the spare bed and collapsed on top of it, sinking into the springs. The taste of cement on my tongue, the smell of dust and bricks on everything.

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I woke to the sound of what I thought was the dying rattle of the generator as it issued a thirsty choke. It was completely black now with the lights off; I was panicking and my heart beat faster in the darkness. I fumbled around the bed. I wasn't sure where anything was; it was all unfamiliar to me and I struggled to find the desk with the screens and my charging phone. I remembered the torch and pulled it out of my pocket, mashing all over it with my thumb in search of the button – I hit it. The beam broke the darkness and shed out into the passage. There was rubble and pieces of brick everywhere. I swung the light over towards the desks. The screens had fallen over and onto the floor. This place had been dusty before, but this was different; this was worse. There was a breeze now too and with no windows and no way in; I was worried.

The phone was still there and I grabbed it. I moved into the passage pulling my bag onto my back and started into the room with the generator. There was no smell of petrol, the machine looked like a fossil in front of me; expecting it to work was not worth a prayer. My pulse was racing and my ears alert, but no sounds to meet them. The living room was empty, no crates of food, no tin cans, just a couple sofas brown with the dirt of an age. I moved over towards the front door, Max had locked it right? It was closed. I moved in, lifting my hand to the handle – it gave. The door creaked open and, I could see through the hole in the roof, that it was night. The landing was littered with boxes and cans and garbage. Maybe they dragged this stuff out here while I was sleeping? How the hell could they do that without waking me? I started asking myself a hundred little questions I didn't have the answers to and in the next few seconds I was standing at their door. It was open too.

Max... Hello? Are you in there? Benjamin? Hello?

I whispered loudly into the darkness of their front door and no one answered. I pushed the torch in through the front door and swung the light about in the kitchen and the living room.

Max?

There was no answer. The dust in here clung to the air like the room before. No one had lived here for years. Further into the apartment I went, arching the flashlight down the passage.

There, in the beam, framed at the end of the passage, was an empty wheelchair. The seat was tattered and empty, no bones or blood, just vacant space with the ghost of a face fresh in my mind. That sick feeling rose up my throat and to my head, twitching. I moved over to the first door on my left. The handle turned. The whole world was outside. There were no walls, nothing but a sheer drop into the street below. The rubble piled up in it, blocking the entire road. I pushed my head out, stretching to get a view to my left and right. The building was fine to the left, but every apartment to the right had shed its skin into the street. The bricks below were black and burnt with blast residue and, I was sure there must have been a crater in the pavement below. I shut the door and shook my head; it ached. It echoed and ached and then there was silence.

I shoved some tin cans from the landing into my backpack, and pushed open the mangled gate at the top of the stairs and moved down towards the street. The stairs below were littered with boxes and debris, piled up and caked in something that smelt like the tossed soil of a battlefield. I stood there in the stairwell a long time, too long. The torch beam fell upon something at my feet, a shrivelled hand poking out from the rubble. I didn't have to think twice – it belonged to someone long dead. It was a child's hand, the tiny shrunken fingers didn't lie. I won't forget that hand – I thought of Amy.

I started running, straight out of the pharmacy on the bottom floor and into the street. I didn't stop. I knew where the ocean was and I ran from it, up past more buildings that looked the same. Past parks with grass growing over merry-go-rounds and over slides. Past twisted leathery corpses propped up against cars, past signboards graffitied with the red flag and yellow stars. I ran to catch up with the years that seemed to have vanished in a single night. I ran until I could taste blood in my breathing, 'til my lungs burned like lamps in my chest and my skin felt their heat.

The shops and malls along the road had gone. They gave way to smaller buildings, some ruined, and others intact. Everywhere, there were housing complexes, this was the suburbs. I hadn't seen anything move and I didn't care – I just ran. When my thoughts dropped away, I stopped. In a ditch beside the road, I drank muddy water that flowed from somewhere outside of this city. I wanted to be at the source. My muscles cursed me; my legs could carry me no further. I took the boots off my feet and submerged them in the tepid water. It was neither cool nor refreshing and there was nothing about calm in my skin.

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The sun was gone and the moon had hidden behind the clouds. The city was darker than I'd ever thought one could be. I wandered off the road and collapsed under a tree beside the wall of another housing complex. Looking inside my backpack, I pulled out the water bottles and drank my fill, that dirty taste in every sip. Inside there were things missing, there were new things too. I passed out.

There were axes, axes and dogs. The men that held the axes were behind a black wall. All I could see of them were their hands. They cursed the dogs in front of them and barking started. The gleam of a blade like a butcher's cleaver, catching the last light of day, was on everything and everything was reflected in those blades. The cursing got louder, but I heard no actual words. It was just the cruel, guttural grumbles of men. Men turned out for a life of crime; the kind of men bred in prisons, between bunk beds and behind iron bars. The flash of the sun was in the teeth that opened for roars and howls. So many teeth. More teeth than faces. I couldn't see the men behind the wall, but I knew their faces matched those of the dogs. The wall came down and the hands and their axes stepped through, joined by their faces and bodies. It ended quicker than you'd think. The last bleeding jaws locked around a gagging windpipe and a hand groping at an axe, no muscles left to lift, no will remaining.

A scraping on the tar woke me. It was the harsh sound of gravel being forced against gravel and a fast ticking followed it. The scraping sounded slower than the ticking, but I knew they were both moving at the same speed. I held my breath and lay still against the wall. What was the noise? The scraping was now clearer, a couple of meters away. It wasn't metal; it sounded like hard plastic, it sounded like shoes – smart shoes, school shoes. The ticking beside it stopped and then the scraping did too. Now there was just the noise of breathing – in echo, mine – theirs. A growl burned just ahead of me in the darkness and the hard voice of a man speaking another language followed it. I knew a bit – it was Xhosa.

Who's there?

It was the voice from the road. I couldn't sense fear in it and I fumbled to respond in his tongue.

I'm no danger. I am friend.

My translation was clumsy. I could hear him laughing as he scraped his feet, turning to face the direction of my voice.

I have no friends. They are all... a long time dead.

I sat up quickly and pulled at my backpack for the torch.

Do you have a gun in there?

I didn't respond – there was sense in lying and in telling the truth but I gambled on silence and waited. He could see me better than I could him – I couldn't see him at all.

What's your name then?

I don't remember.

One of those?

He laughed and I could tell he'd met a few of us who'd been labelled: *not many of your kind left alive*. I wasn't sure what that meant, but my hands had found the torch and I aimed it at the voice and thumbed the button. He was an odd sight, clad in a dusty suit and dress shoes that were cracked along the sides. He was clean-shaven and wore frames with the lenses missing. The man shuttered his eyes in the light, pulling a hand across his face. The other hand I could see was holding a leather briefcase in a similar condition to his shoes. At his feet a short mongrel bared its teeth at me.

It isn't a good idea to have that light on.

I studied him for a few moments more and turned my attention to his dog. It looked harmless enough. It was a scruffy affair with a sort of harness across its back. There were some pouches on either side – he'd dressed it up like a mule. I turned the beam towards the ground in between us and let it rest there.

Where are you going?

Same place as you are.

But I don't know where I'm going?

We know and we don't know. We just walk and when we arrive we know.

I didn't have a response, but it sounded about right.

Did the gas get you too?

Do you have any food?

He had skimmed over my question but I nodded anyway.

It will be cold soon. We should go inside.

I picked up my backpack and started scaling the wall behind me. His voice echoed after me.

I'll find another way over.

I hadn't thought of his dog and the wall, I'd just jumped. I regretted that a little and, as I waited, I regretted it a lot. He looked the kind of crazy you can't hope to trust in.

It was more than five minutes before the scraping noise was audible again. I was sitting on the bonnet of a car outside one of the townhouses. The place was a mess with suitcases and boxes all over the lawns and broken windows and busted doors. He stopped at the car in front of me and greeted me again. This time was in English and it went that way for a while. The two of us kicked past relics of blissful suburbia, strewn on the porches and walkways, until we found a house not so damaged as those around it.

We built a fire in the floor, it cracked the tiles and we fed it pieces of carpet and chair legs and table legs and things that no longer mattered, things no one could miss. We fed the house to itself – it was warm.

My name is David. It probably isn't the real one, but it was given to me and it's the only one I know.

I looked at him a long time with those words repeating inside. I would find my name. I would find the family to which it belonged and I would not accept another.

I don't have one. I don't want one that isn't mine.

You might find it, you might not. We are alive when history has died. Your name may be part of that history.

We fished for meatballs in our boiled tins of spaghetti, with fresh forks out of drawers untouched by the dust. We came up empty, our mouths red with tomato in the red of the fire.

What do you remember?

His question lingered there, a ghost offering from his red lips, the steam of his voice against the flames.

I remember gas. I remember running. I don't remember faces, but I remember tears and screams. I remember waking up in one world, then waking up again in another. It will be like that. It might get better or worse, I can't say. There aren't many of us left.

He set back to his spaghetti, measuring the way for his words with each chew. His eyes were on things beyond the room, beyond the conversation.

The Red Caravan got most of them. You and I fell through the cracks, I guess.

Red Caravan?

You'll see it or you won't. Either way, it'll be too late. It takes them up north, to the mines. They work us dead. That's where most of us are, most of everyone that's left.

How'd you know this?

Well, that's just my bet. They're there or they're long dead.

He paused a while. I could tell he wasn't finished, so I waited for him to gather his thoughts. We wiped tomato sauce from our faces and let the dog lick clean our hands and forks and tins.

We wouldn't have been hard to catch, I guess. A man who remembers nothing of such a long time, couldn't have been hard to pluck out of the street. I wonder if many of us starved to death. I think more than a few did. Why would you drug an entire country? Surely, if they were going to kill us, they'd have taken us with bombs and tanks and things we've seen too many times on TV. No. I think people are in Johannesburg. I think they're there on the mines, worked raw. If they have not died yet, there won't be long before they do.

I thought about what he'd said. I let it work its way through my cracked memories of names of places with nothing to associate them with. There were no pictures, no photos in my backpack, nothing to show me who I'd loved and lost. I felt it next to the fire, piercing and clawing and angry. It was a shelf with books, no names on the spine, no words on the pages, just blank spaces where worlds belonged, but didn't exist.

I'm not even sure you're real... if any of this is.

What do you mean?

I guess it's real... it has to be... you've seen some weird shit haven't you?

I nodded quietly.

You see, that doesn't stop. It never stops. You might wake up tomorrow and tomorrow isn't near what yesterday looked like. You'll be older, you'll be different. It's like someone has stolen everything in between.

He lowered his head; I could see he was upset.

This is what we have. This shit is all there is.

We went from house to house and took the furniture and photo frames and piled them up beside our fire. Like that we burnt away the neighbourhood on those tiles in a few weeks. The once white ceilings turned black on the first night and the house stunk of a million things joined in microscopic union.

It's our job to write the ending. Or I guess to erase it.

I didn't know what he meant by that.

The dog, he called it that, was happier now than he'd seen it in years. He spoke the last word with insincerity. For all we know it had been just weeks.

They'll find a way to catch us.

Who will?

The Red Caravan, them, whatever you want to call them, whatever they call themselves. They'll come. Maybe not now or in a year or two, but they know there are some of us still wandering. They know not everyone is dead.

How, how could they know?

They have drones, those things that fly higher than we can see, but can see us all the same. Those things are always watching.

Why haven't they come for us then?

You and me... We're not worth it yet. Maybe they don't see us all the time, maybe only some of the time, but they don't care yet. They've got slaves; they have what they came for. When those die, it's our turn.

There was food enough for weeks, but he was restless. I was restless. It was the last night we spent in that house. The last night I saw David. He would sink into the gaps in between yesterday and weeks from now, months, years. He would tread silently and on his own, in the

quiet of something we couldn't adequately explain. At least that is what talked about and we knew it was coming.

I told him I wanted to go north and find out if my family was at those mines he spoke of. To find out if I still had one. He knew his was gone. It was just him and the dog. He was fine with that and I think I believe him. I never asked him why the suit and the dress shoes. Maybe he remembered something from before, maybe he had an anchor in those shoes and that suit, there was nothing concrete holding me to the past. In this mess I was free.

I went out the next morning to find him some new shoes – a sort of thank you. I searched a few houses before I came across something I thought he'd like. The city looked different from what I remember of my waking day in the mall. The street signs which had looked only a little battered 'days' before were now rusting and buckling. I'd rather not know what came between then and now.

When I returned to the fireplace, David and his dog were gone, but we were expecting this. Again I was alone. It's the kind of thing you see coming from a mile off, I knew the face of man more afraid to be in company than to be alone. I was thankful for his time – for his wisdom.

There was no sense staying here. There was nothing left for me. I would head for Johannesburg and, if I still had family, I would find them. Their faces were shrouded, but almost visible in dreams; their names hovered far from grasp. I found a map in the glove compartment of the third car I searched. A green pen plotted my course. I would take the N2 towards East London until the turn off to Cradock. On the N10 I drew a line to Middelburg and the N9 until I hit the N1 straight up to Bloemfontein.

It was a long way. It would take weeks. I stuffed a few extra tins into my pack and a pair of knives from a kitchen draw. I went house to house looking for car keys. There was no rush. Each and every photograph I came across, I stared at – stared through. The keys, I tried them all on the cars in street. I knew the batteries would be flat, but if I could find one that fit, maybe. A few did fit: one was parked leaning into a ditch and there was no way I could push it, another had its petrol syphoned and the third was missing a battery. I sat for a while in the seat of the last car; I didn't want to have to walk, but it seemed like there was no other choice.

The faces of those children in the frames on the key-ring; weren't happy, weren't smiling. Maybe it was just the dirt on the plastic. I snapped the rear-view mirror off the ceiling and looked into my own eyes. I was in there somewhere – all of me.

I stared out the front window and the answer sat in a driveway just ahead of me. The bicycle's chain was rusted and its wheels flat, but I was sure there were more around. It didn't take long to find what I needed. I waved goodbye to the names and faces we'd erased in the fire. I left the shoes and a note for David.

I was going to head back towards the ocean, but after what David had told me I decided to take the long way around. Avoiding the big highways might take me all day, but that was better than getting caught. I took Mission Road north east and went through the suburbs and townships without seeing a single person. What I did see in every sports field along the way were large metal cages, almost the size of the fields themselves. These were bigger than the ones on the docks, but their message was the same. Around them were watch towers as well, with no one in them. What had happened here, had happened ages ago. The only stories told were by empty suitcases and an occasional corpse, prostrated beneath the sky. It was quiet and cold. Years ago these places would've been the kind of noisy that doesn't know quiet in the day or at night.

By late afternoon I had crossed what the map told me was Swartkops river.

It would be getting dark soon. The sun was hinting at its disappearance and I wheeled the bike off the intersection at the edge of Motherwell, through the rows of RDP houses and shacks. I looked for one without broken windows or a smashed in door, but there weren't any like that. The cages on the docks and on the sports fields and this place all reeked of the Red Caravan.

The pavements were strewn with suitcases and boxes and bags; the occupants had been forced out in a hurry. Here and there I caught glimpses of what looked like bleached bones. I didn't move closer to see if they were human. I knew they were. It was a different world now, an emptier one. I spent the night in a beaten down house and pushed cupboards in front of the windows. Inside, I lit a fire on the concrete floor. The glow painted me on yellowed walls. I felt like a lie told to children to scare them, to keep them away from fire, but the night was warm and sleep was warmer.

I cycled back to the river to fill my bottles. Again, I checked the map and decided it would be quicker to head up past Addo Elephant Reserve. I'd never seen an elephant before. Were they still alive? This would take me several hours, if not the entire day. Time drags, eternity exists. It lives in a mind that doesn't know what it should be thinking about – how it should be thinking. I kept pedalling; yesterday disappeared behind me and that was all there was – all there is.

By lunch time the empty bush had given way to another township and I was getting closer to the reserve. There were no cages here like in the city, but the houses and shacks had received the same treatment; I could tell. These ruins were spilling out into the street, bits of houses crossing roads to meet each other in the middle, some great ceremony forgotten, unfinished. I cycled through the dusty roads in between these empty shells. Over sheet metal that was once a roof – a wall.

There were voices, in my head or behind some buildings. I couldn't see anyone and nothing moved. I didn't stay to find out or make friends.

The road in here was thick with tire tracks. Something heavy had come through in a time where the road had been wet with mud. Whatever it was had carved great furrows that stuck and dried. I listened for the sound of elephants. I didn't know what to listen for, but if I heard I was sure I'd know.

The administrative buildings at Addo had been ransacked. The cottages were the same way. I walked around the building, picking up pieces of blood hardened rags and empty shell casings. There were no bodies. There were no guns. There were no elephants.

After passing between each building and shed, I found a room with a locked safe door. I could see someone had tampered with it, there were burn marks from a blow torch and a crowbar lay in front of it. In a place like this there were bound to be weapons in that safe. If only I could find a way in. Sitting at the reception desk, I imagined receiving guests and handing out keys... keys! I fumbled around in the drawers and tables in the offices behind the desk and upstairs. The chances of me finding anything were slim.

None of the keys fit the safe room or any of the safes in the building. I let myself lean on the wall, a sharp cracking varnish that cut and upset. These panels were wood, was the safe room encased in steel or wooden panels as well? Maybe I could break in or burn my way in? I ran outside to see – wide awake and excited. The place where the safe room seemed logically to fit had a concrete backing, but rows of logs from the second story floor rested along the top of that wall. Perhaps I could get in from above? It didn't take long to find an axe. There was a work-shed nearby still full of tools and equipment. A neat arrangement of objects; most of whose purposes I had no clue about were set on hooks from big to small across each of the

walls. I picked up a pickaxe as well as a crowbar and hauled all three off into the administration building.

On the second floor the sign on the door said: *General Manger*. There was a picture of her with her children on the desk, she squeezed them as though they'd float away if she didn't. Where are your children now – did they float away? Maybe. Were they alive or did they go the way of the elephants? I turned the photograph face down – they'd seen enough of this. A layer of carpet disguised the floor, but it sounded as though there was wood beneath my feet. I lifted the axe and let it drop. The noise was louder than expected and I waited a while for any movement or response.

There was nothing but silence and insects. There were always insects. I went back to work and after 15 minutes I had cut a line through to the room below. Just an axe blade's width, but I could press the torch to it and shine the light in. There was a mess down there. From what I could make out through the small crack, shell casings littered the floor. There was a smell too. It wasn't familiar, but it wasn't healthy that much was obvious. My body convulsed for having let that odour in. It grated my throat.

After an hour, I had cut enough of the floor away to form the outline of an almost complete circle in the wood, big enough for me to fit through. I only needed to kick my way through the last pieces holding the circle in place. It took more force than I expected and as I lifted my leg to issue the final blow, it snapped with the ease of a twig and I disappeared with it into the darkness below.

Landing on my heels, I had fallen, back first, into something that rattled. My hands touched what reminded me of the seats of a car. I groped around in the darkness for the flashlight; I had lost it in the fall. I felt raincoats and jackets that weren't empty. Their sleeves rattled and ended in that car seat feeling that I now knew to be the remains of the owners. I could feel their teeth. I was trapped and sick. The vomit rose up in my throat. I shut my mouth to force it back – in vain. My chin wet with it – just breathe.

I stood there motionless for a few minutes, knowing I'd have to contend with my own sick to find the flashlight eluding me. The light through the hole above was not enough to aid me. It was getting dark outside and I'd need to figure out how to open the door or find a torch. The

key was in the lock of the door and it clicked obediently when I turned it. I breathed a sigh of relief and set my hands to the steel to force it open. It wouldn't budge. That didn't make sense. It was unlocked... surely? The scene in the lobby started to make sense now. The blowtorch outside and the marks on the safe door, these bodies had been sealed in here.

More than a few minutes passed before my slimy fingers found a flashlight. Not mine though, but it still held a charge. The room I could now see was painted in dry blood. The shelves around it held boxes of ammunition and several guns scattered the floor. There were five or six bodies, it was hard to tell. They were in pieces all over the floor - my fall was to blame for that. I counted the jackets - I counted the skulls; six. There were piles of empty cans and bottles in one corner and a massive heap of what looked like cow dung, in another. On the door there were scratches in the paint, lines of six crossed through with a seventh. There were a few of those. I turned the light to the bodies in the pile, the dry flesh still hanging off the skulls that had holes through, some in the temple, others through the back and the top. I shone the torch into the sockets; we just stared at one another, through one another. What a way to die.

I picked up a rifle from the floor; it felt heavier than I expected, this was nothing like the games I had played on my screen before the war. I knew how they worked, I'd seen them loaded a thousand times, but my fingers had never performed the mechanical action that I knew was necessary. I pulled back the bolt, opening the chamber and pointing my flashlight in. It was empty. It's funny what you remember. I didn't know what rounds it took but I'd find out soon. I put it on the shelf and looked around for the next weapon. There were a few more like it around the room and then one that looked different. Looking in, it had a single round left in its magazine. If I could find enough bullets to fit them I would try both.

There was a pistol on one of the belts of the bodies and I took it, along with the belt, and flung it up through the hole. I picked up all the boxes of ammo I could find, about ten in total, and threw them all up through the hole and into the room above. I wouldn't be able to get out without some effort as the ceiling was higher than I'd anticipated, but the shelves were only loosely bolted to the wall and with the aid of a pipe and one of the rifles I was able to snap them free. I dragged the shelf towards the centre of the room and carefully made my way up. It shook and threatened to fall, but steadied itself and I was free.

It was almost dark and I knew I would have to spend the night. I remembered seeing gas canisters in the tool shed and I was sure I'd find a lamp in there too. There were no sleeping bags or blankets. I had been foolish not to think of that back in Port Elizabeth. Tonight would be freezing, even in this wooden building. There was a gas canister and with only marginal effort I located a lamp as well. I moved them up and to the *General Manager's* office. I'd need to be careful about this. David had warned me about lights at night and caution still shone through the shards of memories I knew.

The filing cabinets needed to be moved across the window behind the desk. After that, I pulled the curtains closed behind them. There was C-shaped mound of earth surrounding the back of the building and shouldered with thick brush. I still made sure to fill the gaps between the glass and cabinets. I barricaded the spaces with frames from certificates and awards and paintings which hung on the walls around the office. No one would miss them, no one would care. It felt like burning another neighbourhood; it felt like saving someone the pain of finding out. *It's a beautiful thing, destroying history; being in control like that.* David's words flowed through this ritual – he was right.

I pulled the curtains off the office windows next door and downstairs and bundled them together for blankets. The door felt weak and I pushed the desk against it to be safe. The frosted glass in the frame near the top of the door shuddered and clacked as the wind gusted through the shattered windows of the lobby downstairs. I held my hands around the gas lamp and wrapped myself in the curtains. The night was quiet; the only noise came from the boxes as I rifled through the ammunition, fitting bullets to the chambers; matching bullets to guns. I found the ones that fit the magazines and filled them up. I did the same with the pistol. Most of the boxes contained rounds for a shotgun. I hadn't seen one down there, so most of the ammunition would be useless. There were 84 rounds for the first rifle and 73 for the second. Tomorrow I'd test them. *Have I ever fired a gun? Maybe.* I fired hundreds online, more than a million bullets over the years or their pixelated cousins at least. It's funny what you remember.

I fell asleep in the failing glow of the gas lamp. The wind was heavy outside and I could hear it beating on the window frames and the doors, but I drifted and disappeared.

There was a man with a briefcase like David's sitting in a baby's high chair in the middle of an empty hall. He had a crown on his bib and spittle around his mouth. He was laughing uncontrollably and rocking the chair back and forth. His face was streaked with black, like squid's ink. It looked like he would fall. All around the hall the soft laughter of other men was audible; they drifted out towards the chair, their sniggers amplified as they drew closer. It was unbearable now and foul. He opened his mouth to speak, but there were no words. The crowd grew silent in anticipation; they stayed silent. Nothing came, nothing went. The ink streaks turned to tears that streamed down his face. The laughter rose up again, bitter – sinful. The man in the high chair spat out a thick stream of saliva all over his clothes and bib and, with a final monumental shake, he toppled the chair. It crashed to the ground. The echo resonated through the hall.

I was awake. The laughter I didn't leave behind in the dreams, but the room was empty from what I could tell. The noise, it came from behind the door, a cacophony of piercing shrieks paired with the vibrations of scratching and clawing. The door was shaking and the laughing grew louder. The light from the lamp had died long ago, but I could faintly make out the doorway from the moonlight that illuminated the lobby below. I cradled the rifle, pulling the bolt and loading a round into the chamber. It sounded like someone or something was now smashing themselves against the door. It must have been funny, the laughter unfaltering, now beginning to resemble something other than human. I'd heard this before as a child. I remembered a trip somewhere strange. I remembered being frightened by these things that stalked the fence of the camp at night, those hyenas with their eyes and teeth glowing along the fence, floating in mid-air, the night so black you could hardly see their feet.

I moved closer to the door and fired a round through the wood. It was a thunderclap in the room and the laughter stopped. The silence did not last long. It was replaced with the yelping sound of a dog in pain. I'd hit one. I pulled back the bolt and fired another shot through the door, the muzzle flash briefly bringing the room into light. The clattering of claws on wood greeted my ears. It sounded as if they were receding. I picked up the torch and turned the beam towards the door. Creeping towards it carefully, I ran my hand over the damaged wood; the door was splintered between the two bullet holes. The Hyenas had done their damage. It wouldn't hold. I wasn't safe in here.

The wood shattered in front of my hand. A face full of teeth snapped in through the gap and closed around my arm. It missed the flesh and caught my jacket. I struggled to shake free while its head whipped back and forth in a frenzy, tugging me. I couldn't break its hold; the rifle in my left hand was not loaded but I tried as best I could to jab the hyena in the eyes with the barrel. It was unwieldy in my left and I missed several times before finally connecting with its nose. The creature relented briefly and I snatched my arm back from its teeth. The others had returned, their laughing magnified against the music of a door breaking, panel by panel. It's a tune. If you can imagine your chest exploding in your ears, you've got to be sure you're dead for that, you've got to be dying. You've got to be alone, nothing to save you. Then when you accept it, when you accept that, then, there is music. It's in every single

sound, and, in the frenzy of anything, there are choirs. I wanted to sing with them – I wasn't ready to go.

I pulled the bolt back and fired a round at the head sticking through. I hit the ear, but they kept coming. I needed a way out. I couldn't turn my back on the door so the cabinets at the windows were out of the question. The ceiling looked weak; it was panelled like most offices, but could the metal frames in between hold my weight? I jumped onto a bookshelf near the door and smashed a panel back into the roof, threw my backpack up and began hauling myself into the crawl space. I could hear the door, crashed through, and the scramble of claws on wood as they bolted over the desk. My foot grew heavier as I hauled myself up; my boot was trapped in the teeth of the hyena with the bleeding ear. I struggled while it jerked its head back and forth trying to bring me down. The boot was gone and I disappeared up into the crawl space.

I could barely see them below, but by their laughter I could tell they circled the hole in the ceiling and I could hear them leaping up at me. The rifles lay on the ground below along with all the ammunition. The only thing up here was the pistol in my backpack. I felt around for it, careful not to touch the trigger. Whether the safety was on or not was anyone's guess. From the bag I pointed it down through the hole. The safety was off. I listened for the target. It was almost completely black below. There were only glimpses of shadows and movements which could've been tricks of the night or the hyenas – *expect the worst*. I waited for the laughter: it came in spikes and waves. Never constant. They were waiting for the punch line of each other's jokes and then shrieked in unison at their amusement.

The muzzle flash lit up the room below for just a second, the image stained in my mind far longer. The light slowly fading from eyes, I soaked up the photograph painted in the floor below. The picture frozen clearly; of rows of slimy teeth raised up to the roof, followed by black orbs of eyes that glowed red as the bullet sounded out of the chamber. I didn't hear a whimper. I fired again, moving the pistol in my hands, tracing the outlines of the image that still clung to the insides of my head. Six shots. At least one was a hit. I heard a whining and yelping followed by feeble scrambling against the desk pressed up to the door. It had either died or had gotten out. There was no way of being sure. The laughter paused and the room below went quiet. I breathed slowly, waiting for the first signs of movement.

It wasn't long before I heard that sound of scratching on metal and the reverberation of the ceiling panels beside me. One of them must have jumped up on the filing cabinets. The panels were shaking. *Surely it can't get up here?* I fired a shot in the direction of the shaking panel. A snout illuminated briefly through a panel forced to the side. *Could it pull itself up?* I needed light, but my torch was on the ground below. I stood up, shaking as my feet pressed gently over the panels, seeking the steel reinforcing between them. I fired two shots into the roof above me. The sound of shattering ceramic greeted my ears. One of the tiles had broken completely; the other had just broken half-way. There couldn't be more than eight or nine bullets left in the gun. Once these were gone, I'd have nothing.

The half-light from the moon shone through the cracks in the roof above. There was enough light to see the overturned panel, the paws and muzzle of a hyena scrambling up. I couldn't miss again; I had to finish this now or be dog food in a few minutes. I crept closer to the upturned panel. Our eyes met, the hyena paused for several seconds. We stared into one another, apologising for what had come and what was to come. We spoke some inane language – you never forget a face as close as that. It frantically tried to haul itself up, but kept slipping back. This one was determined; it wasn't giving up. I was standing right over the panel now, watching the hyena's face below. It stood on the filing cabinet, staring up at me. Its mouth twisted into a snarl of sad defiance; it knew more than I did how this story ended. It just stood there begging me – waiting for its medicine.

With one final monumental leap, it shot through the panel and knocked me backwards. I fired a few awkward shots in the dark, but slipped and back-pedalled. My feet crashed through panels as I fell. The floor disintegrated before me and I plummeted down, slamming onto a desk below.

I waited for the inevitable bite; the gun pointed at every inch of the darkness in front of me. Nothing came. My eyes adjusted to the light through the curtains and I knew this was a different room; the door ahead looked closed. There was still the chance that I was being hunted from above, below, everywhere. I climbed out the window, suspended by piping.

The rest of the night was spent huddled on the air-conditioning bracket outside the window, wrapped in curtains. The laughter still came in waves. There were three or four of them

circling me below. I was safe if the bracket held - it did. There were more in the room behind me, but even if they managed to smash through the glass I was out of reach.

It went this way until dawn. Their laughter grew stale and tired, they made sounds like barking – or maybe I imagined that. The night creaked its cold into my joints and stretched and dragged and stretched. The things below me exhausted themselves, they circled like pilgrims – and I their rattling, shaking god. They'd eat me, it was their way. Once the sun had slid over the hills, they left like vampires and took their jokes with them. I waited until I was sure they were gone, climbed in through the window and, pistol ready, moved through the room. I checked the ceiling panels; they smelled of blood. One of them stained crimson from above. Nothing that has bled like that is still living; I didn't bother looking. The door to this room had also been broken through and there were piles of shit everywhere. I moved to the room with my guns. There was no body on the desk or next to it as I suspected. I climbed over and moved around the room collecting the bullets scattered by the hyenas. One of the rifles had been destroyed – a bullet hole above the trigger from last night's blind fire.

I thought about heading down into the safe again to get another, but there was something moving down there: a victim of the frenzy. It wasn't laughing anymore. Without its friends there were no jokes and its audience of one was a tough crowd with a weapon drawn. Its claws clacked about on the concrete of the safe floor. It kept itself far from the light of the hole above. I felt bad for it.

I filled up my bottles at the rain tanks and searched the work-shed for some batteries and a bigger torch. There were no sleeping bags in sight so I cut up the curtains and shoved them into a hiking bag I found at reception. I tied both my bags and the rifle to the bike. After a few failures I finally managed to get it just so that I could pedal without knocking them with my feet. I had to use more rope than I'd expected and a braai grid from one of the patios at the lodges. I kept thinking of the hyena, that it would starve to death like those men down there, but without the luxury of rather choosing a bullet to the head. It was weak to think like that, weak to think that way about a creature that wouldn't give a second thought to killing me. My head was spinning with slideshows of malnourished dogs – this was no dog, damn it!

I found myself in the lobby as I readied my bike to go. That thing in the safe was scratching at the door, not energetically or frantically, but feebly – timidly. It's a trick, you moron. Just let it alone. I was stubborn against my better judgment and moved over to the door.

The patch where the steel had been welded across the lock was no larger than my fist. I turned on the blowtorch gas and reached into my pocket for a lighter; the lighter that would've been useful last night had I been thinking straight. I pointed the flaming nozzle at the black chunk and watched it turn red and from red to a glowing angry colour that perhaps some artist has a name for, but for me was just a dangerous red. The chunk that had been black fell away and the crowbar fit through the gap between it and the frame. I applied some force and felt the door shift open an inch. I backed off a little – you idiot! I dropped the blowtorch, picking up the crowbar in one hand and the pistol in the other. I thought about waiting, about coaxing it out and retrieving another gun inside, it wasn't worth the risk. These things meant business and I wouldn't survive another night here, even with a gun. I needed to be far away.

I'd left Addo two days ago, but those hyenas had not left me. I heard them at night – in my sleep or in dreams, I couldn't tell. I'd caught glimpses of one limping in long shadows. The farmhouses I had taken shelter in at night had been secure, but still I could not sleep for the fear.

Today there was a clear morning. There were only phantoms of clouds coming and going, made faster it seemed by my pedalling. The air that passed me was dry. It kept me awake; it kept my throat begging. I spotted the first smoke I'd seen in a while, that day, the first evidence of a fire and of another person. It was just outside of a place called Cookhouse. The spindly plume was strung up into the blue above, almost invisible, almost too thin, but there sure enough. I wasn't sure how to treat this discovery. I met it with suspicion, and still pedalled closer to the town.

There was a petrol station at the intersection leading off from the highway and I moved behind it. Still no sound or movement; I was hundreds of metres away, but in all this calmness the sound of talking would carry. The windows of the station's convenience store had been shattered and the shelves were bare. The remains of a cow or donkey lay between the pumps, burned away, but not eaten. There endured a quietness in the scene at the petrol station, not even the breeze threatened to move the dust and dirt around the carcass. Pictures flashed across my eyes, a place like this, packed with travellers, cars in line at the pumps and a man on a donkey cart offloading his trinkets to sell to the tourists.

The busyness of yesterday eroded, crumbling faster and faster as all around me were the carcasses of animals. Long gone and roasted in the sun, in piles and mounds behind the station. The ground black around them, charred and salted – I wondered why the animals, there was no sense in it? Above me in a tree a single bird chirped the answer to my question and sped off as quickly as it had spoken. Stones arranged in circles around the piles, were dyed a white that had faded in the smoke. A fire hardened carving stood at the centre of it all, an effigy so warn and black from the flames, it gave the look of several things not human. Still the smoke rose above the treeline somewhere ahead. If you listen, you'll hear the ritual whispering through those trees.

I left my bike under a bush and grabbed the rifle. It felt heavier now. Maybe this was how it felt when you knew you might have to use it? The sweat was of all of me. I was thick with nerves and the grit of fear. I inched closer. With every step, I'd forgotten that I didn't remember who I was.

The gun and I became one; a clumsy whole that shook each half of the other in a slow dance leading somewhere outside of consciousness. The houses were shedding skin as I drew us towards the smoke. Their glass had been beaten in like all the others and some of the roofs had caved in or had been shelled – the end result the same. The more of these houses that I passed, the worse the condition got and, one by one, the ruins of them faded into heaps smothered in the ground. The gun and I danced, in the trance of whispers of rituals in those trees.

There were people gathered ahead, maybe fifteen or twenty, some children. Most of them looked young. Growing old was a challenge now. I watched them burning their houses. That smoke separated them from those pieces of themselves they'd forgotten they would pick up once the flames had died. I won't forget that sound, a chorus of wailing that went on for too long. No one spoke. No one bothered to break the tone and then they were gone. Lost to the night, I didn't even see them leave. It could've happened there, some final prayer to whoever it was, to make this all end. I don't think they got the answers they wanted.

I must have fallen asleep; the weeping had stopped and left silence in the ashes of that place. I thought I smelled something like dying in the air and wondered if what they'd tried to burn out of their homes was the plague. They hadn't seen me and now they were gone. Again I was alone. There was peace in those moments away from the road with the crying of people I'd never met and would never speak to. The gun and I broke apart, separated and returned to the plain drudgery of individuality.

The quiet didn't last. It hovered around for a while and then fled with the sound of explosions and machine gun fire in the distance. I could see a flashing light gliding above the mountain and the tracer rounds ripping through the black of night like slivers of molten glass. If I were still a child I would have told you I'd seen a UFO, but I knew the sound that it made. I'd seen

too many videos to forget that sound and that flashing red light. It was a drone. It's funny what you remember and sometimes it isn't.

I moved myself into the ruins of a house and did my best to seal the door. The drone fire faded slowly and was gone. Behind it, was left a wall of flame on the top of the mountain that stretched out for hundreds of metres. It painted the town below with a weird orange that played on the roofs and roads and trees. I listened for the pop of sap in branches, but the fire was too far away. I fell asleep waiting for the sound that never came close.

The morning was as quiet as all those before. There were tinned peaches for breakfast; I would have food enough for only a few more days. The bike had been where I left it the night before as I was sure it would be. There were paw marks encircling it, I didn't notice them yesterday or they weren't there before. They tapered around it like a lasso or a halo. I pushed the thought from my mind and moved on.

The road was quiet and empty as always, but today the sun seemed angry at the night before and the sweat soaked through my jacket and jeans. There were rivers all along the highway and, as the sun seemed to slow directly above, I decided to rest.

As hot as the day was, the water froze on my fingers. It felt like cutting, the blade was transparent, the blood stopped, it didn't flow. My feet screamed at me as I forced them into the stream, my legs numbed, my entire body shaking. I was dirty. I could see the brown fade off my skin as the water flowed over me, freezing and clean. I shivered away the dirt of weeks or of months maybe, no way of knowing when now was and when then had been. My skin was covered with insect bites. I hadn't felt them. Whether they were from fleas or ticks or both, I couldn't tell you. I forced my neck and head below the surface. The water trickled but wasn't gentle; it felt like a car had rolled over my face. My cheeks throbbed as if they had been punched in and my eyelids ached. I kept myself under for a few seconds and slowly the pain melted into mild discomfort. There were parts of me I didn't remember; aside from the crucifix about my neck, there was a sign of a skull with a hammer and sickle across the forehead, tattooed on my chest. I ran my fingers over my back, there were scars all over. The memories of all these lay some way from me, perhaps in the same place my name was being kept.

I washed my clothes in the river. Their story was similar to mine: the water grew browner around them and trails of dirt stretched and vanished with the flow. I lay naked on a rock in the sun, the clothes and I drying slowly in the heat. Things felt calmer than they had been for months or years. The difference between those was blurry and insignificant in this brief fresh moment. Death and I spoke on the rock. I felt complete. Whatever comes can come, I am as whole as I can be and I am ready.

The road and I moved together, snaking through the massive valley and changing sky. There were farmlands everywhere. Here and there, broken houses leaked out over the fields. The lawns and barns emptied of hay bales, tractors and tools. Everything seemed to have been thrown out in front of them as if pleading: *take it, there's nothing left inside*. Maybe someone had taken pity or given mercy; the houses looked fine, un-burnt and undamaged.

I was getting tired again; my clothes were now dry and the sun stamped hard on my face and neck. There had been a sign a while back that said: *Cradock 22 km*. If I made it before nightfall I'd be too exhausted, so I pedalled past a few more farms that pleaded with me in the same manner as the others.

It wasn't long before there was one that whispered like a dream. A pond out front, a quartet of willows wept into it, full. A gravel road led past them, up to an old cottage, larger though – a villa, but with thatch, in the style of the settlers. The roof looked a bit beaten and some of the shutters were missing panels; it bore a strange welcome.

A rusting bakkie was parked up near the front steps. The lawns leading up to the building were not sown thick with debris and heirlooms from inside. They were overgrown like all the grass I had ever seen, but this grass seemed greener, a proverb that echoed around my head. There were cows or horses or something of that shape high above the house in the hills and fields that backed it. They worried me more than comforted. I set my bike down by the willows and gripped the rifle and started my ascent up the gravel towards the bakkie – towards the house.

The house was still and as I got closer the car seemed more and more to be rusted in that spot. The stone steps kept the secret of my boots. The door was unlocked. I leaned in with it, rifle pointing straight and the clocks ticked and hearts beat in my head. The wooden floors creaked

at my entry, they moaned as I moved down the hall and from room to room. The rooms of this place were swept, not dusty like the world. I passed photographs of a family: the father looked like a farmer, dressed in khaki shorts with a button up top. He wasn't smiling as much as his wife and children. He looked like he was somewhere else. I should leave, this place is too clean, somebody is living here, but I stayed. I pictured flames for photographs.

All the rooms were empty of owners, clean, but empty. I moved through them all, past the made up beds and the toys, past a rocking horse and a doll's house. When I turned to leave her room that is when I heard and felt it. The rifle in my hand grew colder and the little girl before me stopped in the hallway. She just stared at me.

Amy? Is that you?

The girl was quiet and unafraid; she looked just like the one from the apartment all those weeks or years ago. She waved me over. I moved towards her, relaxing my grip on the weapon. I'd never seen a dress so yellow.

Are you going to join us for supper? Daddy said we were having a guest.

The little girl raised her head to meet my gaze as I moved toward her. At the mention of a father I once again clenched at the gun. My eyes darted from room to room as I stood in the passage trying to get a glimpse of this man.

They're in the kitchen, you're late. We've already said grace and started.

Started what?

Supper, silly. Now you'll have to say your own grace.

I followed her into the kitchen. The table was set for an empty chair. The father was cutting through a steak on his plate and nodded to me and then directed his nod toward the open seat. His wife smiled a friendly greeting and the boys waved their forks, to their mother's dismay. I stared at all of them, confusion and fear plastered on my face like it had been pressed into mud. I didn't move, too busy watching them, studying them. Amy patted my seat.

They want you to sit here.

I put the gun down, resting it against the doorframe and moving to the table to take the seat. No one but the little girl spoke. The father chewed his steak and smiled and the boys were tiny imitations of him in every way. The mother stared at the gun. I watched her; she was neither nervous nor alarmed – inquisitive maybe, like she'd never seen such a thing.

Eat, silly, but you must also have vegetables.

I nodded confusedly and surveyed the family once again. They carried on like robots, repeating their chews and gazes. I reached my hand over the bowl of roast potatoes, pulling it towards me. It was colder than a bowl with hot things should be; it was freezing cold. My hand froze over it and I stared down at my numbing fingers. They watched me, none of them offering a word of sympathy or help. My hand levitated over the food like some statue. I couldn't break it free, I struggled against it, but it held and they didn't seem to care or notice. Amy watched me and giggled. I hated the touch of it in my ears, I despised it. The cold came with it, my entire body in a cast, unmoving, but still listening to the contented chewing. The blast shook my head and sent my ears ringing out like gongs and breaking china echoing in a tiny box. The gun had slid down the door frame and hit hard against the floor. The boys stopped chewing and the father put down his steak knife and just watched. The mother's lips were redder than I remembered. Her eyes painted themselves the same colour and her face followed after them. The droplets became a stream that poured out over the table like gravy. Her head slumped on her neck and for a few seconds she held that sleeping pose, peaceful, before toppling backwards in flail of crimson hair.

My hands were dusty and the family was gone. The gravy on the table was still there, stained deep into the wood, the gravy – the blood. My gun lay in the doorway waiting. There were three pairs of shoes dangling from three pairs of ankles above the table, the rope slung over a beam across the kitchen ceiling. There was no little girl in a yellow dress – there was no Amy. Sitting in his seat, what resembled the father before, was slouched over with hollows for eyes, and lips chewed back to reveal two pearly white rows. There was no gun on the table. Someone had been here, it was gone. Maybe they'd sat down and shared this meal before me. I moved out into the hall. There was dirt everywhere. The bunk bed in one of the

one rooms had collapsed. Beds that, before, were made, were now without blankets and sheets. I moved out onto the steps and sat down facing the rusted wrecks of more than just the one bakkie that had been there before. My head ached and pulsed; it beat like a second heart.

I saw it coming, but couldn't and didn't want to believe it. It walked slowly towards me, past the bike and the cars. It didn't growl or glare, just limping a little now and then. I kept the rifle pointed at it, but it just moaned and collapsed in front of me. It made noises like sleeping and it smelt of dry blood. I watched it dream like a child, but a child with teeth that could rip out my throat. Not for the first time today was I confused, not for the first time in a long time...

My hands reached out and stroked the coat of the sleeping hyena. If I tickled it, would it laugh or are those days over? I let it sleep and fetched my bike and wheeled it up the stairs past this thing I wasn't sure was real. I wasn't taking chances, so the night was spent in the attic. There was tinned spaghetti warmed in a pot from the kitchen for supper, a far cry from the feast at the table downstairs.

He was still there in the morning. The scavenger sat at the foot of the ladder, like a dog. I stared down into eyes that looked into mine like they knew me. I was caught in a waiting game with this thing.

After a few minutes it read my mind and backed away from the ladder far enough to calm me. I kept the rifle in between us as I packed pots into my bag. There were only six cans of food left, 3 days maybe? It kept its distance as I strapped the bike and pedalled down the gravel to the road below. It followed slowly, far slower than I could pedal. I watched it struggle behind me. It limped on every third or fourth step, but it didn't quit. I slowed my pace right down. I didn't understand why, but something far down inside poked at me. I rested the bag on the handlebars and walked it instead, until the hyena caught up. Still I kept a small distance between us.

I pretended we were speaking to one another. I asked it where it was from, but already knew the answer. That was a stupid question and I felt embarrassed. I carried on with my interview and the hyena laughed after a while. Whether that meant it was happy or if it was calling its friends, I didn't know, and the conversation stopped there. I climbed back on the bike and

pedalled a little faster. Constantly I shifted my gaze between the road, the hyena and the surrounding country. It seemed clear. There were no shadows moving along the tar or in the bushes. I was safe or as safe as I could feel with an 80kg hyena behind me. I slowed down again after a while and let it catch up. We picked up where we'd left off, asking about its family.

They kicked me out. They bit me over here and over here.

I pointed to scars on the hyena's back and shoulder and it moved its head up and down like a nod, but with a circular motion from right to left as well. I apologized for the family and slowed down until the hyena was right beside the bike. We walked like that for hours - the bike in between us. That's how we got to know one another or, how it got to know me. I told it that I'd call it Larry, after a friend whose face I couldn't picture and whose real name was as far away from my memory as my own was. I remembered there was someone like a Larry and that was enough. I found out later when it squatted to piss that Larry, the hyena, was in fact a girl, but the name had stuck and that was that. Afternoon stretched on and after bouts of slow cycling and walking, a signpost told me Cradock was 4km away. Larry moved faster the more we spoke and it wasn't long before I could see the outskirts of the town.

There were cages here, like in Port Elizabeth, at the entrance to town on an open field. The bricked up sign that had said: *Welcome to Cradock* had the same red flag painted over it, but the letters beneath it still shaped their way through. This place seemed poor to me. The houses were run down, more run down than any I had seen, they were old, perhaps more than a hundred years old and, as the two of us walked down the main road, there was more and more of the same. It was a ghost town now. Across from the golf course, the houses looked bigger and richer with electric fences and spikes disguised as ivy running the length of tall concealing walls. A few of the gates had been rammed in or pulled down, but here and there were houses that looked untouched. It didn't feel right and Larry was treading cautiously some distance behind the bicycle.

She could speak, or I was just reading it in her eyes. "The road is not safe," was her mantra, but I was stubborn and she was an hyena.

I imagined rich people behind these walls, living as if there had never been a war, TVs on and sun tanning by the pool. I climbed a tree on the verge to get a look over. There was a pool but it had long ago dried up, a small scone of oozing brown mud caked across its bottom. There were no sun tanners and, from up here, the houses looked as if they had been looted much the

same as the others. There was no visible damage to the front gates and walls. That question lingered, but I dismissed it and found a house that would suit our purpose for the night. I didn't know what a hyena ate or even how to catch it, but I let it follow me through the garage and rooms in search of anything. There was a packet of rice in a cupboard in the garage that looked as though whoever ate it, might survive. The rice was old, very old. It would have to be boiled and left up to Larry's better judgment. Other than that the house was empty, insects and rats had gotten into everything in the kitchen and there was no canned food anywhere. I opened the fridge to discover the most disturbing thing I had seen in as long as I could remember; dark green and black ooze covered the walls and floor of the fridge, it seemed as though mould had grown to consume every speck of white. And the smell that issued out of it left me gripping my face. I didn't bother looking in the freezer; what might be there was far more than I could stomach.

I built a fire on the braai beside the pool and for a while it felt like things were normal, like this is how it was always done. Then onto the grid went the pot and once again that uneasy feeling returned. Larry was fine with rice; it took her some time to work up the nerve, but she ate what was put in front of her. I'd bring it with me, the rice. I was not hungry enough to risk it yet, but maybe once the cans ran out, maybe then and if Larry was still alive.

I spent the night in the bathroom, the door closed and a chest of drawers behind it. The mattress was a welcome comfort. In the top cupboards of the bedroom I found my first sleeping bag. The curtains had served us well, but we were moving on to greater things. I slept like a child that night. Larry was somewhere behind the door and I felt safe from biting teeth.

This became a sort of ritual between us. We worked up the courage to spend nights without doors between us. I asked her many questions and made up the answers I thought were fair. Some days I got the impression she wasn't happy with my assessment of the truth. She'd keep her eyes fixed on other things or she'd walk far ahead or far behind. Slowly I drew stick figures of her past that pleased her; I cannot say if she knew what they meant or which of the hyenas in the sand was her, but it made her happy to see those drawings.

We didn't catch sight or sound of another human being until we reached the Gariep Dam. We were tired and hungry. The last of our food and rice were gone and Larry had taken to catching whatever she could. I knew the time was coming and I'd have to learn to hunt. The problem was there just wasn't anything to hunt; I hadn't seen an animal bigger than a hare since the farm and I wasn't even sure if what I had seen on those hills was real. For now, I would be fine with water and whatever fruit I could forage. Soon we'd have to find meat. I wheeled my bike off the road and towards the great expanse of water before us. The surface was as still as our last week, bluer than I imagined possible in this new world. I undressed again like that afternoon not so forgotten as everything before it. Again, I had to peel the clothes from my skin, in places it felt as if I were removing my own flesh. It stung. The sun was harsh. Larry drank from the dam and slowly I walked into the water, that same slicing feeling, like being frozen up to the neck, begging to shatter. The numbness came quickly and after a few minutes was gone entirely.

I swam around, but was careful not to go too deep. I was scared of water I couldn't see the bottom of; there were always things in there, whether they were real or not. The water rippled around me, not away from me, but toward me. I traced the miniature waves from the shore to my chest; at first they were gentle, but slowly they began to grow higher. I rushed back to my clothes and to Larry. She paced wearily on at the water's edge, everything urgent. Her silent pacing shouted, "We must go!"

I could hear it, like thunder but not the kind I'd heard in the sky. It seemed distant, but the shaking earth told me different. I hurried to pull on my jacket and pants and wheeled the bike in a panic back to the road. Over the road, I headed into the thin bush. I pushed through in a frenzy. It was too thick to cycle and the noise was growing louder and closer. I could hear the creaking of metal and the rumbling drone of an engine – I hoped it was only an engine. I dropped the bike, grabbed my bag and rifle. We ran.

I didn't look back once; I just ran. The droning was clear now. It had all the tell-tale signatures of an engine. The creaking metallic sound that followed it was new to me. As we climbed the clank and clamour nested in our ears, raising hairs on our necks, like there were ghosts touching and chasing and tasting as we fled. We were as high up the mountain as we could get. I stopped, out of breath, between some rocks and crept closely to the edge. I could feel sirens bellowing through my ears, not sure if I'd heard them or if my head was screaming

at me to stop. Larry had followed me the whole way up and sat behind me, breathing heavily on my neck and bobbing her head in the direction of the road.

I took the rifle in my hands and aimed down the sight, not to fire, but to get a clearer view through the scope. I'd heard David speak of this thing, but to see it, it sent shivers through my body and the sirens rattling in my head now beat my brain: *Run, you bitch! Get the hell out of here!* I would've liked to obey the voices cursing me, but they blurred back into the siren and I was frozen. 30 metres of pig iron on tank tracks and as tall as telephone poles, it rattled, creaked and roared. It took up both lanes and moved as slow as you'd imagine a thing that size should move. It had three cannons on the roof and turrets along the sides; it was a mammoth of a machine. The rust in the iron made it look like it was covered in dried blood – indeed it could've been. The front grill was bent into a forked plough, the teeth of which were at least the size of my torso. You don't forget something like this.

The gun shook in my hands. My vision through the sight grew as blurry as the voices screaming at me to run. The mammoth wasn't alone. Two drones hovered above it on either side – silent predators. They flashed red and orange, keeping pace with their master. A large cage on wheels trailed the brown behemoth. From what I could see, there were people huddled behind the bars. I steadied my grip on the gun, desperately trying to make out the faces. I could try count them, but they were beyond recognising, they blended in with the dirt of clothes and the rusty shard like bars. I remembered David, I hoped he hadn't been rounded up. They looked for all the world to be rotting away behind the poles as brown as the vehicle they trailed.

With strained eyes, and monumental effort, the faces began to emerge from the blur. The thirty odd souls in the cage sat motionless, either resigned to their fate or beaten into submission by the sun. I watched from the mountain, wanting to help, but overcome. The beast ground to a halt in an otherworldly screech of metal on metal. The engine coughed and droned into a quiet purr, stopping at edge of the dam. A group of soldiers exited the mammoth and moved over at a snail's pace to open the cage. They pointed their guns at the prisoners – the slaves. One of them motioned for the group to move to the water. I followed them in the rifle sight. They moved painfully slowly, by the cold design of a master who grows fat while his servants shrivel.

An elderly man was beaten with the butt of a gun and shoved forwards. This only slowed him further. A soldier then kicked him twice and dragged him by the hair towards the water. The other men with guns corralled the slaves at the water's edge, pointing their weapons at them, instructing them, I assumed; to drink. I'd never seen people drink with such desperation. In the frenzy of shovelling hands and submerging of faces a couple moved further into the water. The two of them held hands as they kept drifting deeper and further from land. I watched them with curiosity. The distance between them and the rest was now unmistakable, they'd made up their minds, their exit chosen and their decision sealed between fingers clutched so tightly in that embrace. The soldiers grew agitated, two of them rushed through the crowd at the edge and towards the couple. I watched as the couple disappeared beneath the water and the guns started to fire. It was hard to say which happened first.

The muzzle flashes slowed and reversed, almost frozen. The sirens in my head screeched back, catching up with the shots below that gradually broke the slow motion trance. There was a thunderous crack, like lightning in my ears. It joined the flashes, sirens and gunshots. The smoke rose from the barrel of my rifle and on the other end of the sight someone dropped their gun and collapsed into the water. I watched it turn red as he leaked out into the dam. The shots below ended as abruptly as the sirens in my head: *Run, punk! Get out of here!* I realised what I had done as things around me froze again. Larry cocked her head to the side and stared blankly into my eyes as if asking: *what comes next?*

I turned my gaze back down the sight. Some of the prisoners had bolted; others lay down next to the water. The soldiers didn't know what to do in the confusion, most took cover behind the mammoth. Some ran in circles around the prisoners trying to keep them from running, trying to keep themselves from getting shot. The drones broke away from the mammoth, climbing to better vantage. I smelt the end. The air came alive with the stench of diesel and the mammoth came to, awoken in a cacophony of creaks and roars. *You're screwed now!* My heart pounded against my chest. Like a giant taking a bat to it, the reverberations thundered through my entire body.

When the first bullet hit the rocks behind where I had lain, I was gone. The sirens, the gunshots, the drones, the mammoth, they all fought for dominance. They peeled off the rocks to my left as I ran – the drones, the mammoth, the soldiers – it made no difference who the

bullets belonged to, the rocks stung my face all the same. I was bleeding – my left side peppered by splinters of the mountain – but I ran. Zoning out onto the fringes of auto-pilot, where the world turns quiet and it's just you, your demons and the God you place between them. I caught glimpses of consciousness as my legs seemed to glide over the ground rather than struggle against it.

The taste of blood; my breath swallowed in the smell of burning lungs. I could feel the rocks on my body, beating me, cutting, sheared off like wool in piles around me. There was no noise, no sound above a heartbeat and that was felt more than heard. I ran for cover. There was nothing to stop them, nowhere to hide. Up ahead was a blackness, a dark eye pulled into the rocks, I ran for it.

The drones were firing; they were the only ones that could see me now, in between these rocks. I ran into darkness. The light behind me became a needle and the machine gun fire died with it. I could make out shapes in front of me in the dark, but the blood and sweat in my eyes kept me guessing. I dropped to a kneel, a tug of war for oxygen left me blind.

When I could breathe again I wiped it all away; the sweat, the blood. Larry was a statue standing and staring into the faces of three white goats. They stood unconcerned by our presence. Their heads bobbed inquisitively as they moved around the two of us. Larry and I were panting. She seemed exhausted but indifferent to the circling goats. The sound of propellers grew closer and I was sure the drones were scanning for a way in. A man stepped in between the goats. He was old. He sported a beard that begged reverence and wore a dirty robe, tattered, and patched in places with leather and plastic. I followed the tip of the crook in his hands out towards me and focused on where his face should've been. The rest of him appeared as my eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Follow me now, or you will die here.

His accent was thick, but he spoke with authority. I followed the man with the goats and the beard like Moses. I followed as if summoned, mindless and without questions. That name came into my head from a shred of a memory I couldn't quite hold. The tunnel went deeper, but not darker; light from holes above us pierced inward and lit our path. The propeller sounds grew softer and softer and the rumbling mammoth passed out of earshot. I held my

hand to the side of my face, the blood still flowing thick as we followed him. I could feel the gashes with my palm. The pain drifted someway off; the adrenaline pumping through my veins keeping it in check.

It wasn't long before the holes in the rocks above grew bigger and bigger until there was only sky. A groove through the mountain still flanked us and stretched ahead like a winding snake. I followed in silence, not knowing what to say or how to say it. This was his world – he should be first to speak and so I waited. The goats bleated – or whatever it is that goats do – and took turns to pass back to examine us before returning to Moses.

After a long time, an hour or so, we emerged from the gorge and out onto the plateau. We must have been going in circles because from up here I could see the dam and the spot where I had swum and where those prisoners had been. The earth up here looked barren, outside of a scattering of trees every few hundred metres. I looked for signs of life. There were few, but they were there. A scattering of corn stalks sporadically spaced and a chicken or two moving between trees and bushes.

You are safe now, they have gone.

Moses turned to face me with a stoic gaze that generated neither warmth nor hostility.

Thank you.

I mumbled after some effort. The words replayed themselves in my head and felt insincere; I knew nothing of this man, but after following him for over an hour it felt as though that was enough.

There is no need for thanks. I saw you would do the same for those at the dam as I have done for you.

His goats approached me with renewed suspicion, butting their heads against me playfully, affirming this reality. Larry moved over and sat beside the old man. He was neither afraid of her nor dismayed by her proximity to his goats. I was further confused and motioned to ask, but was cut short.

You are hungry, yes?

I nodded and he waved for us to follow. His shack was propped between some rocks and a clump of large trees. It was mostly wooden and covered by grass and branches, camouflaging it beneath the trees. I asked about the stalks of wheat and corn that grew in odd patches around the house, never together, always separated – he didn't answer. There were other plants here and there, some growing under the shade of an overhang, others beneath a bush. I suspected he knew that up there in the space above us, someone could be and was watching, taking photos and triggering alarms. Nothing here looked organised or arranged and I guess that was the key.

I had to duck to enter the shack. It wasn't as large as it looked from the outside. There was an animal skin on some dried grass in one corner and some rocks arranged around a fireplace in the other. The space in between was occupied by goats, and beside the door was a second smaller makeshift cot, barely big enough for an adult. Moses smiled and stretched out his arms.

This is me or what is left of me anyway.

I was again at a loss for words.

It seems cosy.

I thought about asking his name, but I knew he'd ask mine and after all what was a name now anyway?

And these goats?

I blurted the question out – surprising myself.

What about them?

I didn't know how to phrase what I was thinking, I mumbled under my breath and then let it out.

They're alive...

Yes?

I haven't seen a farm animal for... I guess a long time.

There aren't many left, not south of the wall – not here.

How've you kept them alive?

I'd say they've kept me alive more than anything.

I gave him a puzzled look and he pointed to Larry.

Your dog; how long have you known it?

Weeks I think?

You think? You see that's the problem. You and I don't know when this is and when that was. These animals do – they keep track of the time that disappears into the fog of the gas. They keep track of us.

I understood what he was saying and didn't all at the same time. My head began to ache – I changed the subject.

How long have you been here?

Ever since the gas, I guess.

You can't ever be certain how to answer that question.

He looked at me as if he knew we were in the same boat, the same boat without oars or a flag or sails. A long silence followed those words; the kind shared by people who have lived through the same storms, but lack the phrases to free themselves.

I have stew for us tonight. You look hungrier than that thing.

He pointed to Larry and I smiled and bowed my head slightly, the adrenaline had died and exhaustion had caught up with me.

You're not afraid of it?

Why? Should I be?

I don't know. I guess I was.

And now you're not. Was I afraid of you?

No.

Exactly. I should have been. If I were still a sensible man, I would've been. If we were both sensible men; we would've never done what we did today.

Those words irritated me. They went back and forth around the truth of what was trying to make its way out of his mouth, but couldn't. I reached into my pack to pull out the 5litre bottle of water I kept in there. My bag was so soaking, at least one bullet had torn a hole through the bag and bottle. There was still some liquid left, but not much. I drank quickly and turned to Moses.

Do you have any water?

He nodded and pointed out the door.

There is a clay jar outside with water, for you and the dog.

I exited the shack after having to shove Larry out of the doorway. She sat obstinately staring at the man inside. I eyed him, but his attention was with his goats. They'd curled up around him like cats trying their very best to purr. I poured water into the stone slab below the jar for 'the dog' and tilted the jar at an angle for myself. It was a massive affair – perhaps 20 litres or more. There were several smaller ones around it, the kind you could carry.

We drank our fill and walked towards the edge. I sat with my legs dangling and surveyed the dam below. Its waters were gold in the sun, gold or silver, aspects of both that dazzled my eyes.

I drifted again, walking on water, a pavement beneath giving my miracle away. The air was choked, my throat thick with phlegm. Smoke bellowed from buildings around me, rubble in streets and people vanishing and reappearing, black and white, but all red. Pieces of them scattered around the charcoaled wrecks of cars. The screams so constant they solidified into silence, a silence that choked the air. I coughed in and out.

Every now and then it came again – a blast that shook the screams' hold loose and awed a second or two of nothing. And then the familiar crumbling and shatter of glass and concrete. Water gushed from a hole in the pavement. I walked on it, through it. I recognised the reflection in puddles and shards of glass. I shouted *Amy*; I shouted it several times. My eyes darted from building to body and from body to building. Someway ahead, mirrored in water, the form of a girl huddled and crying. She shared her soul with the puddle and was gone. I turned my eyes and kept calling. I moved past the quivering ruins of people begging for help. The Fire consumed a building, consumed everything; a pillar to the sky from the ground up. It cast a golden glow into the water. My footsteps turned it silver, turned it gold.

Larry laughed in my ear and pawed at my shoulder. My gaze broke its fix on the dam below. In this marriage of dizziness and confusion, I put my arm around the hyena, forgetting fear for a moment. The rifle raised – the stock solid against my chest; I searched the sight below. There was a patch of crimson on the yellow dirt at the water's edge. A body bobbed in the shallows and another lay some way off to the right, beside a bush, stuck as if groping for shade even in death. I saw no other movement. I hated to think it, but I'd killed them as much as I'd tried to save them. They were dead as a result of my shot; I'd panicked them in my own panic and those that ran, I assume they were dead too or perhaps they had a Moses with goats just for them?

We can't stay here long.

No sound, just a look in her eyes that told far more than those five words. I must listen. I sat out there until the sun started to set. I sat with Larry and stroked her head and tried to drift away to another memory. Her ears flicked as I moved my fingers passed them. The stew was as good as he'd promised; there were eggs too and goats milk. He gave me some for Larry and told me his story or what he could recall. Moses, like David, knew as

much as that they were victims of the gas. They knew as little as that they had a life before it which was gone and lost in memories filed so far away, there was no retrieving them. Moses started his story at a farm ten kilometres away.

I remember waking up in a stable, covered in straw with a taste like chalk in my mouth. Maybe more bitter, maybe nothing like chalk, or just the closest thing. My mouth was dry and I was thin and there was no name I could remember. There were things, deep rooted things, mechanical things I knew; the automatic and simple, but the picture was so broken I couldn't even think about where to start. I don't think I ate for days at the beginning, there was just constant confusion and sickness, the vomiting, I'm sure you know?

I nodded at him and sipped my stew, trying to forget the word he'd just spoken, but agreeing with him all the same.

I must've been a farmer or something similar, because I knew to feed the animals and I did that until I ran out of feed. I let them out of their pens, and the chickens, I let them out of the runs and cages. A lot of them had died, maybe from that gas, maybe something else, but I tell you that farm came alive with a thousand of them loose. It wasn't long before some men came. One of them had a gun and the others carried axes and pangas. They beat me and took what they could. They took horses as well and they left over the mountains. After that I grew afraid. I stopped lighting fires at night. I dug a hole under the barn and slept in there. Weeks went by and the animals drifted a wandered, some stayed, but many left. It wasn't long before I heard it – that sound you heard today. Like sharp metal scratching itself, but angrier and with that thunder. I caught glimpses of it from far and I hid. It stopped at the farm; the prisoners were thrown into the barn and the soldiers feasted on the animals. I think they shot most of them out of boredom. When they'd gone, I went back to the barn with my goats. They'd left the carcasses of some of the animals to rot in the hay and I knew even if I'd managed to clear them out, I could never live here with the stink of death soaked so into it. I was not alone; there was body between the carcasses, not as dead as they were, but close. It was a woman; she was sick and barely breathing. She told me her name was Tumi. She was the first and only person I'd met in all this time since the gas that knew a name that had been given to them by parents and not

themselves. She told me of the war and the gas and the Red Caravan. She told me about the plague and about the mines.

The old man paused and grew quiet. He shivered a little. It wasn't cold and I could tell he was struggling to keep from crying. I sipped my stew, trying to keep as quiet as I could, trying not to disturb him. After a few minutes he spoke again, but so slowly I could feel the respect in each word. He spoke as if treading through a minefield.

Tumi lived a while after that, months I think. One day she was gone. I searched for her. For a long time I searched for her... I still search for her. You can't let them catch you boy, you can't. All I know is where they take you, you won't come back from. You and I are blessed and cursed, I don't know which is more, but the line between them is where we are safest. That line is out here; in mountains, forests, deserts. In places they've given up searching or they never cared about. I know that you're looking for something, I can read it in your eyes, but it isn't there, it's gone.

He lowered his eyes and his gaze never met mine again. In the morning, he gave me food and milk and a clay jar with water and pointed me to the gorge. I said my goodbyes to Moses and his goats and began my search for the bicycle I had abandoned the afternoon before. When I eventually found it, I had not been the only one. It had been mangled, the wheels bent out of shape and the sleeping bag shot full of holes. I stood over it for a while and in the silence resigned my feet to the walk.

This journey had just become a lot longer. Over at the edge of the dam, I searched around the shell casings and blood and bodies for signs of life. The water was as still as the day. I shouted half-heartedly, calling out to anyone who might have escaped. This I did twice; too little conviction for a third. I was drained, tired even after a full night's sleep, even after food.

Larry drank, I filled the clay jar and we walked. By midday, my feet ached and my ankles felt swollen. The rifle and the backpack were heavy burdens. I slowed my pace. The next place I found to rest, I would spend the night. We were too exhausted to go any further; we'd walked maybe twenty kilometres since morning and it had taken a toll. Out here, there were farm workers houses up not far ahead. I stopped there and fell down on the cold concrete floor and slept.

I was shivering when I woke up, my face numb against the floor and a harsh wind howling outside. It came in through the broken door and shattered windows turning the house into a mini tornado of dust and debris. I spat sand out of my mouth and walked through the door. It must have been late afternoon. The clouds had obscured the sun, but it was still light enough to see.

Up the hill, there was a farm house, not like the last one; this one was a ruin. The left side of the house had fallen away. In the yard there was a skeleton of a tractor jutting out the side of a beaten up shed. Dried canvases of blurred beige and brown rotted in their frames on the porch and on the lawn. A wheel barrow filled with bleached bones rusted beside the front door. I could hear nothing but the wind and my teeth. They ached.

I entered to find the house as I expected; looted and weather-beaten. There was a single window inside that wasn't broken. I rested my palm against the glass half-expecting it to disappear. We searched for a way into the roof and I eventually found a hatch and shifted a table beneath it. It stood square in the passage blocking most of the wind. I climbed up and through the hatch.

It wasn't dark in the roof. The far half was exposed and the wind flooded in. All the same it wasn't empty; there were boxes of various junk, photo albums and toys. I scraped around worming my way between them. I heard a bell, the soft jingle of a Christmas tree ornament conjured up an image of hands, tiny hands on wrapping paper, they tore through it, but gently. I searched for the face that belonged to those hands. There was nothing. Exhausted, I forced the boxes together into a crude wind shield, curled up behind it and dreamt.

The morning found me cold and hungry. The wind outside had stopped and there was light at the end of the roof again. I crawled to the collapse and watched the sun crest the mountains. Downstairs, Larry was laughing, agitated or excited, I studied her through the hatch. Blood covered the floor beneath her, it pooled up around the table. She painted red paw prints against the wall and around the puddle. I grabbed the rifle and jumped through the hatch, my boots slipping as I hit the puddle. I struggled to catch balance, my right hand square in the wet of it.

I held my hand up. The blood was as thick as oil, congealing and dripping in thick strings. My hand clenched into a fist. I smeared my bloody thumb across the knuckles and painted the wall with my palm.

Larry was parading triumphantly around the body of a small buck she had dragged into the passage. I stared at the thing in front of me, trying to imagine how that much blood came from something the size of a goat.

We're leaky creatures. A single puncture and we'll drain.

She smiled like a demon with red teeth, looking longer than all the days before. Her excitement was childlike; her agitation at my slow assessment of the thing was obvious. Skinning an animal is no adventure; cutting flesh from muscle drove needles through my head and stomach. My hands were stained with the sin of it. I proceeded with the grim task. Next I removed the head at the neck, it took a long time. Cutting with that old kitchen knife was a punishment. I was sorry. I pretended it was cheese or bread, but the crunch of bone and the damp feeling of sinew kept me checked.

When I was done I gave it to Larry, she was not waiting for it to be cooked. Breakfast was venison on spit. The meat was the greatest thing I'd ever tasted, I was sure of this much. The fire warmed the floor of the once upon a time kitchen. I cut chunks of meat off the rest of the body and bundled them together in packets and bits of plastic. Raw, I was certain it could last for a few days at most, if cooked again. Whether or not I was right, the taste was worth the gamble. I washed at the pond. I waited for Larry to join me, her sick maroon fur begged for water. Our standoff lasted more than a while, eventually she gave herself to the water. I washed the stink of the kill away. My hands were covered in the thinnest blood, no longer red, but orange in the water. Larry was smiling, her demonic fangs had retired into a paper white.

I kept off the road. Without a bike, there was no reason to risk the Red Caravan or whatever else might be waiting. We followed it from a distance, our guide. When we arrived at the Orange River, the plan changed. It was in full flow and to risk the rifle wasn't an option. We'd have to use the bridge. I scouted the area with the scope, waiting patiently for the faintest hint of movement. After twenty minutes, I was satisfied we were alone. We crossed quickly. In the middle of the bridge tied up against the arches was a corpse in an orange raincoat. A banner spray painted above him said something indecipherable. I didn't stop to get clarity, the body was message enough.

My boots carved a path through the dusty soil, kicking up a cloud in Larry's face. She broke her trailing and shifted pace to walk alongside me. We spoke at length; she returned my questions, answered, and, with eyes fixed on nothing but the ground ahead, we went. That was how things went: we followed the road and we hunted for food. We spent our nights, orphans, in abandoned buildings. A week had passed since we left Moses on his mountain. A week had passed since we'd seen another person. I recognised something in her, some vague *déjà vu*. Larry felt it too, at least that was the message plastered across her face. There was something like a cloud hanging over us, the more I asked her about where she came from, the bigger it grew. She told me of storms and lightning and thunder and I listened, I listened and I forgot.

It was somewhere near Bloemfontein, between the signs signalling *not that far* and *pretty close*. That is where we caught sight of the smoke. The fields we walked in were already far from the road. The terrain turned from uncomfortable to inhospitable as we approached the rise. Massive gorges of eroded soil led to a wall of sharp rocks and brittle ground, the wall stretched on for as far as I could see on both sides. Larry wouldn't be able to climb and neither would I. We followed the wall until it broke: a brief respite of bush and grass. We crawled over the last stretches and stared off at the pluming smoke.

What I saw left me struggling to understand. Two elephants stood facing one another, their tired and depressed expressions mirrored on one another. The larger of the two had something like a saddle hanging at a confused angle on its back. In between them, the shape

of a person, dressed in what must once have been brightly coloured clothes, but which were now dirty and muted. A fuzzy mop of lime green hair topped off this oddity whose back was towards me. I lifted my rifle sight for a closer look.

This crazy looking person wasn't alone. Sitting some way off at the source of the smoke were three more, similarly dressed. Their clothes even dirtier, all bore the same ridiculous resemblance. Their faces were painted in a clayish red. It snuck in quietly: the picture of an elephant at the centre of a ring, standing on its hind legs while things dressed like these ran around smiling madly. In these flashes I felt happy; I was a child. I knew my mother must be sitting there beside me, but my neck wouldn't move. I was given what I was given and that is all I saw. It's funny what you remember.

Clowns, that's them, that's what they are. A fifth one emerged from beneath an awning near the fire. This one moved very slowly and with the marks of age. There was a dog too. It couldn't have smelt us yet. It trailed the old clown as if on a string.

We lay there watching them for fifteen minutes, uncertain how to approach. Was that even a good idea? Only one of them carried a weapon; at least one I could see anyway. It was a banged up shotgun that looked as though it may fall to pieces if fired. They sat around the fire; talking or not talking. I couldn't hear from this distance. They seemed placid, but their outfits rendered them in an insane light.

I decided to stand and shout to them, instead of sneaking up closer and risk alarming the dog. When they heard me, their reactions were at odds with one another. Two of them bolted and hid behind the elephants. The elderly one froze and watched me draw closer. One sat indifferently at the fire and the last of them – the one with the shotgun – he held it up limply, adopting a pose I assumed was meant to be threatening. I was far more concerned about the two behind the elephant. I kept my gun gripped firmly in my hands but aimed at the ground. I called out to them as I approached.

Relax, I'm not going to shoot. Please put that gun down.

The dog had started to growl and elephants grew wary at the sight of the hyena. There was no reply from the clowns. I held my ground; I was out of range and we waited and watched each other. The pair behind the elephants had emerged carrying weapons. They kept them lowered

and moved to stand on either side of the aged clown, still frozen like a mime. I started to feel I'd made a mistake.

They stared blankly at me, their faces red and unmoving. We were stuck in a game of chicken with the kind of people you know have built their lives for this madness. I backed away slowly, inch by inch, rifle ready for a single move. I'd gotten close enough to cover; that must've worried them. They broke the silence.

So here we are friend, how'd you imagine this ended?

The clown that remained seated by the fire had to be the speaker. The others never moved their gaze and just stared straight ahead at me, into me. My hands were nervous with this new silence broken. I watched their guns for the sort of movement I should fear, but they were steadfast. I had nothing to say. The voice that issued the question sounded stern enough for me to forget the meaning of the word 'friend.'

I'm no danger to anyone. I mean no harm. I could've shot you from the hill if I'd wanted to.

The last few words were awkward as they left my mouth; I hadn't given them the send-off they needed.

Well, we can't just let you leave like this.

The voice was far away, but I could still hear it well enough. The hair on Larry's back raised, her shoulders arched. She too waited for the final straw.

What's your solution then?

Why don't you come down here and talk? We'll put away our guns.

I didn't answer. He was right to ask how I thought this would end. This was stupid from the get go. The fear of clowns is not irrational; it is as real as my sweat and the rifles in front of me. The dog stood his ground, no match for a hyena and it knew it. We backed away some

more. The clowns made no motions to follow. When we were almost at the crest behind us, when I heard it; the unmistakable sound of a bolt locking in a round. I turned around slowly, the rifle wasn't pointed directly at me, but the message it sent was all the same.

Larry was panicked, spinning around to face each of the adversaries in turns. I was done – they'd take everything. They'd kill me or worse. *Idiot!* My head throbbed and the siren bounced around inside it. I could feel the weight of my eyes in my skull as they pressed up against my brain. I was trapped like a bird flying above a sea of lava that would never end. It was hot, inside my head, inside my chest, the sun, their fire, all hot, too much! *You'll die today, you piece of shit. You knew that right?* The siren was pricking my brain with accusations and condemnations. I don't know who fired the first shot, but the warmth of it was all around us. The temperatures jumped and that's when the elephants grew tired of the games people played.

The clown behind me was down. I could see him clawing feebly at Larry's neck as she sank her teeth into his. The elephants had upset the pair with the rifles and only now had the man sitting beside the fire stood up. He raised a revolver in my direction and pulled the trigger. He was far off and so was his shot. I could hear him cursing at me loudly, in between the elephants as they trumpeted and stampeded away from the gunshots. The old clown sat down in the dirt as if rooted there. The rock was my home for the next few minutes. The clown with the shotgun chased after the elephants, trying to calm them. He eventually managed to stop them, hundreds of metres away from the camp. The pair with rifles was somewhere behind the awning and their leader stood at the fire with the dog growling by his side. It seemed as though he'd seen this going differently.

The clown behind me was finished. His face bloodied and destroyed from the neck up, the last of him flowed out into the rocky soil. Larry returned to my side. Her muzzle was a wet mix of dark brown and red. She laughed once and was quiet. I could take a shot at the leader and risk being taken down, by the others or I could high tail it over the hill. The man at the fire reached down and grabbed the dog by the neck. He dragged it back behind the awning, with the revolver pointed firmly in my direction. I could see none of them, aside from the one sitting, defeated. Whoever he or she was, they'd not uttered a sound the entire time. I needed to go; they could be flanking me and I was outnumbered.

My feet beat rock and ground as I passed the ruined body of the man behind me. I thought about his gun, but I'd surely be hit if I stopped for it. Two shots greeted my ears as I crested the hill. I felt the impact of the first and it sent me over the edge, floored and rolling. I could feel my back was soaked. The pain hadn't sunk in, but it would come. I waited and nothing. I reached behind my back to feel the space in between the bag and me. There was no blood on my hand, just water. The jar inside had taken the bullet. They'd seen it hit; they'd be coming and quickly. I broke out ahead as fast as I could go, adrenaline slid through my veins. I was coated. There were bushes some way off. If I could reach them, I could hide. More shots – they sounded timed and in tune. Their echoes met up with one another and that is when I fell.

I woke up in rain, under a bush that stared down at me with branches scratching my neck for a pulse. I was cold again and worse than wet. There were no bullet wounds, no cuts, only scars. I tested myself, hands scraping in and out of arm pits, back, knees, legs, neck and torso. I felt the slime of a week's sweat. My fingertips and nails now black with the filth. I was dirty and I was dying. It was a gentle death, it was peaceful, it comes in the ripples of drizzle on water and it moves through your core. I wasn't afraid.

My bag was still strapped to my back and my rifle on the ground in front of me. They hadn't found me, surely? Larry was gone. There was no sound other than the patter of raindrops on the dusty ground, dry branches and the occasional crack of thunder bursting with the lighting in the sky. The rifle at my side looked beaten and scratched, nothing like I remembered before. I felt lighter – hands to my face; that gaunt feeling of cheeks long deprived of food. How long had it been this time – years? Everything about me felt different, weathered, aged and beaten.

I sat up on my haunches and let my head spin, trying to catch reality where I left it. *The clowns!* The voice prompted me, poking my memories with pins. I stood up, clutching the firearm with angry hands. There was nothing but the rain, a mist and an ache somewhere deep inside. I checked the chamber – empty. I reached into my pack and scratched around for the ammo boxes. My hands clawed across a few loose rounds, nothing more. My throat parched, I caught water on my tongue and sat my empty bottle before the clouds as if praying for it to be filled. I sucked the moisture from my soaking jacket and listened to my stomach cursing me. Where was Larry? *You lost her!*

I climbed to the place from where I descended. There was no sight of a camp, no elephants, no clowns and no dog. They'd been gone so long the ground had forgotten them. There was no blood stained into the rocky soil where Larry had struck. The familiar sickening feeling of the day on the docks came back to me. I gathered the fragments of memories in a heap and spewed them out in front of me. The yellow trail down my beard was thin and fluid.

I could taste my own hunger on my chin, I could taste death.

The road below called to me and I followed. I shuffled with the gravel and tar. The mist had become a sheer wall on either side of me, it boxed me in from front and back. It was my own private universe. I shivered and marched. My mind went away to places far outside this box, coming back now and then like a dove. It whispered the way. I trusted the dove.

The farmhouse family at dinner kept playing back and forth in my head, the roast chicken and potatoes still steaming in front of me. I could taste them in the smell. My tongue tried to trick me, but my head knew otherwise. I wondered about David, Moses and Max, where were they now? Could I go back? I wanted to see them.

This time, that little hand in the rubble, I would pull the rocks away and bury her. I would do it this time. My mind returned to the misty box just as it cracked. Lightning spread thin veins around it and it opened. It took dozens of cracks and the thunder that followed, before I saw the bridge ahead.

I spent the night curled up under that bridge, shivering with visions. I ate the things that crawled on me; I ate all of them. In the dark, I didn't care what they were, only that they filled small gaps in the aches. When the light came, it hurt. It burned every inch of me, like I'd never seen the sun before. I covered my head and endured the heat on my clothes.

The road above the bridge had wreckage strewn across it: the remains of a wooden donkey cart, a wheel barrow, some poles and a collection of bodies. I hoisted myself up onto the bridge and eyed the mess. The bodies seemed a few days old. There were four or five. I couldn't be sure. They were badly mangled and spread across the tar like confetti. I caught no stench of rot, only the soft wet smell of rain. A leg from the knee down still in its shoe; lay in front of me. Dress shoes, like David's. I returned to my patch in the sun and waited to dry. I rolled out the contents of my pack to do the same.

There were a few bullets left for the rifle. They were damp and I hoped they'd still be fine. The pistol still had a box of rounds and the magazine looked full or close to it. I laid everything out on a rock. I thought of merchants at those Turkish bazaars; I felt like one of them. There was no customer in sight. I preferred it that way. I put the thought of David out of my mind.

Time dragged without the hyena. I missed Larry. Without her I was just a crazy hobo talking to himself under a bridge. I couldn't remember what happened or where she'd gone. Perhaps she was dead and that was all there was. Perhaps she was killed saving me.

I was down to my shredded boxers and the sun seemed less hateful. My jacket was still damp on the rock. I dug about in the wet soil, pulling up earthworms and beetles. I'd eaten more than I cared to count before I'd satisfied the grumbling.

It was midday before the jacket and pants were dry enough to pull back on. The fabric felt almost clean against my skin, the sensation foreign. I thought about a bed, with sheets and a pillow. I tried to think it'd be comfortable, but all I could imagine was my dirt, plastering it thick.

The smell of damp had burned away and the faint fragrance of the dead permeated the bridge. I had to check the bodies before moving on. Sidestepping the dried puddles of blood, dismembered limbs and the viscera, I retrieved three backpacks. I checked for weapons, but there was nothing. This seemed like the work of a drone, the bodies torn apart by machine gun fire was evidence enough. I took what I needed and was gone: a blanket, a water bottle, a pack of unopened batteries, a journal and a lighter. The rest was junk or ruined, contaminated with blood or a keepsake from a life not quiet forgotten. I left their memories scattered around them, thanking them for their gifts. The road is dangerous.

I left the tar behind and walked the hills and gullies it neighbored. I followed it apprehensively, the grey and black snake that bit so many who walked upon it. I had been foolish and lucky with the bike. I should've known. Maybe David had told me; maybe I'd just switched off. I missed them – a voice that wasn't my own. I missed that more than what it might say or the face it might be said with.

The bush thinned away and, far ahead, I could spot the grey horizon of a city cutting out above the fields. This must be Bloemfontein. I would leave it for tomorrow. The afternoon had stretched on and to be caught in a place that big at night may mean death.

I found another farmhouse on a hill overlooking the road in. I gathered wood and lit a fire on the bathroom floor, covering the windows as best I could with trays and boxes. There were

mielies growing in the fields, haphazard and choked by weeds and burnt, by the sun, but still edible.

I boiled them and relished every bite, every last piece of corn. I was in heaven in the beaten down farmhouse with the fire on the floor. I remembered the journal. I opened it to read by the fire. My eyes grew as tired as my stomach. There were scribbles on the cover, a name perhaps, all I could make out was it started with S.

They will come for us and they will kill us, we've lived our whole lives with this inside. We will greet them with bitter teeth and they will not taste the best of us, but the very worst.

The first page had these words inscribed in painstaking cursive. I read them over and over as I lay propped up against the cupboards in the kitchen. I turned the page and began my conversations with S.

She'd grown up on a farm in the Western Cape. She recounted the whispers and rumours of war that persisted through her teenage years. She described things I didn't remember, but knew must have existed. I learnt about traffic and business and crowds and love. I followed her words around places still whole, buildings unbroken. I imagined money and I imagined friends. Those were the hardest to understand. I slowed down at every mention of family, each stroke of the pen around father and mother. I tried to catch glimpses of mine, but they were as grey as the mist. The memories of them ran away faster than I could chase. I took her world for mine and fell asleep by the fire in a ruined house on the doorstep of Bloemfontein, alone, but not.

When I woke I read more of S. I could feel the war hung just around the corner of her life. It narrowly missed her in entries and musings and rants, but it was there like a shadow. It grew longer and longer and then no one could ignore it:

They landed today, the Americans. They parachuted down around Joburg and I watched the ships docking at Simon's Town on the TV. The Russians say they are coming too, but we know it will be a while. I think this is it, it won't be long before it goes to shit again. Our lectures have been postponed this week, awaiting a safety report from the department. This is

the occupation. There was little fighting, it was over in a few hours. It ended too quickly for things to change, I'm sure things will be back to normal soon.

I packed some mielies in a plastic bag and stowed them in my bag. Ending my conversation with S, I left the house and made the descent towards the grey horizon. I walked through the fields and far away from main roads. Every few hundred metres, I stopped to look and study the buildings and streets for signs of life. There was no movement, but in a place this size, I was sure there would be more who'd escaped the Red Caravan.

As I got closer the cages, began to appear again in the fields around the city, abandoned and rusting. The wind rattled the wire as I passed by. There was no military presence, save some sun-scarred flags and old murals with the occupier's insignia. I kept close to doorways and windows and held my rifle firmly; five rounds locked in and ready.

There were fewer bodies on the streets here than in Port Elizabeth and it felt suspicious. I wished for Larry, but I was all I had. I moved through the city, street by street, passing the World Cup stadium and following signs towards the hospital. There would be something in there for me, there must be. Clean sheets or a bed or a mattress for the night. The things I'd been dreaming of. I wandered in past reception. I laughed at the big sign that hung above the desk: *Sign In*.

There were rows of benches in the entrance hall, some overturned and broken. The elevators were open and crowded with more benches and beds propped up against the walls, like some storage closet. There were no bodies, no ruined skeletons, just the horrible discolouration of blood on linoleum, long stained. I searched through offices on the first floor. The computers had all been removed; some screens remained on the desks, but their towers were gone.

After searching through several offices, I had emerged with two working pens, a lighter and a pair of jeans a lot cleaner than mine. I shouldered the rifle and held the pistol in my hands, moving slowly up the stairs and stopping every few steps to listen. When my ears caught the sound of voices, I froze. They were faint, but not far off; four or five people were arguing frantically. I remembered the clowns and turned to shift myself back down the stairs, my slow escape forestalled by a face peering up from below.

Look, I see the gun. Put it away and we'll talk.

The face slunk behind the bend and continued to address me from safety.

I've also got a weapon and so do my friends up there. We're not interested in a fight.

I was tired of fighting, tired of running, tired of the fear, so drained and spent that even if this wasn't surrender, I was fine with the end.

I'm coming down. I'm not going to fight.

I put the gun in the backpack and slowly descended the stairs, hands raised away from myself. The face wore a black beard and a green beanie. He looked healthy and calm. In his hands he cradled a shotgun, pointed at the ground away from me. He didn't speak. He studied me.

Take a seat over there. I'm going to call my friends, okay? We're fine, right?

He gestured towards a bench across from him and I nodded twice. He blew into a whistle that hung around his neck. It was loud and piercing, sharp and short.

Within a few seconds the stairs were alive with the patter of feet. I watched boots and pants turn into hands gripping guns and then startled faces. They shifted glances between the bench and the man opposite me. There were five in all. They whispered among themselves, two women and three men. All of them looked clean, all of them looked healthy. One of the women separated from the group and walked towards me. She held a pistol in one hand and a machete in the other. She stood in front of me, saying nothing, staring me up and down. She held the machete in my direction, pointing it at the blood-stained jacket.

Is that your blood?

I think so, yes.

I fumbled through the shards of memories available and she kept staring as though my answer was insufficient.

Yes, it's my blood. I haven't killed anyone.

I knew that was a lie, but the technicality of that could wait until there wasn't something sharp in my face.

Where're you from?

Port Elizabeth. That's as much as I remember. I've travelled up from there.

She looked at me and then back to the group who still whispered among themselves.

So you're one of them?

Her question hung there and I didn't understand it, I waited for more.

One of what?

One of those wanderers, a gas tripper, a crazy man?

Her words framed and painted a picture of what she thought of me. It wasn't worth much. I lowered my gaze to my boots and prepared for the worst.

I'm on a journey. I am not crazy, but there are things, many things I don't remember.

I offered those words and listened to the silence that followed. When I raised my head she was gone, back to the group who now spoke above a whisper, something about drones.

We're not going to shoot you. We're not even going to take your weapons, but you're going to have to do something for us.

I looked up again. It was a man speaking now. He wore a surgical mask over his face and sported a long black trench coat. His eyes were green and that is all I knew about him.

Come upstairs. We're going to show you something.

Fifteen minutes later and I was standing in what had once been a break room, but now had several computers on desks running the length of it. There was a generator in the corner and a pile of cell phones pouring out of boxes beside that. None of them stood close to me. They kept their distance, outside of the one who wore a gasmask. He walked right up to me and spoke. They thought I might have some disease or something – maybe I did. The man in the gasmask asked me something. His voice sounded distant and robotic through the filter.

I guess you've heard of a drone? Maybe you've been lucky enough to survive one?

I nodded, thinking back to the incident at the dam.

We've noticed something about these drones.

I could barely hear him through the mask and the others could tell. The woman with the machete gestured for him to stop talking and finished for him. She made no attempt to come as close as she had earlier. Instead standing across the table, she addressed me.

There are the drones for the slavers and there are others. We didn't know whose these were for a long time, but we do now.

She pointed to the other end of the break room and a pile of wreckage spread out on the floor. She held up the blackened insignia of a flag on a piece of fuselage: stars and stripes.

America is gone. We know this. So where do these things come from? They never attack the Red Caravan and we think we know why.

I nodded clumsily, understanding almost nothing of what they were trying to say, least of all what they wanted me for. She pointed to the pile of cell phones next to the generator.

They pick up these signals when they're on and they come. We've been trying to take them out.

The man with the black beard and green beanie chirped in now.

They're automated you see. There must be a lot of them left and we have no clue where they launch from, but they do. They attack and kill hundreds of people like us out in the country, in the wilderness. Some of these things are patrolling, others wait for signals and we've proved it.

He seemed very enthusiastic, almost like he had never come across a drone or knew what it was capable of.

You can't bring those things down. Why even try?

These people seemed the crazy ones to me. Everything about them was at odds with my reality. They stood out in confusing contrast to their decaying surroundings.

Where are you people from?

My last question confused them and they were quiet again, whispering among themselves for a while and then turning back to face me.

It doesn't matter – where we're from – but they're many of us. We live away from the roads and towns, where they don't search. Our problem is not the Red Caravan or gas trippers like you, it's the drones. We're going to solve that problem and you're going to help.

My head was lowered for the duration of the response, but I could pick up the anger in the woman's voice, angrier than her machete.

The generator cranked to life, rumbling noisily on its cardboard mattress. Two of them left at this advent. I guessed to stand guard. This kind of sound in an 'empty' city wouldn't go unnoticed. If anyone was lurking around, they'd come. Two of the screens came to life, but they were switched off and, instead, a pair of cell phones were grabbed from the pile and set to charge via USB cables plugged into the computers. I could feel the three in the room all

had something to say to one another, but none wanted to shout, instead they gestured with their hands in a sort of pseudo conversation. I watched them with a growing feeling of isolation and difference, with a feeling of being about to die.

Fifteen minutes later, they removed the phones from their cables and marched me over to the domed stadium I had passed on my way in. They spoke to me, but I wasn't listening. I was somewhere else, worrying about Larry, wondering what happened to her and if I'd see her again. I thought of S. and her journal. I thought of Amy. I had no idea why.

I was standing in the centre of the stadium now, the dome above me was open in a massive oval portal to the sky.

The man with the gasmask pressed a phone into my hands and garbled some words through the filter.

It's on. It's connecting to those internet drones. They're still up there, orbiting or something. It shouldn't take more than 10 minutes for them to track the signal. They don't come low unless they scan a person and –

He paused there, cautious:

You're the bait.

I gripped the phone and looked through the lenses on his mask, searching for more that he wasn't telling me. I wouldn't get out of this one and, if I ran, even if they didn't shoot, there was nothing left, nothing outside of questions without answers. He pointed to a large metal shell next to me. There was a hole dug underneath and a pile of ground next to it.

When we shout, you're going to get under there, okay? We've got it taken care of from there, okay?

Okay.

I nodded, staring with suspicion at the metal shell alongside us.

It's thick, it'll stop the bullets for a while and that's all the time we need.

He pointed to the rigging around the oval portal above us. I could see a net tied to rocks hanging to the left of it. There were ropes running the length of the dome towards the stands on either side and I could just make out the shapes of people moving around at the places the ropes had been secured.

What if you miss?

If we miss, we're all dead, not just you. We have a sharpshooter, but there's little chance he'll be able to bring one of these things down. The only hope we have is to burn it.

Burn it?!

Yes burn it. We bring it down, we dump some diesel on it and we burn it.

I'm going to roast under that thing!

I wasn't ready to die that way, not slow like that.

It's deeper than you think under there. You'll be fine. I'm sure.

I looked around the stadium; today we were playing a different game. I held the phone as he backed away and walked off towards the stands. I stood there like an idiot, uncertain of what would happen next, but painfully aware it was taking forever. The shapes around the rope fixings stopped moving, but I could see they were there, only crouched and waiting.

There were 15 minutes of silence like this, before we heard it, a faint rumble and touch of flame. It hovered over the dome, jets adjusting to drop through the portal. I looked up, into the cold unforgiving metallic eyes of a creature far more terrifying than a clown. It bathed me in a red light. I held the cell phone like a child. I forgot more than my name in that red glow. I could feel the heat of it descending. It was angry, but wise and all knowing. It was radiant and I could forgive its crimes.

I held the phone up to it, like a zombie to its necromancer. The faint repetitions of a shout from the stands buffed off the bubble of my hypnotic face-to-face greeting with death. It hovered over me. I heard its guns loading and the heat from its jets burnt me, singeing. That heat broke me from trance, the shouts now clear.

Run! Get out of there!

I disappeared under the shell as the machine gun painted stripes in the grass. Bullets hailed in ricochet off the shell. I could feel the heat of them even metres below. It smashed like a gong above me; the jets seemed to roar with more ferocity now and this thing I was in became an oven. The sweat started to pour. The cry of a *charge* greeted me from above and it was returned with machine gun fire.

The digital whine of distress rung out from the drone as it scraped the shell above. They were burning it now and that whine grew warped and sharper, then softer and gone. I wondered could they feel pain? I felt it in the cries.

They pulled me up and out of that oven, my hair burnt back from the jets, matted and charred. They thanked me, but all I could hear was the whine; it coloured everything. It ran over the body beside it, clutching the peppered remains of a bucket. The wreckage black – the drone was dead. They picked up the body and carried us both off the grass in a hurry. They spoke to me, but nothing made it in.

I looked blankly into the gasmasked face of the man whose shoulder I was draped over. I whispered to him.

More will come.

I was in a hospital bed, between clean sheets, my face shaved and body fresh. I ached a little all over, but I was alive. I ran my fingers over my eyes and to my head, the hair sharp and prickly. My jacket and jeans were folded on the bed next to mine alongside my rifle and backpack. There was another stack of clothes and a note. These looked cleaner, like those angels with their faces unblemished and their skin so new.

I was alone again. There were no voices whispering from nearby halls, no generator shaking on a cardboard mattress. I didn't have to call out and ask if it was over. It was and they were gone. I lay in that bed for a few hours; comfort like that was something foreign. I took their suggestion and their clothes and left mine in a bundle on that bed.

I went back to the stadium. The drone was gone, but its fiery traces were everywhere in burnt out patches, the long grass now gone, charred and swept with wildfire. The shell was still there, dented and bruised, but still in place. I stood on it and stared up through the portal and out at the sky. Clouds were gathering and soon it would rain. I moved up into the grandstands, made my way past turnstiles and upstairs to the boxes. The doors had been tampered with and leaned on snapped hinges.

I sat there in a leather armchair, like a king. I pulled out S's journal and read.

They're gone now, most of them. I've seen videos, some say the entire country has been blasted off the face of the earth. The soldiers that left, took to their ships and went to... who knows? The Russians got the same, there's no war anymore and everyone keeps saying, finally we have peace. There is no peace. The soldiers that remained have turned this into their own private country, the people are too tired of fighting to care. I don't think we notice one another, they are there like the book is on the shelf, it exists, but we go a long time without seeing it. No one really knows what to do, besides farm and forget. I asked dad about England, about our grandparents, he says they're gone too. I visited Europe as a child and now all that's left is a mass of fascist gangs and right wing radicals. What's left for us? I don't know where to look for the answer to that question. I feel like we're all dying a slow, drawn-out death.

I closed the journal and let my eyes rest on the field below. I watched the players walk out onto the fields and line up before a crowd of hysterical supporters, clambering over the rails and waving flags as if possessed. I heard the roar of 60 000 people gathered in one place to worship the sport and team they loved. The flags waved slower and the crowds grew quieter, the shining walls turned dusty and the seats empty. I watched the field fade away, back to its blackened state. The lights faded to grey and gone and a pale bleakness painted slashes across the scene.

A trophy broken on the floor beside me, I picked it up and searched the golden figure. The smile he wore was stern and earnest, his shine long lost. I could live up here. I could watch them play their games with drones, if they ever returned. Up here, I felt powerful, strong, I could be done with weakness, I could take fear and strip it naked, shove it against the glass and force it to watch what happens below. I was tired with the thought of it and in that armchair I slept.

*

I don't really know how many days it's been since I left Bloemfontein. It's been heavy walking and my new clothes have taken on the same muddy appearance as the old ones. I've kept the road in view. I saw it yesterday: a sort of yellowing bakkie. It wasn't a military vehicle, not the one I feared. The rifle scope showed me seven people: two inside, the rest on the back. They were moving too fast to get a clear view. I watched them speed away, back in the direction I'd come. I thought about what they might bump into down there, those clowns, the clean faces, David? After a while I was thirsty and didn't care. They'd probably be food for drones anyway.

I went from farmhouse to farmhouse, like a pilgrim on journey to a God he'd never met. To ask a question he didn't know yet and hear an answer that'd be the only thing he'd never forget.

I'd taken to eating worms again, and bugs. Now and then there were fruit trees, but their gifts were mostly shrivelled or infested with worms anyway.

I got by as best I could. The bullets were low. I was down to eleven and the pistol. There weren't many animals up this way and making that much noise to fill your stomach was more of a risk than I would take.

Somewhere between here and there, there was a church. At the end of a small town, the red bricks had bled their colour out into ivy that crept from the fences to the walls. The building was almost swallowed in green. Nothing moved, just a dim light through stained glass, candles. The gate was rusted closed, but there was a hole in the fence. The pistol pressed against the massive wooden door of the church building, I counted down from ten and pushed it open slowly.

It was empty, almost. On the stage behind the podium was a woman as dirty as I was. She was talking, but not to me. I searched the room, she kept speaking and I kept looking, listening. I marked her with the pistol as I moved through the pews. She seemed too calm for someone with a gun pointed in their direction. There was no one here, she was crazy, I had nothing better to do, so I sat and listened. She spoke like she could speak forever and I thought I might fall asleep to this affair.

After the longest time she stopped. She acknowledged me with a nod, stepping sideways away from the podium.

At the end of the world, we're all failures to God. The time between the start and the end was wasted.

There's nothing like isolation to drive you from your own mind. In a way those felt like Larry's words, I could imagine her whiskers on my ears, and the familiar foul breath. I was alone with this woman, Larry was gone.

The walls of the church were dirty with the smoke of her fires. Nothing left of softness in the pews. Her words were hard to swallow and this air, harder to breathe.

But the night isn't the dark it used to be and you remember the moon.

I let her speak; I don't think she wanted any response. Conversations were for yesterday, she didn't live there, she was outside of time.

I remember your face

Doubtful.

When you're done, you'll be back.

I don't think I could stomach more of stained glass and the pitch black cross. She had seen me staring in its direction.

Marble... It was once pure white... So much.

She mumbled names under her breath and that was all. She didn't speak a word when I left. She wouldn't look my way.

The hyena leaves a hole, dug out by its paws and in her absence. I fear for her death. There's emptiness in my inhalations.

It was a Friday when it happened. I like to think it was a Friday. I liked to think all days where Fridays; it helped somehow. It was hot and dry. I was sat on a rock overlooking the road. It stretched out beneath me like some liquorice worm, the kind I'd seen on the packets stuck to barbed wire in the wind. This worm was dead, dead and crowded with death. There were a lot of things – or something – spread out across the tar.

I was trying to decide whether it was the shine of heat or the blood still wet, soaking the road when they came. Massive birds the size of dogs, hooked beaks and all digging into the scraps spread in haggard heaps across the road below. I was hungry – not as hungry as those birds – but maybe they were the answer to the burning question in my belly.

I walked casually down the hill. There was enough of whatever it was to keep them busy for a long time. I stopped about ten metres away. They looked at me. There were eleven of them – perhaps more – but they didn't care I was there. I slipped my hand into the bag and pulled out the pistol and lifted it straight out ahead.

I stuck my eye down the steel of the sight, with its chipped red paint. Most of their heads were buried in the mounds of what I now recognised as an elephant, though why it came to the road to die or what might have killed it were mysteries to me. I could smell it now, the sickly warm odour of meat in the sun. That smell sticks to your throat; it coats it and, like hundreds of tiny maggots, it shuffles through with a shiver.

I singled out the biggest vulture. We eyed one another. His beak chunked with viscera, his neck coated in a red damp. He stared at me a long time. The blood on his beak seemed to flow up to his eyes, they looked more crimson than black. That same friendly laughter sounded in my ears: Larry's. I listened closer, but the wind whispered nothing more to me, just the dull snapping of sinew and the wet hammering of meat and claw. I fired the pistol, the blast far softer than imagined. The bullet passed, almost useless, through the feathers on the wing.

They took notice now, the gang of scavengers with hooked beaks and bleeding eyes. They stared now. All of them intent on knowing the design of my mission, the reason for the disturbance. A collective sentence was hovering over them, the pistol was the gavel. They never asked me clearly, but I told them all the same.

I'm going to kill you.

They looked into me like they understood, but didn't care enough to move. A shell slammed its way through the barrel and snapped a neck. The thick branch of flesh and feathers hovered briefly and collapsed on itself in a muddle of blood and dirt. The remaining vultures shouted their objections, flapped their wings and were gone.

Its claws still moved. The bullet through the neck hadn't really done the job. I might've heard it rasping for breath, but I like to think that was the wind. I stared at it, dying slowly, its eyes growing from that red back to black, a soft black, a sad defeated black. I felt sorry for it; I regretted shooting. Most of all I regretted the time it took to die, the time it spent looking in its own distorted way right into my eyes. I hated that bird; I hated myself. The truth was somewhere in the grey middle of the day.

I ate well that evening. It gets easier when the thing you're eating doesn't resemble the thing you've killed. As I cut I asked the knife questions that I should've asked myself weeks ago. What was my plan? I get to Joburg and what, magically I'm reunited with the people I've lost. The people who I don't remember and somehow they remember me?

I'm as alone as they come. I'm crazy, just like that woman in the hospital called it. I would've turned back there. I would've taken my soul off the road and crawled back into the hinterland unknown.

I wasn't ready, but it came: the laughter out of the darkness and the soft pat of paws on sand. My Larry. She stood staring above the embers, eyes piercing and dancing in the sleepy glow of flames retired. I sat up and waved her over. She obeyed like no day had passed without her. There were scars again, down her shoulder, down her legs. I stroked her neck and begged her to never leave again. We ate from the vulture, forgetting snapped necks and guilt and I was no longer alone.

The sun baked my forehead and scratched the lips of my eyes until I answered. I drew myself up and away from the mess of last night's feast and over to the shade of a tree. I felt broken, more tired than any of the days before, like a wave had crushed me in my sleep and left me to pull the pieces of myself back towards the place they'd been scattered.

I was dizzy, it was partnered with confusion and there was Larry. I'd taken the wrong road out of Bloemfontein. In the time that passed, I could've been 300km in the wrong direction, but I wasn't far off from where I needed to be. The grass seemed to shine greener here. The name of the town was Welkom and maybe I was welcome. We walked without speaking. Some chasm filled with all the questions in the world was sprawled out between us. I called from my side to hers and we watched one another and knew as much as we could that the answers would come and we'd never be ready.

The road in had trees in long lines on either side. It felt different from the dry and dying places I'd scraped through. I kept to the trees, walking through the tall grass that clung and hugged the highway. Larry was almost invisible behind me in the wall of green she cleaved through, her ears like periscopes, black tipped and breaching.

When I got closer to the road, I could see the tracks cut into the tar from the iron mammoth. There were cars pushed onto the verge in a single minded fashion. The scraping of paint and steel had been washed away by so many storms and red days. A long time had passed since the cages on the roadside held captives and military boots broke down front doors.

There was an eerie stillness here – even the birds were mute. I could hear my heart beat and the sound of Larry breathing behind me, everything uneasy. The houses here, though looted, seemed in a better state than any I'd encountered. I half expected someone to come out of their front door to chase me away from the gate. That familiar barking of dogs that this place conjured up, germinating seeds of memories long gone.

We were alert; the dangerous quelling of calm did not subdue us. I took care to watch the angle of the sun on the shadows. We approached every house with caution. Doors and windows were our enemies, a beast to kill us waiting somewhere inside everything. There were none – not in the first ten houses, not in the next twenty.

Family portraits and photographs hung untouched on walls, generations back to the dust where their memories were now committed. Where were their names? I wanted to dine with them, to exchange stories, to hug, hold and cry with.

Some of the faces looked like mine. I imagined friendships in the lounges and studies of houses occupied only by rats. Larry ate them all, there was no laughter and she waited faithfully. This time she'd keep her word; she'd never leave me again. I turned to face her, her head swayed as she walked and then stopped. She lifted her obsidian eyes to meet mine, with a face like a mother separated from her children, she locked the gaze.

There was food here – not a lot – but more than I'd been finding. The dust of rice still heaped in plastic bags and tins, canned food with their paper labels eaten by snails or slugs. Trails of rust coated their outsides. It didn't take long before my bag was full. There was no sense searching for more than I could carry. We could stay here a few days, get our strength, before walking into the mouth of it all. The thought of teeth gnashing and gnawing played over in my head, in dreams, in visions.

We slept in a hotel that night. We'd earned it. There were no beds undisturbed or doors still locked. Built-in cupboards and service rooms still held piles of linen; fresher than seemed right. I wrapped myself in a sheet and piled pillows on the floor for Larry. The itching nesting in the blankets faded quickly. I dreamt of Johannesburg and Moses and vultures.

With curtains so thick, I slept into afternoon. Larry was at the door, staring. That frightened me in waking. Dead muscles pull; they numbed in an excess of rest. There was a death in immersion, a world less stressful, forgetting to be fearful. My teeth weren't clenched. My jaws moved smoothly in a foreign fashion. I'd inherited the face of some other man. Scratching small white insects from my skin I waited for my eyes to shift from snapshots to video. Sleep blunts.

In the complete light of afternoon, we searched the building for more. Plenty of matches, little nail clippers with the hotel's logo emblazoned on them and soaps, things I'd not seen for a long time. We stood in front of a shut door. Larry wasn't interested in getting close, she stood behind me and whined softly. I examined the door, closed and maybe locked. I put my hand to the handle; the other gripped the pistol, ready.

The handle gave, almost coming to pieces in my grip. I walked straight into a wall of stench, the must of decay. The carpets of this room brown, not beige like their neighbours; the silent statuesque shapes of bodies crowded the room. Long dead and dried, heads drooped forwards in depressed prayers, others snapped back with empty sockets drawing in the ceiling. Shell casings littered the floor, the only evidence of goodbye kisses, any gun long stolen by some wanderer. These dark leather faces, with teeth as bright as the marble in the bathroom, unnerved me. There were many, more than ten. The shambled remains of children rested on a few of the laps. I just stared. Stared and tried not to breathe.

We left the hotel and went, street by street, house by house, searching for anything useful. It was boredom that drove me into each building or the painful urge of needs I couldn't name. There were safes every now and then, mostly empty, others shut beyond all ways of opening. I sat down at dining tables, some with the relics of last suppers still spread across them. I rested on uncomfortable stools and listened to rain dance down roofs and windows. I stared into faces of beautiful women on walls and doors, the shine in their eyes freckled with dust. The days passed away like their children.

I could've spent the rest of the life I had left in that place, a ghost haunting photos and families dead or enslaved. The more I looked into their eyes, the more I felt like a thief plundering homes and muddying floors. The welcome was worn out. The smiles in those photos turned to frowns, the owners moaning at my every footstep. We took the road out. We'd spent four days, maybe more, in that place. We headed to Kroonstad. From there, the plan was Vereeniging. In ten days, we could be standing on the front steps of the city.

The morning stretched in grey. It was painted through holes in the clouds by soft swathes of sunlight. That was the day we saw the wall. From far off, it crept towards us like a something pathetic, to be hurdled and done with. After an hour's approach, it was done with perceptions. It loomed above us, thick and unrelenting. Barbed wire drapes hung from the neck all along it, as far as it stretched. The end was beyond sight.

To the right was the road, some kilometres away. I took out the rifle and lifted the sight to my eye. There was a barricade, sandbags in rows, with towers on either side. There were people moving about or the clouds played tricks with their shadows. I wasn't going any closer. We sat in the shade of the wall and chewed on strips of dried fruit, so packed with preservatives they'd survive us. Larry circled me, sniggered and walked off left, following the wall. I thought she'd stop and come back. She kept walking. She was disappearing more into the distance. I grabbed my bag and rifle and rushed after her.

We walked for fifteen minutes in the shade of the wall, before the sun caught us again. By that time, the sparse bush gave way to denser trees and the wall seemed pressed up against it, forcing it back. The grey and browns were locked in a conflict that would take millennia to win. Nothing man-made lasts forever. Larry was quiet, persistently following some trail that struggled to keep itself against the wall. The bushes made it difficult. They were thick now and small detours had to be made. My new jacket snagged on everything, its quality proven when no thread loosed itself and all I had to contend with was the hindering annoyance.

We walked so far I began to wonder if I was supposed to be following her or if she had just been making an exit on this doomed journey. After an hour had passed, and the bush with it, we stood in a clearing surrounded by ant mounds and the familiar smell of blood. Larry sat around the mouth of a drainage ditch that ran beneath the wall. It was small, it could probably take me, but moving would need saintly patience. I lowered my head and looked into the maw of the pipe. A faint glint of light broke over the top of something blocking the way, not too far in.

I stuck my torch in. A body, twitching slightly, but head buried in the sludge on the bottom of the pipe.

Hello?

No reply. I studied the body in the light and saw it, a maggot falling out of the hair, squirming like a new born in its own filth. I gagged, the smell hitting me full in the face. I needed to get through.

I wrapped some cloth around my mouth and nose and buried myself in the tunnel, moving on my stomach towards the twitching mound blocking my path. When I had reached it, I pressed my hand down on the jacket, ignoring the writhing flesh beneath it, and pulled. The body lurched forward. It was lighter than I expected; I shuddered at knowing why. I moved inch by inch, my head growing dizzier and my throat closing. I pretended I wasn't trapped, underground with a decaying body. Larry whimpered behind me, somewhere out in freedom.

I'll be fine.

The snap of cartilage and bone echoed in my ears as I emerged from the hole. I gave my burden a final tug. When I looked down again it became evident I had ripped the arm out of its socket. I turned to move, circling the ant mounds, catching my breath and cursing all at once. I grabbed the collar of the jacket and dragged the body out of the sludge, past the mounds and into the bush at the end of the clearing. I pulled the backpack off the rope around his leg and upended its contents on the ground in front of Larry. A pistol, rusted, perhaps beyond use, a box of ammunition, some wadded up notebooks, a tarp, a knife and two cans of food.

I took his gun and the magazine. It was full. I had to test it: I had to be silent. I shuddered as the thought crossed my mind. I pushed the pistol into the backpack, wrapped it around my arm and pressed it against the jacket at the edge of the bush and fired. The soft viscous expulsion that covered the outside of the backpack answered my question. I wiped the gun off on the grass and placed it in my pack along with the ammunition.

I was confused by this ruined heap of a man stuck in the drain. He sported military fatigues, but his face was so eaten away I could not make out whether he was one of them. I doubted it. Face down abandoned in that sludge. Maybe he was fleeing; fleeing what? I would've gone through his notebooks, but they were the kind of slimy I couldn't contend with, no matter what information I might've found. He'd not been dead long, weeks perhaps, but not months. I thought back to the day I crossed the bridge out of Port Elizabeth on that bicycle. He could've still been alive, running from whatever hell lay on the other side of this wall. I steeled myself for the task at hand. Like my benefactor and barrier, I tied a rope around my leg, fixing the backpack to it and made my way through the sludge. When I emerged on the other side, I was surprised by what greeted me, shocked even. The purest picture of corn fields and trees stretched out for as far as I could see. A firebreak ran five metres between the wall, flowing out of sight. I lifted the rifle and peered out towards what looked to be orchards a few fields away.

It was the kind of green that hurt my eyes, burned me all over; nature had never looked so unnatural. Larry had crawled out of the hole in a similar fashion to mine; she laughed quietly and set to rolling around in the ground at my feet, presumably to clean herself of the filth. I rubbed my jacket in the dust, drying up the death that coated it. I did the same with my pants and socks. It might've helped some, but the smell was on me and wouldn't leave. He'd left his body and joined mine, his stench a ghost that would haunt us until we found water. Over the manicured fields with no one tending them and through the orchards that offered no fruit, we made our way. It was not long before we came across a small dam, shrouded by willows on one side. I stripped. I soaked my jacket and pants in the cold and opened a few of the soaps we'd rescued from the hospital.

I scrubbed Larry and myself until the vestiges of the smell were just a sickening memory. She didn't protest at the water. She seemed to understand what I was doing, even a creature who didn't think twice before burying its face in a rotting carcass. Our rules were different, she knew this. I soaped my clothes to an extreme white foam and stopped only when I had run out of soap. I wanted to eliminate the traces of him down to the molecular.

We dried on the bank near the willows and hoped we'd be fine, we'd go unseen. With the sprawling surgically maintained fields surrounding us, it was hard not to get the impression that there would a great many people around. I had lost my way. I was far, many kilometres

from the road I was following. I'd walk straight with the wall behind me and perhaps I'd make it to a town I could figure out on the map

We walked through fields, keeping the corn that towered over our heads as protection from hostile eyes. We followed straight lines carved into the soil, but the green blocked our view. Things took longer in this maze of one direction. We saw it, the machine that kept them green. It stretched across thirty or forty metres, a hulk of polished steel arching across the corn. It glided on tracks between the cuts of orchards and crops, spraying a fine mist over us as it went.

The farmlands were where the illusion of paradise ended. They fell away after a while, revealing scores of small towns, now, mostly rubble. A house stood here and there, relatively intact, but the evidence of bombing was overwhelming. There was a network of dirt roads leading around these towns and to the farms that surrounded them. The buildings leaned on themselves, a sad little island in a sea of magnificent green. I could hear the soft rumble of an engine not more than a few hundred metres away. A large lorry with picture of a mielie emblazoned beneath the letters of an alphabet I had no way of understanding. The red flag was there too, fierce, but small beneath the yellow sheen of corn. It rode past and in the direction we had come. Its pace methodical and pacified. I was not worried.

We stole whoever's corn it was – as much as I could carry. I boiled it in a pot, around a fire beneath some rubble in the basement of an old-style corner store. I mashed some of it between stones and piled it on a slab for Larry. She ate with more enthusiasm than I'd anticipated. It was dark down here. The moonlight wept in slivers through cracks in the floor above and it added little complement to the dulling flames that warmed us. I thought about reading from her journal, but I had over-eaten and the flames tugged my eyelids.

In the morning, we emerged from our rubble bunker and stood out in the soft morning light like moles, blinded, but faces twitching with all the sight of the world. I sat propped up against the only tree in this hamlet that hadn't been reduced to cinders or a stump and pulled out my map. I played connect the dots between where I was last and where I could be now. A number of options fit the vague assessment.

An hour later I sat in a booth of a McDonalds, next to what must have once been a busy road, but was now only strips of torn asphalt buckled and warped. It had been twisted by some

force that left the surrounding buildings intact. The paint sheared off the walls in long sheets. The plastic tables and chairs had a similar tormented pattern to them.

I tried hard to leave behind thoughts of what could do this, of what happened here. The metal all around seemed immune to this treatment; its effect only evident on some of the furniture and walls. I slid my hand away from my brow and stared into the dirtied face of an overly enthusiastic clown. It didn't move in its plastic mould, but it hung there like a vision, crisp and fresh as those others I'd met before.

Larry placed her paws on the counter as if to solicit attention from imaginary staff in the back. I would've chided her, but she laughed excitedly at some discovery. I lifted the rifle and followed the line of her sight as she bobbed and weaved, looking intently at something moving in the kitchen.

Hello?

No answer.

I won't hurt you.

The silhouette danced fearfully away from the half-light dawning over the counter and went further into the kitchen. I listened for the sound of a door opening, anything that would hint at it escaping. The torchlight flickered on and bathed them in that angry reveal. A woman, clutching a child to her body, faced me and trembled. She fumbled words that fell to nothing in her teeth and oozed out as tears. I knew that face, I'd worn it before.

Sit down, please.

I offered my hands away from the rifle, holding greasy digits to the sky and then out to them.

I will not hurt you. I am not one of them.

This wasn't enough. The mother clutched the girl so close, I was sure she would suffocate her. Her eyes darted between the hyena and me. Larry had stopped laughing and just watched, her head at an angle, her expression sad.

She won't harm you either. I promise you.

It took a long time before she emerged from the shadowy kitchen and announced herself in crumbling confidence as Annalisa. The child was dead, perhaps not now, but some days had passed since. I couldn't pretend to understand her grief, but I saw the metal collars around their necks and I knew the shape of their story.

She said almost nothing and that was fine. I asked her about where she had come from and long silences followed. What she did tell me was exactly what I had been told before. David in his tattered dress shoes and briefcase had shared the knowledge of this universe already and, in all honesty, I had ignored him.

Approaching that hole we dug in the side of the road, next to that abandoned petrol station, we were witnesses to this silence that came before and we buried it with that little girl. Her wrists were shrunken imitations of her mother's, so similar to those striking out of the rubble in the far away dream. We buried her with that silence and I prayed instinctually that it was enough. A feeling so foreign came over me when I uttered the word "Amen." I had emerged from that silence and into a rehearsal for a play I'd been preparing for my whole life and I understood nothing of it.

It was her turn to speak and for me to listen. Her words were hollow in my ears, like the cheeks of her child. The face we had consigned to the earth was still there on her chest, turned facing me, eyes vacant and begging. I asked her where I should go after she asked me the same and our answers were matched in reverse.

There's nothing for you in Johannesburg, only a collar.

There's nothing for you outside the walls, only freedom.

It was the kind of freedom that was its own prison, but those words didn't rise to my tongue and we left things there for the night. We slept on crumpled boxes in a store room. I was long to sleep, her face painting cries across me, shivers in the warmth.

In the morning she mentioned refugees and old mines over our boiled mielies and apples. She was a farm worker; she said slave, but that word erased itself from my speech as quickly as she'd spoken it. For her these mines were too far, too dangerous to reach. I offered for her to come with us, but she refused. It felt wrong to leave her, but the look on her face told me there was no changing her mind. She was a long ways off from burying her grief beside the road.

We followed the remains of what had once been the R721, travelling through a desert of green, endless green. There were roads that dissected ours at right angles, freshly tarred and shimmering like black gold in the heat. We were careful of these; we waited in bushes along them for the absolute silence, before crossing. Trucks came and went, frequently; some followed by military vehicles, some without. We broke across in mad dashes, running until the road behind us was gone and the useless coils of tar in front stretched on, all warped and wasted.

There were ghost towns every few kilometres, shells of places once relics, still relics now. Old railway houses with wire fences and rusted silver gates set at sharp angles and across wide roads from sprawling ruins of shacks and miniscule government housing. I'd seen this set up countless times. It was a road or a river or train tracks that separated the two worlds. They leaned on one another from a distance.

I slept in the places I'd slept before, broken buildings, windows covered with boards and fires in the floor. I slept in roofs and basements. There was no need here to chew time away on insects and pry the last facet of food from a pan with dirty fingernails. I ate too much and too often. I worried for the hyena, for Larry. I trapped assortments of rodents to feed her. This is what she hungered for, not more mashed corn, potato or rice.

She spoke less and less, not that she spoke at all, but she used to laugh or what passes for it. She used to do that often. That was gone now and the energy in her faded the further we were from the wall. I grew sad, my thoughts on darker things than her obsidian eyes. I was no warden, this was no prison. I had not stolen her. *I had not stolen her!* I told her that and she crept closer, but was further all the same. I guess she could feel it, that echo in the wind in the gaps between yesterday and tomorrow, the things I couldn't name, but could touch and taste and nightmare over. She'd seen them coming a long way back.

How long?

The shreds of tar came to an end at a river. Its banks were wide and full. The map said Vaal and this was Parys. The bridge was less now than it had been before. Its massive girders

looked to me as though they might once have been proud and solid. Now they lay buckled and bent, the tortured end of some immense explosion. The bridge was out and the water an angry white.

We sat on the hill above the river and watched it flow. It sped past the islets between us and where we needed to be. My head was empty there. The dull buzz of water over stone kept its pulse in my ears. I was gone.

She wore a bright yellow dress and sat beside me, a smile blurred away behind brown curls. She laughed like I imagined children did and then she was quiet. She was as quiet as Larry and the void was so loud. She had wrists like her mother. I remembered associations, but not the faces with them. There were feelings, fleeting like stars, pulsing and exploding away from me, somewhere on some else's horizon; the distance between time and the image, a lifetime. I felt sick and lonely – the headache kicking in with the fresh water smell. I was at another river now; someone else's hands massaged my back and the sun my face. I could feel my eyelids dipping and a name. I could grab it from that mouth in that moment, but nothing. The little girl in a yellow dress was gone, somewhere, but there was no fear. There were whispers, so soft they could've been my own, but the hands on my back said otherwise. I turned to face these hands, but the blur hung like a shroud behind me. The woman and her child watched me through mirage faces.

I choked awake to the chill of water on the air, the sun out like the bridge and my face towards the stars. Larry lifted her head from my chest and stared at me. Her eyes and fur were a mask of the same anonymous black.

You don't have to do this you know?

Do what?

Crossing the river, we could just go back.

Back to what, back to where?

She didn't answer it was futile. There was nowhere we'd been, where we'd belonged.

I lit a fire in a gift shop. I didn't worry about being found. Whatever miracle had brought me this far could take care of the rest too. There were goats across the forecourt. Three white goats, jumping around a shape that reminded me of Moses. They blew away too quickly like leaves and I was asleep.

In the morning there was no Larry, just the traces of embers marked into charcoal streaks across the gift shop floor. I eyed the useless trophies and figurines – no one to be proud of a visit, no one left to care. The forecourt was empty of its mystical goats. Moses was a memory. The river was loud on its banks.

I was hungry, but Larry was gone and I would look for her first. She wasn't curled up in the grass where I'd passed out the day before and I called for her. That was the first time in a long while that I'd spoken her name. It felt impersonal to speak the name of the only living being around me. The feeling grew stronger when I was sure she had no idea what her name was, my name for her. The waters were flowing faster, their white even angrier in the foam from the night before; somewhere upriver a storm, a flood or a busted dam.

A line of disintegrating wooden piers jutted out along the bank from the backyards of houses sharing a similar fate. Some rowing boats had been hiked up onto grass and there on the seat of one sat Larry. She looked at me as if she'd been waiting a while and was in no way surprised I had found her. I got the impression as I watched her that she was in a rush. To go where I couldn't say, but I packed our things from the gift shop floor and dumped them in the boat before her. There were oars here too, but how much good they would do in such fast flowing water, I didn't know. We sat there in the boat way up on the grass and looked at one another for a long time. I locked eyes with this hyena, searching for what she knew was coming. Gazing into that obsidian, I told myself her heart beat as red as mine. Her snout was wet and her stubby whiskers protruded in an upset fashion. She watched me, her head slightly tilted, her tongue poking from her mouth like the smallest piece of a pink slip in the mailbox. She drooled.

This was a bad idea. I put my shoulder to the boat and forced it sliding across the long wet grass down to the water's edge. I let it hang there, the water wrapping itself around the front of it. The miniature islands that littered the distance between here and there would break our fall in some way. That is what I told Larry in as much as I could make it sound true. I gave one last heave before jumping in.

The boat sat, lurched in the muddy water, laughing. I stuck an oar to shore and pushed us out and we were gone with the current. Not quite as fast as the things I'd seen shooting down passed the bridge but fast enough to know I was not in control. I paddled like a demon, capturing only inches back from the angry river. We slowed as we hit every rock and bank of each tiny island. Larry laughed, but not the happy kind I know. She was terrified. If I wasn't so busy concentrating on clawing my way across the river I would've been too. This was a terrible idea.

The boat shattered into splinters and we cascaded through the air and into the water. It was shallow here, shallower than I expected, but the force of the water up to my knees was powerful and I was weak. I drew myself up and over the rocks to sit on the hump of a pathetic islet in the centre of the raging water. The rifle strapped to my back, everything else swallowed by the angry white. Larry wasn't laughing. She wasn't there. The water was shallow. I could make it across. I stuck my boots into the flow and moved between the pathetic islands and obstinate rocks that stood there, refusing to be weathered away. I collapsed on the other side, soaking and seared by the spray and mist. It was icy cold; this frigid morning air now screamed with the touch of water across my body.

I sat like a wounded dog licking my sores as I wrung out my jacket, sifting through the loose change of bullets in my pockets. I edged up the bank, trying to catch pieces of heat through the clouds. Larry was there, like a black mist far away, snailing towards me. She was drenched like those furry creatures that missed the Ark, those obsidian eyes at one with her coat so soaked and black. The offer of apologies played over inside as she closed the gap between us. I hugged her to my chest and stroked the water away. She sneezed and that was where we left it.

Our shivering subsided with the clouds and she was done with sitting. She pawed away from the river and I followed. She knew the way.

More fields and orchards, I grew sick of the view. I grew sick of the distant rumbling of machines, harvesters, trucks, tankers. Whatever they were, they polluted my ears and picked away stitches in my brain. More roads carved out of the earth, drilled perhaps. I guessed at their demise and gave up, but we followed them for days. I caught glimpses of people through my scope: rows of collared beings, dishevelled and bent, prodded like cattle through fields in long lines. We kept our distance, but still felt watched. I slept very little, the closer we came to Johannesburg the more I regretted leaving the coast.

At night, I could see its glow. An ugly orange in the distance, a defiant “I am here,” yelling at me.

Randfontein was the closest we came. The glow was undeniable; the city was alive and pulsed with the angry spark of smog and electricity. These outlying towns were ruined, caged in barbed wire and cloaked with craters of bombs. A dog barked in some distant place and sirens sounded in the night, sometimes for hours at a time. Nothing moved here. The streets were crowded with burnt out vehicles, trucks and buses. A graveyard of industry, in shambling warehouses, with roofs stripped in coils towards the sky, were surrendering their insides to the sun.

Office desks were scarred and warped from the heat and the puffing union of rain and plywood stood unashamed beneath the cloudless blue. We lingered here between a broken and a new world that burnt its presence in our eyes by night. Everywhere there was food, or relics of it. I suppose there had been no time for looting, no time for anything but retreat or surrender or death.

There were glimpses of shadows here and there, things moving in the darkness. Larry wasn't disturbed and I trusted in them as tricks of tired eyes. The map was gone along with the journal and the every piece of me I'd assembled on the journey. We patched together new packs and pretended the things lost no longer existed.

Amy was there and nothing would move her. Ignoring her wasn't an option she'd concede. I let cars and buses and trains cross the distance in between us, but I caught glimpses of her curls through the cracks in the carriages and windows. I traced a circle on a new map, cutting roads, railways and forests. The curls disappeared behind them all and I was free again. My thumping heart relieved to reality.

Larry set her head on the coffee table. Her face and the map was all I could see in the circle of light painted by the candle. The circle caught three towns in its net, Rustenburg, Marikana and Brits. That was as close as I could remember to what I had marked on the old map. The area was massive. I might never find them. That didn't trouble me, I was content in this wasteland bordered by paradise. It tasted of home. We slept without a fire, in blankets from places we wouldn't ask questions about.

The coffins lined up behind the warehouse weren't empty. I lifted the lids of three, before I decided that was a fact for all of them. The wood was rotting outside in the rain. Rats had come and gone, where the frames had fallen prey to the weather, they had worked their way inside, where the occupants had become prey to them. No reason to look, when you know the faces had been stolen by hungry teeth.

Larry hated the smell, she wore fear on her face and moved in mourning. We slept in sunlight that afternoon, we baked the damp from our clothes and fur. We smelt worse than those coffins, but it would blunt. She said so.

In the morning, we left Randfontein. We were headed north, along dust roads so forgotten, the bush had reclaimed them. The only evidence of them was the barbed wire fences that slunk and hung parallel. The shadows had followed us; they cheated me at every twitch and turn of my neck. Out here in broad daylight they worried me; they scared me. Larry was calm, but my trust in her assessment of them was suspect. I clutched my rifle and fought for a solid glimpse of them.

Am I crazy? Do you see it?

Larry didn't respond. She only looked back at me briefly before leading me to where I was going.

The shadows didn't bother us after that, didn't bother me. The sun was high when we spotted it: another of the highways. I studied it through the scope; there were more vehicles here than I'd seen anywhere. The gaps between them were less than a minute at most. I'd never get across without being spotted. We'd wait until dark.

We slept in the shade of a thorn tree and waited for night. It was hard sleeping in the shifting shade; the sun burnt my eyelids, forcing me to cover my face. The hours left in the day weren't many, but they dragged like a child's blanket. She was there again, through the gaps in the branches, in the fragments of cloud cut out of that thorny embrace. The curly haired girl in the yellow dress. She spoke this time. Her voice like a choir of one and all I could hear. Everything else was silence, silence and stillness. I couldn't catch her words as they echoed in a cacophony of a thousand little voices.

I chased those voices, with the fervour of a man possessed. A frenzy of anguish burst through my chest like the spikes of a mace forced down my throat, exploding in my heart. I was running; feet met ground, met bush, met road, screaming in tongues and trailing tears. Fists clenched, the pulses and sirens in my head, my ears.

I'm scared of the dark.

Her or me? Who said it didn't matter. I ran like my feet could carry me to those clouds. I could feel every inch of me talking, angry as a thousand suns – no answers. Just that choir of voices, yellow dresses, tears and curls. I poured my lungs out in roars like lions caged and pricked with spears and the torture of their children. And then stutters, no words, just sand, dust, choking and pain, pulsing pain, swimming through my veins and wreathed in fire. I was awake.

I let myself out, crawling out of my tears to collapse back into the world, far from the shade. I wiped my face with hands covered in blood. My knuckles bruised and pants torn. The choir ceased its singing, but its dying reverberations still snaked their way around my head. Larry was gone and it was blacker than night. It took me a long time to reach the thorn tree. She was waiting. Standing guard, the slightest turn of her head indicated her awareness of my presence. My throat was parched. I gulped down a litre bottle of water without pause. I made

motions with a can opener in my hand and a tin in the other, but it was time to leave. She had spoken. I followed her across the brush, through the veld and over the highway. She picked the time, between a convoy of trucks and headlights so distant they could've been fireflies. We trekked a kilometre or so until we saw it: a compound of thatched roofs with B&B in fading paint on the wall. I dropped inside the first one we came to and lay shivering on the floor. Larry lay beside me, her head on my chest and staring.

After a while, I climbed off the tiles and dragged myself to a bed and set the day behind me. There were no sirens here. The night was as quiet as the shadows it gave birth to.

I'm scared of the dark.

Her words, in a voice softer than anything I'd touched in this world. I dreamt it away, soothing it down to the core that was the muddled stack of me.

I scratched circles around the tin can, peeling the labels off. I played with my food. There was no hunger aching in my stomach, but I knew to eat and so we did. There was rice and canned meat – long rancid – for Larry and peaches for me. I took every breath of that sweet syrup slowly and held onto it. The darkness didn't seem as dark with that smell in my nose. I stank, I couldn't smell it, but I felt it in the dried dirt on my forehead, salty upper lip and caked brown fingernails. There were soaps here, in the wreckage of the bathroom. I stripped down and walked out into the night. It was warm a berg wind blowing just for me.

The pool was almost empty. A tired puddle of muddy brown water stood a final stand in a shady corner. I rinsed my feet in the water. Wiping the dirt away with the lather burnt my skin all over, an angry layer of it disintegrating like a snake into the brown liquid. A blanket caught the rest of the muck as I dried and scrubbed it away all at once. The blue of the fabric had turned to purple and black. I left it lying there next to the puddle. Larry sat at the edge of the pool, her paws dangled over the curved bricks, she stared at the blanket. I sat with her, but she was too upset to speak. She never wanted to come this far.

The road out here seemed fine, unlike those we'd travelled since we crossed the wall. There were still fields and orchards, but the land here seemed drier and the space between these were growing bigger. I looked at the map, but when we walked it was Larry that I followed.

There were rotting wooden signs everywhere to spas and lodges and hotels tucked away behind bends in the hills and bush. We weren't distracted by their promises. I pretended they weren't there. It wasn't hard.

A few hours of sweat soaked my jacket when we stopped at the petrol station. The sign above the kiosk was missing letters, but Magaliesburg was distinguishable in the window of the bottle store across the way. The stilted roof above the pumps had collapsed over the forecourt, the long rusted and charred shell of a tanker wedged beneath it. I stood in between the bottle store and the wreck and told myself the shadows in the windows weren't real. That the shapes of hands weren't more than the clouds.

I sat on the tar and waited for Larry to move. She watched the windows and circled me like I was a place to sit. She didn't sit. I poured water into her cup and she drank and I drank. Our bottles were half empty and bellies half full. The sun wasn't kind sitting on the blazing tar. I led us out of the heat and into the freezing shade of the bottle store. Inside had been completely ransacked. If there were still bottles, they were broken or empty. I hadn't seen a place picked this clean in a long while.

The hands in the windows crowded around me, shadows no more. Heavy breathing through black masks and filters painted white to resemble skulls. The eyes that broke the illusion in blinks weren't malicious, weren't angry, weren't in a rush for whatever comes next. I didn't count. One would've been enough. I could feel the stitches picked from my brain, torn from it. I sat down in the circle of their shadows.

They spoke words I understood, but didn't. Their weapons pointed at the ground and not at me. I waited for an exit. They didn't look like the soldiers I'd crossed paths with. Maybe these were the refugees.

I've been looking for you.

We know.

The reply came as less of a surprise then, brushed over in the seconds before standing up and looking into the eyes of the five masks surrounding me.

Do I need one of those?

I pointed to the gasmasks and two of the heads shook their response.

Not unless we're spotted. Not until you get to the mines.

Larry moved around these men or women – I couldn't tell beyond the voices I had heard. She laughed once or twice and lay down at the door, eyes on the road before sleeping. None of them were scared of her – none of them gave her a second thought. I caught glances that looked ashamed – guilty of meeting mine; the kind of look you get from people who know you. They took their masks off and sat around the bottle store, some on overturned shelves and others on the chairs that remained behind the counter. They spoke amongst themselves in whispers, no questions or words offered my way. That feeling of being a prisoner returned, but I had my gun. This was the outside.

I tried to talk, they stopped their conversations and stared at me. Their faces told me I was the boy who cried wolf, but here there was a wolf under every tree.

Are you the refugees?

Yes, some of them anyway.

How long has it been since the war? Since they came?

Eight years I'd say. Yeah, eight and a few months maybe.

The confirmation of the truth on the tip of my tongue stung me. We both knew it was coming; the echoes of it were everywhere. And these five men with their masks and rifles had seen enough to forget the impact of their news.

Why haven't you taken my gun? Why do you sit around like I'm not a threat, like I'm some boy with his dog?

You're not a threat. Your gun isn't even loaded.

The chamber pulled open with the bolt, it was empty. There had been bullets there before. The shadows must have taken them and now here they were in the flesh. I pulled a loose round from my pocket and held it between my fingers. They grew agitated, but didn't raise their weapons. There hadn't looked to be a leader among them, but there was. He stepped forward, his left hand out and waving slowly for the others to be calm. With his right, he presented his gloved palm to me.

There are a lot of things you can do with that bullet, but not here, not now. Give it to me or put it back in your pocket.

The bullet looked useless between my fingers – an ornament – but it was last bit of control I owned. I slid it into the chamber and locked it in. Lights out.

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I caught glimpses of the sun. There was a forest, or perhaps just bushes. Then the hand over my face and something forced into my mouth, then darkness again. If it were hours or days or weeks, it was all the same and meant nothing and everything.

It was underground that I woke up, my hands moving over a floor that felt like rock and ground. The air tasted dirty and old. I was buried alive.

For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world, but now once in the end of the world has he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

There was a voice down here with me, deep and solemn. Not so far, too close not to fear. I sat up, the space in here far bigger than a coffin. I moved around, groping at air, trying to find anything, something, someone.

And as it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this comes judgment.

The voice was sure of itself in the pitch black tomb. It wasn't far. I shuffled towards it, with feet uncertain of every step.

Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and to them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

The voice stopped and took measured breaths. I felt a hand on my wrist pulling me to sit beside it. This was a grown man's hand, muscular and self-sure. Still I blinked uselessly in the dark, hoping to wake my eyes to something, nothing.

Who are you?

Max. That's what they call me, but I prefer Kenny.

The voice too old to be the little boy on the harbour, it couldn't be.

I knew a boy once with those names.

You know a man now with them.

Where are we?

It doesn't matter. We are here and this is all there is.

Where's Larry? Where's my hyena?

She's somewhere else.

There were shivers all over, not from cold or damp. I had lost her again. I needed to hold her and I wept.

Are we dead? Am I dead?

We're alive.

Why is there no light?

There is light. I can see just fine.

What is wrong with me? Why can't I see?

I think you're tired of seeing. You've seen enough of it and you've seen it again and again. We've missed you

Is it really you?

It is me.

I let those words float around. There wasn't anything to say. There was too much to say, too much to ask. He held my hand and pressed a bottle of water in the other. I closed my fingers over it and drank.

Please tell me where Larry is, please.

My words were clogged in sobs and stutters. The breath sighed out of me and my heart beat in weird patterns. I felt nervous like a child who'd broken a window. I was a child who'd broken a window. I saw it all crystal clear, the school, the stone, the principal.

Larry is fine.

Will I see her again?

There was a long pause before he answered. My heart raced and sank all at once.

Yes. Yes, I think you will.

Can I see her now? Please.

Not yet. I need to ask you a few things.

Okay.

What do you remember?

Of what?

Of where you came from.

I came from Port Elizabeth.

Why did you do that?

I don't know. I think I was looking for family, but I don't remember a family. I think I was looking for a little girl in a yellow dress. I don't know.

She isn't here.

I didn't think she would be. I think she's a dream.

She isn't a dream. She wasn't a dream.

Then what is she?

She is a daughter. She is your daughter.

I didn't breathe. If I could will my heart to stop beating, I would've done it. Everything floating around inside me discovered gravity and plummeted in one horrific synchronised display. There was nothing left but open ears; everything else abandoned ship.

You found her this time. Didn't you?

The yellow dress walked in front of me and sat opposite. The curls shied away from the blur and all I could see were her eyes. I cried as she smiled at me. I cried and I laughed. I laughed like Larry.

Where is Larry!? I want my hyena!

Did you bury her this time?

Bury who?

The girl with the yellow dress – your daughter.

I don't have a daughter.

Those words tasted like I'd just licked metal, they were sour and shook me.

I don't have a daughter.

Small shocks everywhere, jolting me, higher voltage with every repetition. Tears, clenched teeth, knuckles tearing at their flesh.

I don't... I don't... Where is Larry!? Where the fuck is Larry!? I'll kill you. I swear!

Did you bury her this time?

Who?

The girl in the yellow dress.

There is no girl in a yellow dress! Turn on the lights. Let me out of there.

You're not ready. Answer me, did you bury the girl in the yellow dress.

What do you mean? There is no girl. I have no daughter!

There is. The girl in the yellow dress is your daughter.

His tone grew more and more frustrated as I got angrier. He had moved away from me and in the darkness his voice came as if in circles around me. Across from me the girl in the yellow dress turned to walk away, tears streaked her cheeks. She said nothing, her back towards me.

Amy.

Yes, Amy. Did you bury her this time?

What do you mean this time?

Just answer the question.

Where is Larry!? Bring her here now.

There was just silence. No footsteps, no questions, nothing. I listened for the sound of breathing, for any movement, for Larry's laugh.

Larry!

I called out over and over and not even my echoes bounced back. I stood up and shambled towards nothing until it turned into a wall in my hands, cold and damp.

Where is she? Where is Larry?

Please answer the question. Did you bury her?

The girl in the yellow dress was in front of me, watching me. She mouthed her name, but no sound. Her lips moved and formed phrases like: I love you and I miss you. Her little yellow dress grew dirty and brown and her eyes watered and her cheeks were red. She was crying again and I was silent, silent and watching. Her hands covered her eyes and forehead. I traced the fingers down to the tiny wrists, wrists that stuck out of rocks and rubble in a stairwell so far away.

Did you bury her?

No. No I didn't.

There was silence. For the longest time there was silence. I turned those words over in my head, tossing them like the easy soil of a fresh grave. She was there, emerging from the pit of my memories into the space between me and him.

She has a brother you know?

Everything cut, every word, every breath and I shook in it, like it was a bed of broken glass. I let myself out, floating away from his noise. In photographs I viewed myself, I viewed Larry. We walked together, barefoot and as free as in those photos as we'd be on the day we'd die. The hyena was happy, I could see in those eyes the same love I had seen in Amy's. I dug my feet in, I clenched my fists and I stayed with it as long as possible. The photos were fading, time decaying everything in my visions and again I could see. He stood before me, a young man, with a patchy beard and the eyes of an orphan no more. It was like looking into a mirror, all those years ago in the apartment in Port Elizabeth. I was breaking, piece by piece, I was pulled apart and rebuilt, too fast to remember not to cry, too fast to forget any more. When he spoke, I knew there was no more running.

Do you remember me, father?

Yes I do.